

Rogier van der Weyden's Philadelphia 'Crucifixion'

DESPITE Rogier van der Weyden's stature among his contemporaries and his sustained influence over Northern European art both during his lifetime and after his death in 1464, much about his life and art remains frustratingly vague because of meagre surviving documentation and the difficulties of confirming core works among the output of his shop and many followers. One area of inquiry that may yet contribute much to a sharper definition of his artistic identity is the study of his materials and technique, especially as the information gained from the most important surviving source – the paintings themselves – may turn out to support or to contradict the assumptions and opinions that still remain the basis for most judgments concerning works in the Van der Weyden group. Such study has significantly improved the understanding of one work in particular, the *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John* in the John G. Johnson Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Fig. 23), which has elicited varied and sometimes directly conflicting scholarly opinions through the decades. Research carried out between 1981 and 1990 has done much to amend and consolidate our understanding of this work, settling some questions that could previously be addressed only speculatively.

Technical investigation of the painting began in 1981 with infra-red reflectography conducted for a survey of underdrawing in paintings by the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden. The survey, published in 1992, singled out the Philadelphia *Crucifixion* as a pivotal painting within the Rogier van der Weyden group, in that its underdrawing combines key features of the distinctly different underdrawing styles of two benchmark works, the Prado *Descent from the Cross* and the Escorial *Crucifixion*.¹ Though the study's investigation of materials and technique was limited, it did produce some observations, both technical and qualitative, indicating Rogier's direct involvement in the actual painting of the Johnson *Crucifixion*, while dendrochronological analysis of the panels supports the late dating assigned to the work by a number of scholars since the 1940s.² Further examination of technical, documentary and stylistic evidence, carried out in 1990 in the Conservation Department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, yielded new information on the painting's technique

and state, and in 1992–93 cleaning and restoration, founded on this research, were undertaken.

Though the painting has been almost unanimously accepted as by Rogier since its acquisition by John G. Johnson in 1906 (Fig. 13), opinion as to its dating, original appearance and overall quality has been varied.³ A first consensus developed around the opinions of Max J. Friedländer, who noted in 1921 that the subject and sculptural treatment are 'entirely of Rogier's genius', but then stated that the two panels on which it is painted had 'formed the outer wings to an altarpiece and are painted very light in tone, almost grey in grey except for the red curtains'.⁴ Three years later, in *Die Altniederländische Malerei* he added only: 'In its simple concentrated design a highly characteristic invention of the Master'.⁵ This judgment and the description of the colour as nearly grisaille, combined with scholarly disagreement as to whether the large bipartite format represented altar-piece wings, the left and centre sections of a triptych or even parts of an organ case, gave the impression that the two panels were subsidiary elements from an incomplete work.⁶ The acceptance of such estimations perhaps contributed to a relative neglect of the panels over the following decades.

An alternative view of the painting's quality and its importance to the understanding of Rogier's style and chronology emerged in 1939 with E.P. Richardson's proposal that the Johnson painting is the 'Cambrai altar',⁷ a work for which there is some contemporary documentation.⁸ He noted that the work's nearly square format corresponds approximately to the dimensions given in the documents, and argued that its 'great size and superb quality make it clearly one of the major efforts of Rogier's career', according with the artist's recorded involvement in the delivery of the altar-piece to Cambrai. Richardson's argument for the painting's importance and quality depended in part upon overturning misconceptions about its colour, and he pointedly observed that 'quite contrary to descriptions of it by European scholars as almost a monochrome painting, it is of a special brilliance of color'. Documents date the Cambrai altar to the period between June 1455 and June 1459. Richardson, faced with the then prevailing scholarly view that the Johnson painting was a

¹J.R.J. VAN ASPEREN DE BOER, J. DIJKSTRA and R. VAN SCHOUTE: *Underdrawing in Paintings of the Rogier van der Weyden and Master of Flémalle Groups* (*Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, XLI), Zwolle [1992] pp.25, 37, 158.

²*Ibid.*, pp.156 and 158. In the 1981 comparison of the underdrawing, the few older X-radiographs then available and the paint surface, two creative moments were noted – in the underdrawing and in a first paint layer – suggesting Rogier's direct involvement in at least those stages of execution. Further examination of new full sets of X-radiographs and the painting itself in August 1992, however, led van Asperen de Boer to observe that 'there are corrections even in the top paint layer', and to conclude: 'All this [the continuous development of the figures throughout the drawing, underpainting and final paint layers] points to Rogier's own hand in all stages and probably no participation of the workshop at all'. (Correspondence of 25th August 1992 in the painting's conservation file.) He also noted the presence of a thin, translucent tan or 'flesh-colored' paint-layer applied over the underdrawing before painting was begun, a feature he had also found in the one other work studied for which specific layer structure information was available, the Prado *Descent from the Cross*. The author wishes to thank Dr van Asperen de Boer for generously sharing his knowledge of Rogier's technique and materials.

