



Fig. 29.1 *St Christopher*, wall painting, Mechelen, tower of St John's Church

# Mural Paintings before Jan van Eyck. A Remarkable Discovery from around 1400 in St John's Church in Mechelen

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**ABSTRACT:** During restoration work on the gothic Church of St John in Mechelen, traces of wall paintings were found behind the eighteenth-century organ. Two monumental portrayals were discovered, together with architectural polychromy and painted stone consoles. The paintings, which represent St Christopher carrying the Christ Child and St George with the dragon, date back to 1400 and show great artistic quality. They are unique testimony to the painting tradition before Jan van Eyck. During conservation work, analyses of the painting technique and the materials were made. The historical and art-historical examination of the paintings aims to place them in the historical context of ducal Burgundy and the artistic milieu of around 1400 in the Low Countries.

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When the mural paintings were discovered in the tower of St John's Church in Mechelen in the autumn of 2008, the importance of the finding soon became apparent (figs 29.1, 29.3).<sup>1</sup> The paintings were almost entirely covered in thick layers of white-wash<sup>2</sup> (fig. 29.2). The trend for stripping the walls in church interiors from the mid-nineteenth century up to the 1970s has meant that discoveries of wall paintings are limited to parts of buildings where whitewash was, fortuitously, not removed, such as the space behind the organ. An ensemble of mural paintings dating from around 1400 is obviously extremely rare and valuable. Apart from the fact that it literally enriches Flanders' heritage, the finding is also of great importance in terms of art history.<sup>3</sup>

## Two Monumental Portrayals

The north wall of the tower features a very large image of St Christopher carrying the Christ Child across the river. On the left, his companion the hermit waits with a burning lantern. The scene is set in a landscape with a river, rocky banks, and trees (fig. 29.1).

On the south wall St George appears on horse-back, resplendent in full armour, piercing the neck of a dragon with his lance (fig. 29.3). On the left the princess watches, kneeling devoutly with her lamb. A fortified city is visible in the background. On the right is a cluster of elm, oak and lime trees.

The mural paintings are situated in what now appears to be the first floor of the tower; however, the present wooden floor was only put in place after the eighteenth-century organ loft was installed (fig. 29.4b). In the Middle Ages the mural paintings would have been visible to everyone who entered the church through the west door (fig. 29.4a). Each figurative image is set in an illusory alcove with a pointed arch, outlined in black paint. The alcoves are now 5.74 metres high and 3.96 metres wide; the very bottom of the image is hidden by the floor.

In addition to the two monumental portrayals of St Christopher and St George, this space also contains interesting architectural polychromy and beautifully carved consoles with preserved colour-





**Fig. 29.2** *St George and the Dragon*, wall painting, detail, the princess, shown during the uncovering of the painting

ing (fig. 29.5). At the moment, questions of how long the paintings were visible and why, and when they were covered over, cannot be fully answered. After the Counter-Reformation many medieval paintings were no longer deemed suitable and had to disappear. The apotropaic properties associated with St Christopher and the related excesses of devotion also led to the disappearance of his image. The major wear displayed by the mural paintings suggests that they were visible for a relatively long period. The text on the vault may provide some clue as to when the paintings were plastered over. It refers to damage in 1580 and restoration in 1602. One hypothesis is that at that time the vault and the wall surfaces were completely whitewashed. If so, these mural paintings would have been visible from around 1400 to 1602.

### Layer Structure

Immediately after the tower at the west end of the church was built the paintings were applied to the inner brick wall on a layer of plaster consisting of the usual lime and sand. First the painter filled the 'alcove' with a uniform base of red ochre. Onto this he painted his underdrawing. He then applied the colours, with the all-important nuances and shading. He used fairly thick, black outlines to define the figures. In the case of St Christopher it appears that the red background, which follows the outlines rather untidily, was only applied after the figures were completed. In any case the stencilled flowers, which turn the background into a kind of cloth of honour, were painted last.