³Early critical responses after Johnson's acquisition of the panels ranged from cau-

tiously positive to strongly enthusiastic, with Roger Fry, for example, praising the panels in his 1906 correspondence with Johnson as 'one of the most impressive creations of Medieval thought'. Max J. Friedländer, in a letter to Johnson of 1907, called them 'magnificent,' adding that he had tried to acquire them for the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. His later published opinion, though positive, was more reserved.

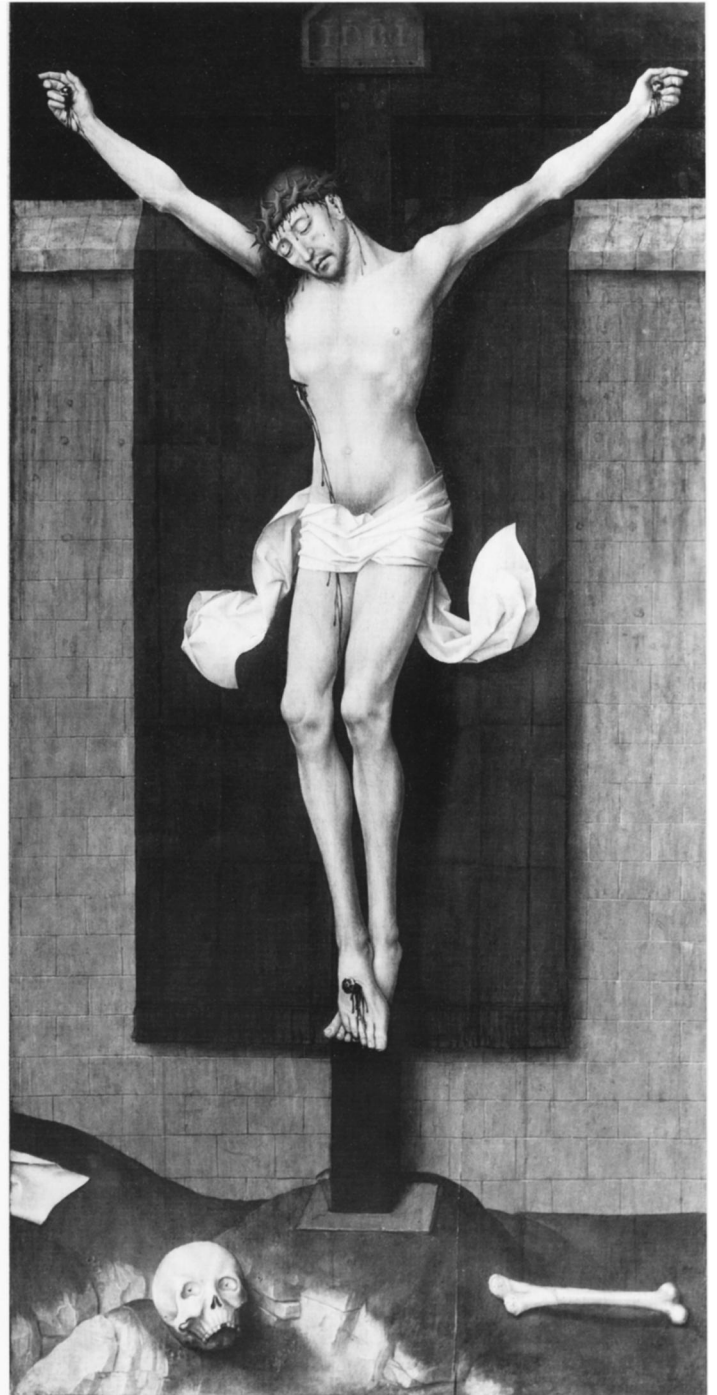
⁴M.J. FRIEDLÄNDER: 'The Pictures of Rogier van der Weyden in America', *Art in America*, IX [1921], p.65.

⁵*Idem*: *Die Altniederländische Malerei*, II, 'Rogier van der Weyden und der Meister von Flémalle', Berlin [1924], p.96, no.15.

⁶E. PANOFKY: *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Cambridge MA [1953], p.285, note 2. The completeness of the bipartite format was eventually established by the Johnson Collection Curator Henri Marceau's observation of the symmetrical positioning of the cloths of honour closer to the division between the two panels than to the outer edges.

⁷E.P. RICHARDSON: 'Rogier van der Weyden's Cambrai Altar', *Art Quarterly*, II [1939], pp.57–66.

⁸The documents pertaining to the commissioning of a painting for the Abbey of St Aubert at Cambrai are in Lille, Archives du Département du Nord, no. 36, H431, fol.221.