Fig. 29.3 *St George and the Dragon*, wall painting, Mechelen, tower of St John's Church





**Figs 29.4a-b** (a) Simulation of the original situation in the tower; (b) simulation of the present situation in the tower

### Underdrawing

Hitherto, there has been little interest in the subject of underdrawings in mural paintings. There are various reasons for this: issues of visibility (the technology available to research into panel paintings is of little or no use at all in this case); the fact that only a small number of mural paintings survive from the late fourteenth to the fifteenth century, making a comparison of works by the same master impossible; the substantially less interest in underdrawings in mural painting north of the Alps compared to the spectacular *sinopia* in fresco painting south of the Alps; the lack of specific publications on the subject (the presence of underdrawing is at best mentioned in passing in restoration reports); and the lack of a methodology for the exact record-

ing of underdrawing in restoration documentation for mural paintings.<sup>4</sup>

In this case, wear of the paint layers has left the painted underdrawing very visible. Painted with a brush in jet black, it is purely linear, without any hatching or shading. An attempt was made to document the underdrawing in full size using tracing paper, but this proved not to be feasible, not only because it is still partly covered by the paint layers but also because the difference between the outlines and underpainting is quite subtle. In particular, the painting's large dimensions made it difficult to keep such a large sheet of film in place: while the drawing is being made, the film must be lifted repeatedly to perform certain checks. Thus we were forced to limit the tracing of the underdrawing to



the most interesting parts of the image, particularly those places where pentimenti were visible.

The underdrawing in Mechelen is strikingly visible even to the naked eye. It is so extensive that in current views it plays a major role in the readability of this ancient and worn painting: now the underdrawing stands in for the original composition in certain places, which was probably not the original intention. The horse's mane in the underdrawing is so detailed that one might wonder whether the intention was for these black lines to filter through the mane's nervous and pasty white painting.

The underdrawing is highly skilled. Precise, and painted without any hesitation, it betrays the hand of a master experienced in monumental compositions. Only the outlines, folds and facial characteristics are drawn in; there is no suggestion of volume

or shading. The underdrawing is painted in fairly thick, black lines. In some places it is difficult not to confuse it with the outlines that were painted at a later stage. In executing the underdrawing the artist eschewed technical aids and drew freehand, straight on to the wall. Only the figures and the large animals have underdrawings. None was found on the landscape, trees or rocks. Strikingly, the princess's lamb also displays no trace of underdrawing.

There are many pentimenti; however, they do not relate to the content and only involve the positioning of and alterations to the heads and hands in particular and sometimes the folds. Obvious pentimenti are visible in the position and arched form of the shield on St George's back. Alterations to the Christ Child's head and hands can also be seen.



Fig. 29.5 Corbel

### Different Hands

Our working hypothesis is that at least two painters were involved. The first was responsible for the architectural polychromy on and around the vault ribs, and the polychromy of the four consoles. He also painted the alcoves with their stencilled decorations. The second painter filled the alcove with a red background (unless the first painter was also responsible for this) and painted his black underdrawing on top. He then continued to add different layers of colour with sparing use of technical resources such as the aforementioned stencils and a strip of applied brocade.

The notion of there being two painters is confirmed by the fact that they used different colour palettes and pigments. Strangely enough, the painter responsible for the architecture and landscape used more expensive pigments, such as pure vermilion for the red areas. The painter of the

figures, however, chose pigment mixes to paint the beautiful red areas such as St George's stunning cloak. He made only sparing use of more expensive pigments, such as lead-tin yellow type I and indigo, which he reserved for important figures and smaller but important parts: the Christ Child's yellow halo and his blue garment, the princess's blue dress.

The painters used completely different styles to paint faces (Christopher and George compared with the consoles). This division of labour should not surprise us and fits the occupational structure of medieval craftsmen perfectly, in which a large degree of specialization and an extensive division of labour was common in craft guilds.

### Colours and Pigments

The importance of colour in a medieval mural painting must not be underestimated. The association of colour with lustre and light presupposes a

direct link with divine revelation. Colours and light in medieval church interiors are never accidental but help create the illusion of a Heavenly Jerusalem.

Analyses of the pigments and stratigraphies produced interesting results.<sup>5</sup> Red earth (iron oxide red) was used for the red base coat. The underdrawing was painted in charcoal black. St George's silver armour, now visible as a grey layer, contains tin leaf and minute traces of lead.

In order to obtain specific shades of colour, the artist mixed several pigments together: in St George's stunning cloak vermillion, red lead, red ochre and calcium carbonate were identified. The work becomes even more refined as he built up the colours in two layers: the light green on St George's saddle consists of a first layer of lead-tin yellow type I and a second layer mixed from lead tin yellow type I, lead white and copper green. In order to obtain dark green he used the same mixture, though without the yellow base, as is clear from the sample's stratigraphic cross section.

In the image of St Christopher the light blue colour used to paint the Christ Child's garment was obtained by mixing indigo with lead white (fig. 29.6). The same mixture was probably also employed in the St George painting, for the princess's dress, which was then enhanced with white stencil designs and with relief decoration on the waistband. The light yellow used on the Child's halo is lead-tin yellow type I. St Christopher's purplish-red garment is vermillion mixed with red ochre. Lastly, the pigment used for the background with the stencilled flowers is red earth (iron oxide red), the same as was used for the base coat.

### Condition

The general state of preservation of the mural paintings in St John's Church in Mechelen is better than average, because the configuration of the figures has been almost entirely preserved and they have not previously been restored. Thus no old restoration products or overpainting are present. Fortunately, the few large missing sections,

caused by previous damage and holes in the walls, are not in any important areas. The four faces, for example, of Christopher, the Christ Child, George and the princess, are remarkably well preserved, a result of the apparent absence of losses and the fact that they are created from successive paint layers and therefore exhibit less wear.

The wear and thinning of the paint layer is present over the whole of the painting, though this in no way impedes one's 'reading' of the images. Wear to the top layer means that the underdrawing has been revealed once more in most parts of the image. Here and there the poor condition of the paint layer is regrettable.

### Artistic Context

The wall paintings of SS George and Christopher are of exceptional importance to the history of art from around 1400. We refer more specifically to art from between *circa* 1380 and *circa* 1420, executed in what has come to be known collectively as the 'International Style' and which manifested itself in all areas of artistic production. In recent decades, art from around 1400 has attracted much scholarly attention, occasioned by several major exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> However, such major events have largely ignored the art of wall painting. Nonetheless, there is a demonstrable relationship between wall painting, miniature painting, panel painting and other forms of visual art.

There are no known archival sources for the wall paintings in Mechelen. But comparative research does make it possible to place the works in art-historical perspective. Around 1400, artistic output in Flanders and Brabant was closely associated with production at the royal court in Paris and the ducal court of Burgundy. Since the signing of the Peace of Ath in 1356, Mechelen and Antwerp had been ruled by Louis of Male, Count of Flanders. In 1369, his daughter Margaret married Philip the Bold, youngest son of the French king and first of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, who on Louis's death in 1384 became Count of Flanders, Franche-Comté, Rethel, Antwerp, Mechelen,





Fig. 29.6 *St Christopher*, detail, St Christopher carrying the Christ Child on his shoulder

Artois and Nevers.<sup>7</sup> On 21 March of that year, the ducal couple made their Joyous Entry into Mechelen.<sup>8</sup>

Extensive research has been carried out into the representative function and the significance of the artistic production at these magnificent courts and the travelling artists who worked at them. Movable and immovable works of art adorned the regal residences as well as religious and public buildings. Wall painting also played a prominent role, as is apparent from archival sources.<sup>9</sup>

### Related Wall Paintings

Comparable to some extent to the wall paintings in Mechelen is the slightly earlier St Christopher from the collegiate church of Semur-en-Auxois, transferred to the municipal museum. The attention to detail, the naturalism, the vibrant colours and the expressive quality of the figures make this a very important example of Burgundian painting. Based primarily on resemblances to the cartoons for the Apocalypse Tapestry series in Angers, Fabienne Joubert dates this wall painting to 1370-1375 and attributes it to Jean de Bruges, who worked for Philip the Bold and is mentioned in the accounts for 1371 and 1372 of the ducal court in Dijon.<sup>10</sup>

In Bruges, a remarkable late-fourteenth-century depiction of St George fighting the dragon adorns the east wall of a room in the house at Spinolarei 2, as part of a complex iconographic programme.<sup>11</sup> This is a more static portrayal than the one in Mechelen and is rendered in full profile. In a series of niches below the painting of St George are ten male figures representing the virtues. On the south wall is an unusual triumph of fifteen, rather than the customary nine, heroes.<sup>12</sup> This imagery has been associated with the crossbowmen's guild, which used to meet in the neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup>

Around 1400, SS Christopher and George adorned a wall of the Mary chapel in the Church of Our Lady in Halle. The now lost murals are known through various copies.<sup>14</sup> Below an architecturally articulated baldachin, Christopher wades through

the water with a blessing Child on his shoulder; in a rocky landscape, George poses victoriously atop the dragon he has just pierced with his lance. His silhouette is not unlike that in the wall painting in Mechelen: broad-chested, with a narrow waist. He is clad in armour and a surcote with a segmented belt worn low.

The ensemble in St Catherine's Church in Duisburg (Tervuren) is an excellent example of a high-quality wall painting from the Low Countries from around 1400.<sup>15</sup> As has recently been pointed out, there are some striking similarities between these monumental paintings and the panel from Kortesseem now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels (inv. no 4883).<sup>16</sup> The ensemble in Duisburg testifies to the close artistic connections with the circles of Parisian and Burgundian courtly art and to the intense exchanges of artists and models that must have taken place.

In St Rumbold's Church in Mechelen, the niches behind the Baroque altar of St Anne, in the east wall of the south transept, feature some early fifteenth century paintings of saints.<sup>17</sup> St Alexis and St Dorothea are represented against a red background. A third saint in the same series, namely John the Baptist with a lamb, is presently visible in the church, to the right of the altar.<sup>18</sup>

The Flemish miniature art of that same period was first subjected to extensive study in the context of the exhibition and colloquium in 1995.<sup>19</sup> More recently, the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels) published the first part of a work on ongoing research in the Low Countries into contemporary panel painting.<sup>20</sup>

The wall paintings in Mechelen may be placed in this artistic context. Admittedly, there is a considerable difference in technique with the other contemporary arts, particularly in terms of the luxurious application of gold leaf<sup>21</sup> and the plentiful use of various relief decorations<sup>22</sup> and engraving techniques on sculptures and panels. Only the waistband of the princess incorporates applied brocade and gold foil has not been applied.



### Costume

Insofar as dating the Mechelen wall paintings is concerned, fashion provides important clues. Around 1400 clothing from was characterized by an unprecedented variety of types and designs of attire, subtle combinations, bright colours and striking fabrics; in sum, it was marked by a richness of invention.<sup>23</sup> Dagged sleeves, collars, shawls and headgear made for truly bizarre effects. Men's fashion was even more diversified than women's.

The costumes in Mechelen are entirely in keeping with this fashion. The silhouette of St George is quite pronounced and typical of the late fourteenth century: a broad chest and very narrow waist.<sup>24</sup> Around his hips he wears a heavy segmented belt and his surcote has wide sleeves with edges cut into dagges (fig. 29.7). He is portrayed as a prominent knight. The rarity and costliness of the materials and pigments used in the production of certain garments meant that such items were generally reserved for the wealthy elite. This was the case, for example, with the belt with little bells that were made of gold.<sup>25</sup> The helmet with mail collar and open visor, finally, was part of the standard armour of a knight and appears on numerous representations of the saint from this period, such as the statuette of St George in the altarpiece by Jacques de Baerze (Dijon, Musée des Beaux Arts).

The princess wears a blue gown with opulent brocade patterns and an ermine-lined collar. Its wide sleeves hang all the way to the ground. The fashionable high waist is accentuated by a belt richly embellished with relief decoration (fig. 29.8).

St Christopher's attire is of an entirely different order. He is clad in a plain red tunic under a wide white coat with green lining in a flowing fabric that is draped across his shoulders and flutters about him. It lends him a sense of dynamism that contrasts with the static landscape.<sup>26</sup>

### Style

The underdrawing has no depth and the perspective of the composition is worked out entirely in the paint layers, particularly in the folds of the

garments and the expressive detail of the facial features. The flesh tones and faces are meticulously constructed in successive layers of colour. Certain vestimentary details have been highlighted with stencil patterns, as in the splendid red brocade surcote worn by St George. The broad folds and shadows are already worked out in the red paint layer, while both stencilled brocade patterns are flatly applied. They are painted yellow, but are clearly supposed to evoke gold brocade. The princess's blue gown was also decorated with a stencilled white fleur de lis pattern originally.

The voluminous effect of the folds in the fabrics is expertly executed and produces quite a sculptural effect. This is particularly noticeable in the well preserved sections of the painting, such as in the greens and whites of the flowing coat to the right of St Christopher.

The rather abstract volume of the oak, lime and elm leaves has been worked from dark to light: from black to dark green, with pale green highlights.

In addition to these technical, stylistic details, the rendering of the landscape is also characteristic of the art of around 1400. The combination of a realistic landscape with abstract background features, as in the painting of St Christopher, is also commonly encountered in contemporary miniatures. These imaginary settings are characterized by a sense of perspective that is still naive.

Analysis of miniatures has shown them to possess quite specific properties: saturated colours, modelling through the application of colour, a preference for realistic details and for the representation of textures, fabrics with brocade patterns that also existed in reality, colour fields accentuated by clear contour lines.<sup>27</sup> All these elements also appear in the wall paintings in Mechelen.

The term 'realism' does not apply in a strict sense to art from this period: these paintings are not truthful representations of reality as it presents itself to us. The proportions of the trees, rockery and buildings in relation to the human figures are entirely fanciful, for example. On the other hand, all the details – including the leaves on the trees,





**Fig. 29.7** *St George and the Dragon*, detail, St George's long dagged sleeves and the cluster of trees

the feathers on St George's helmet, the foliated decoration of his shield, and his horse's mane – are rendered quite realistically. The realistic details in the expressive and energetic visages of the two saints are equally striking.

Other salient features include the fluidity of the draped attire and the wonderful suggestion of airiness. Christopher's cloak wafts in the wind; George's garments are agitated by the movements of himself and his horse as he spears the dragon. Such details add to the dramatic tension.

In terms of composition and iconography, the paintings are akin to miniatures produced at the courts of Burgundy and France around 1400, particularly those by the Boucicaut group.<sup>28</sup> The Boucicaut Master probably came from the north but he worked in Paris. His oeuvre and the wall paintings in Mechelen are closely related in terms of the representation of space, the plastic detailing

and the iconographic modelling. The representation of St George on horseback, an image that would come to full prominence in the course of the fifteenth century, as in the work of Rogier van der Weyden, would also appear to derive from the miniatures of the Boucicaut Master.<sup>29</sup> The shape and structure of the trees are identical. On this basis, the paintings may be dated to the first decade of the fifteenth century.

The placement of the figures in the image plane and their position inside the tower, the modelling of the individualized faces and the realistic details are all indicative of a highly talented artist. As such, they also substantiate the view that artistic talent is not incompatible with the use of mechanical procedures such as stencilling.

We conclude that the paintings discovered in St John's in Mechelen belong to the so-called International Style of around 1400, with strong



**Fig. 29.8** *St George and the Dragon*, detail, the princess in an opulent blue gown with white stencilled brocade patterns, ermine collar and fashionably high waist accentuated by a splendid belt



influences from Parisian art. The paintings produced by artists from the Low Countries during this era are quite distinct. How exactly these artists influenced one another is a topic for further research, but artists are known to have travelled around, taking their models with them.<sup>30</sup> In this context, we refer to the striking similarity between the head of St George and that of a wild man in a drawing from around 1400 attributed to Jacquemart of Hesdin, a miniaturist from Artois who worked at the court of John, Duke of Berry, in Bourges. The drawing is part of a sketchbook consisting of six panels of prepared boxwood.<sup>31</sup> The inclination of the two heads, their profile with a square forehead, the long, heavy nose and the eye with broad brows are all very similar. Moreover, the hairline of the wild man and the rim of George's helmet correspond almost precisely.

The wall paintings from Mechelen add to our art-historical insight into painting from the period in question. The fact that these paintings were not movable objects but an integral part of the interior of a building makes their discovery all the more interesting. The question remains: were they produced around 1400 by a local artist from Mechelen?

### **An Artist from Mechelen?**

It goes without saying that the presence of the Burgundian ducal court acted as a catalyst for artistic production and exchange in a prosperous town such as Mechelen. Inside the city gates, no fewer than five sizeable Gothic churches were built: St Rumbold's, St John's, the Church of Our Lady Across the Dyle, St Catherine's and the former Church of St Peter and St Paul. The new Schepenhuis or Aldermen's Hall reflected the city's municipal pride and autonomy.<sup>32</sup>

The special political status of the city, first under the counts of Flanders and subsequently under the dukes of Burgundy, undoubtedly provided a stimulus for Mechelen to flaunt its wealth, prestige and power. The construction of St Rumbold's, for example, may be seen as a statement confirming the independence of this enclave in Brabant.<sup>33</sup> The concept

of the new choir was modelled after that in the cathedral at Amiens, with an ambulatory and seven radiating chapels.<sup>34</sup> Above the entrance to the north transept, there used to be a stained-glass window with portraits of Louis of Male and his wife and daughter.<sup>35</sup> Artistic production is also known to have been stimulated by events such as visits by rulers, joyous entries and other festive occasions.

The accounts of the court of Burgundy for 1413 record a payment *A maistre Vranque, peintre, demourant à Malines, pour paindre et faire la figure de mademoiselle Katherine de Bourgogne, fille de MdS, païé comptant... VI fr. XV s.*<sup>36</sup> In other words, a painter identified as Master Vrancke, who used to work in Mechelen, was paid for producing a portrait of Catherine of Burgundy, daughter of John the Fearless. This must have been quite a significant assignment, and the obvious implication is that there was a highly qualified painter working in Mechelen. The hypothesis put forward by Bella Martens that this otherwise unknown painter Master Vrancke may have been none other than the famous painter Meister Francke, who is first mentioned in Hamburg in 1407, has never been substantiated.<sup>37</sup> It was Emmanuel Neeffs, who also studied the Burgundian accounts published by De Laborde, who suggested that the portrait painter may be identified with a Master Vrancke from Mechelen. But which one?<sup>38</sup>

Few late medieval paintings produced in Mechelen have been preserved. Archival sources do, however, confirm that from the early fourteenth century the city had painters on its payroll. They used to paint banners and emblems, adorn public buildings, and create festive decorations.<sup>39</sup> In the period around 1400, one name sticks out in the urban accounts: Vrancke van Lint, who is mentioned from 13 October 1386 onwards in public works entries as a city painter.<sup>40</sup> Neeffs published some valuable information about the work created at Vrancke van Lint's workshop.<sup>41</sup> The payments are recorded very clearly in the city accounts.<sup>42</sup> Master Vrancke decorated wind vanes, banners and coats of arms; he carried out a paint job at the



premises known as the Huis van Bornem (1394-1395), polychromed a sculpture in the facade of the Vleeshuis (1399) and created decorations for the city gates.<sup>43</sup> He also produced an altarpiece for the Schepenhuis (1404-1405).<sup>44</sup> On the occasion of the funeral mass for Margaret III, Countess of Flanders, held in St Rumbold's on 11 April 1405, he decorated the catafalque and executed the polychrome decoration of seventy-four shields with the arms of Burgundy and Flanders.<sup>45</sup> Shortly thereafter, on the occasion of the Joyous Entry of the Duke of Burgundy, John the Fearless, on 23 April 1405, he decorated eighty-four coats of arms. In 1405, he received payment for his work, for fabrics and for painting materials when Mechelen joined the duke in defending Flanders against an invasion by the English.<sup>46</sup> He further decorated the fireplace of the council chamber in the Schepenhuis with gold, silver and azurite (1408-1409). Eight years later, finally, Vrancke van Lint produced twenty-five medallions for the antependium of the oratory of the magistrate. This lengthy series of painting assignments coincides with the art-historical dating of the wall paintings in the tower of St John's.

Mechelen's municipal accounts provide evidence of a considerable artistic output of ephemeral as well as enduring works of art, as was customary.<sup>47</sup> In fact, in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, no such distinction was made in the context of artistic production. The available documentary evidence would suggest that Vrancke van Lint was the only known local artist to execute such commissions towards the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. Moreover, the municipal accounts indicate that his production was quite prestigious: clearly his services were sought to enhance the splendour of the city and the court of Burgundy. On this basis, we hypothesize that he was also commissioned to create the wall paintings in St John's. Be that as it may, the arrangement of the more than life-size figures in the compositions and within the tower space would certainly suggest that the artist was accustomed to executing this kind of monumental work.

### Patron and Purpose

Neither concrete data nor archival sources are available to tell us who commissioned the wall paintings. Any hypothesis on this matter must therefore be based on contextual clues.

The location of the paintings is crucially important in this respect: the intention was clearly for the saints to be visible to the faithful. The placement of St Christopher suggests that the west portal was the main entrance to St John's. Hence St George on the opposite wall occupied an equally prominent position. This has a special significance. In the absence of source materials, the specific functions of St John's tower and of the portal could not be determined.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, there is clearly a general underlying meaning, as described by Durand de Mende.<sup>49</sup> The purpose of the tower is defensive. The church entrance is an important sacred space that provides access to the Heavenly Jerusalem and thus is associated with Christ. The representation in this location of two saints who are deemed to ward off and combat evil ties in very well with the medieval visual idiom.

Given that St George was the patron of the nobility, his painting may have been commissioned by a member of that class. The House of Burgundy, too, had adopted George as its patron. And Mechelen's *schuttersgilden* or 'armed guilds', whose duties included responsibility for their city's safety, are also possible candidates. The Oude Voetboog, oldest of the town's crossbowmen's guilds, had been in existence since before 1315.<sup>50</sup> As membership was for life and numbers were restricted, a Jonge Voetboog or 'young' crossbowmen's guild had been established as a kind of recruitment pool. It is not entirely clear when the latter association was set up, but it most probably already existed in the fourteenth century. Both guilds took St George as their patron.<sup>51</sup> The Mechelen *schutters* fought for John the Fearless, as well as his son and successor Philip the Good, on one occasion against an English army during the siege of Calais.<sup>52</sup>

St Christopher is a popular saint who provides protection against a sudden death. His cult was

widespread and his image appeared in many late medieval church interiors. On the other hand, Christopher was also the patron saint of Mechelen's *kolweniersgilde* or arquebusiers' guild, though it is uncertain when this militia was established. The earliest documents are the letters from Philip the Good dating from 1453 in which he requests the magistrate of Mechelen to send eight *kolweniers* to reinforce the ducal army in Lille and help crush a rebellion in Ghent.<sup>53</sup> Though their weaponry had been in use since the early fifteenth century,<sup>54</sup> the *kolweniers* were first included as a guild in the city accounts only in 1504.<sup>55</sup>

On 23 April 1405 John the Fearless was officially welcomed in Mechelen as the city's new ruler.<sup>56</sup> Such festivals were known as Joyous Entries, an event in which the militias traditionally played a prominent role. John the Fearless had taken part in the crusades and owed his nickname to his bravery during the Battle of Nicopolis in Bulgaria (1396). To raise the necessary funds, his father Philip the Bold borrowed considerable amounts, with Mechelen also contributing its share.<sup>57</sup> John was spared from decapitation by Sultan Bajazet in return for substantial ransoms. Already venerated as a hero for his military exploits in the service of Christendom, he further acquired the aura of a martyr on account of his incarceration in Turkey.<sup>58</sup> His release was made conditional upon the payment of a large sum of money, to which the people of Mechelen again contributed substantially.<sup>59</sup> Upon his return, and notwithstanding the defeat suffered at the hands of the Turks, he was given a hero's welcome. He and his father visited several towns and cities, including Mechelen, where they were showered with gifts.<sup>60</sup>

For all of the aforementioned reasons, the wall paintings in St John's could be interpreted as a salute from the town militias to their sovereign. However, further clues in this respect are lacking. The fact that the paintings are located in St John's, the patron saint of John the Fearless, is in itself not a decisive argument. Nonetheless, St George could be argued to have been portrayed as a nobleman

and as a true crusader, covered in St George's crosses. Flags and banners bearing his image played an important role, not only in wars, but also in grand official ceremonies in centres of political, spiritual or economic power.<sup>61</sup>

St George is the embodiment of chivalrous virtues and hence numerous sovereigns since the fifteenth century had themselves portrayed in his guise. Jean II le Meingre, better known as Boucicaut, Marshal of France and crusader, is believed to have had himself portrayed as St George.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore conceivable that John the Fearless is represented as a *miles Christi* in the wall paintings in Mechelen. In that case, the painting would tie in with the many other fifteenth-century city ornamentations where the sovereign is represented as an antique or a biblical hero.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, one should not lose sight of the general apotropaic properties of the two saints, both of whom were deemed to ward off evil.

It is particularly unfortunate that the small coat of arms above St Christopher is poorly preserved and hence illegible, because a heraldic interpretation may well have facilitated our reading of the painting.

## Conclusion

It is quite evident that the newly discovered wall paintings are unique. There are very few well-preserved wall paintings from around 1400, and the fact that these examples have never been restored or overpainted makes them all the more exceptional. They are, moreover, relatively complete and their artistic quality is outstanding. Stylistically and costume-wise, the images tie in with the International Style of around 1400.

The wall paintings add an exceptional page to the history of art from the Low Countries around 1400 and complement our understanding of the better known and more intensively studied panel painting and miniature art of the same period. The fact that these paintings are inextricably connected with the building in which they were discovered implies that they were produced in situ, and, moreover, by a competent artist or workshop.

## NOTES

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1 A first preliminary report of the discovery was published in: Buyle 2008.

2 The uncovering and conservation-restoration work was carried out by Marjan Buyle, Els Jacobs and Philippe Schurmans of the Flanders Heritage Agency.

3 The full report of the conservation-restoration work and the technical, material and art-historical research was published in *Relicta*. It is also available for consultation online via OAR: Buyle, Bergmans 2013. A French article is published online: Buyle, Bergmans 2012. The art-historical study has been published in the Antwerp Royal Museum Annual 2010: Bergmans, Buyle 2010.

4 This methodology is currently being developed as a handbook for restoration documentation for mural painting restoration, by the Flanders Heritage Agency.

5 Analyses of the pigments were performed by Marina van Bos and Ingrid Nijs (KIK-IRPA). The full analysis report is published as a supplement to Buyle, Bergmans 2013.

6 For example, Cologne 1978, Paris 2004, Dijon 2004, New York 2005, Nijmegen 2005, Luxembourg/Budapest 2006, Strasbourg 2008 and Rotterdam 2012.

7 On the historical and cultural developments during the Burgundian era, see in particular Prevenier, Blockmans 1983 and subsequent spin-offs. See also the recent synthesis: Boone 2011.

8 Van Doren, 1, 1859, p. 75.

9 Nys 2004.

10 Joubert 1992; Dijon 1992, pp. 156-157; Dijon 2004, pp. 294-295.

11 Buyle 1995.

12 See Van Anrooij 1997.

13 Noad 2002 (with bibliography 1995-2002).

14 Bergmans 1998, pp. 138-142, 313-314.

15 Bergmans 1988; Bergmans 1994; Bergmans 1998, p. 333.

16 Stroo 2009, p. 249.

17 Bergmans 1998, pp. 233-234, 325.

18 Bergmans 1998, p. 325.

19 Smeyers, Cardon, 1995. See also the recent synthesis by Deneffe 2011.

20 Stroo 2009.

21 Baert 2009.

22 Geelen, Steyaert 2009.

23 Blanc 1997, p. 9.

24 Martin 1967, pp. 73-94.

25 Fingerlin 1971, n. 538 and p. 160.

26 Cf. the analysis of the Boucicaut Master's Christopher by Blanc 1997, pp. 104-106.

27 Smeyers et al. 1993, p. 175.

28 Meiss 1968; Châtelet 2000.

29 Strasbourg 2008, pp. 97-99.

30 Scheller 1995. For a discussion of 'Flemish' miniature art, see Vanwijnsberghe 2011.

31 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms M. 346, fol. 3v; Scheller 1995, pp. 218-225.

32 Van Uytven 1991, pp. 75-80.

33 Blockmans 2010, p. 424.

34 Coomans 2009, p. 15.

35 Neeffs 1876, p. 21; Laenen, 1934<sup>2</sup>, 339. The window was removed in 1767.

36 After De Laborde, 2, 1, 1849, p. 97.

37 On Meister Francke, see among others Martens 1929; Hirschfeld 1970.

38 Neeffs 1876, p. 501.

39 Neeffs 1876, pp. 89-100.

40 On city painters, see Wisse, 1998.

41 Neeffs 1876, pp. 97-99.

42 SAM, registers of the city accounts for 1386/1387-1416/1417. They were also registered in the chronicles by J.B. Rymenans and in *Chronologische aenwijzer* by Gysseleers-Thys (SAM Oud Archief, Fonds CC Extrait des archives).

43 SAM, R. 1064 (1397-1398), f. 107, 123v; SAM, R. 1072 (1404-1405), f. 156v.

44 Neeffs 1876, p. 98.

45 SAM, R 1072 (1404-1405), f. 164v.

46 SAM, R 1072 (1404-1405), f. 169.

47 Neeffs 1876, pp. 89-142.

48 See also Kuys 2006.

49 Durand de Mende ed. Barthélemy, 1854, p. 22. *The Rationale divinatorum officiorum of William Durand of Mende: A New Translation of the Prologue and Book One*, New York Columbia University Press, 2007.

50 Van Melckebeke 1913, p. 10.

51 Van Uytven 1991, pp. 71-72.

52 Van Melckebeke 1913, p. 28.

53 Van Melckebeke 1874, p. 1.

54 Van Autenboer 1972, p. 4.

55 Van Melckebeke 1874, p. 9.

56 Van Doren, 1, 1859, p. 80.

57 Van Doren, 1, 1859, p. 79.

58 Blockmans, Prevenier 1997, pp. 51-52; Paviot 2003, pp. 17-57.

59 Van Doren, 1, 1859, 79.

60 De Barante 1835, 2, pp. 25-26; 424-428.

61 Braunfels-Esche 1976, p. 81.

62 Braunfels 1974, pp. 385-387; Braunfels-Esche 1976, pp. 117-119.

63 Vandenbroeck 1981, pp. 15-16, 48-50.