13. *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John*, by Rogier van der Weyden, as it appeared c.1906 after its acquisition by John G. Johnson. Oil on oak panel, 178 by 90.2 cm. (each panel). (Philadelphia Museum of Art).

work of the 1440s if not earlier,⁹ proposed revising the stylistic standards for the artist's chronology, pointing to qualities which he ascribed to the influence of Italian art following Rogier's 1450 journey to Italy, such as the painting's 'extraordinary monumental severity', and especially its colour which, he observed, achieved 'an almost High Renaissance largeness and power' through 'contrasts of broad, simple color areas'. Although Richardson's identification of the Philadelphia panels with the Cambrai altar was later challenged,¹⁰ his stylistic observations had significant repercussions.

Henri Marceau, then curator of the Johnson Collection, is cited in Richardson's article and is known to have discussed its revisionist analysis with scholars such as Leo van Puyvelde and Erwin Panofsky. One consequence of Marceau's interest in what he had come, via Richardson, to understand as the work's essential character was the restoration carried out in 1941 under his direction by the freelance restorer David Rosen, a treatment that seems in some ways to have been a direct, quite literal response to the language of Richardson's descriptions. This intervention changed the painting markedly – more than any other intervention in the preceding

⁹PANOFSKY, *loc. cit.* at note 6 above.

¹⁰PANOFSKY (*loc. cit.* at note 6 above, note 3) pointed out an error in the transcription used by Richardson, '*un tabliau a II huystoires*' implying a picture in two scenes. The document actually reads '*un tabliau a II huyseries*', translated by Panofsky as 'a retable with two shutters'. Though agreeing with Richardson's late dating, he reasoned that

the Philadelphia panels could not have been the Cambrai or any other shutters because of 'their admirably careful execution, the sophisticated colouring and the presence of gold; in all other instances, the exterior wings of Rogier's altar-pieces are treated as second-class work and were normally entrusted to assistants' (*ibid.*, note 2).

480-odd years – determining how it would be known for the next five decades.

No photographs were made during the 1941 treatment and the written record consists of a few brief lines in the curatorial dossier and an article written by Rosen that year.¹¹ These state that he had found the panels to be 'heavily . . . streaked with old varnish and repaints' which the cleaning undertook to remove. As for the backgrounds, Rosen declared that the dark blue areas above the wall were '18th century repaints' in 'an oily pigment foreign to the epoch of the picture', adding that traces of gold, described as 'old' or 'original', were discovered beneath. Consequently the blue background was removed and the area above the wall gilded. The very brevity of the first-hand accounts of the treatment lent them a forceful authority, implying that actions taken had been the single possible response to plain and confirmed facts of the painting's technique and condition; it is therefore not surprising that the changes were accepted without question. Leo van Puyvelde's 1941 discussion of the painting after treatment shows an acceptance of Richardson's observations ('Most European scholars have an idea that it is painted in grisaille, but it is in color'), and he goes on to note that 'since the work has just been successfully cleaned through the diligent efforts of Mr. Henri Marceau and Mr. David Rosen, a background of gold at the top gives an extraordinary luminosity to this diptych'.¹² With this praise, the gold background and other features of the painting's appearance after restoration began to be considered as absolute facts of original conception.

The replacement of the dark background with one of gold did, after all, align the painting directly with others that have gilded backgrounds, notably the Prado *Descent from the Cross* and the Beaune *Last Judgment*. The gold on the Philadelphia panels provided a textbook example of a gothic feature set as a foil to the painting's otherwise progressive qualities, supporting the prevalent view of Rogier's art as a reconciliation of conservative sensibilities with his own powerfully inventive personal vision. The gilded background, thus seen as a fitting archaism, was also regarded as recovered evidence of the painting's importance. The use of gold, along with colouring that, as Panofsky later observed, exemplified a 'sensitivity to color . . . second to none',¹³ bolstered arguments for the two panels' status as an independent work, rather than altar-piece wings. Finally, the gilded background, accepted as appropriate in itself, replaced a true stylistic anomaly: the unmodulated dark sky unknown in any comparable work by the artist.

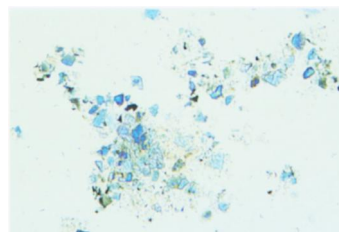
Post-War scholars attached significance and merit to another aspect of the painting's appearance after cleaning that seemed to reinforce established views of Rogier's work and the Philadelphia painting in particular. The *Crucifixion* was already being described as 'abstract' by 1923,¹⁴ and has been admired by scholars and artists alike in this century for seemingly anachronistic formal qualities such as the dominance of design over detail and the broad massing of colour. The painting's severity and breadth of handling, if remarkable before the cleaning, were much more so afterwards,



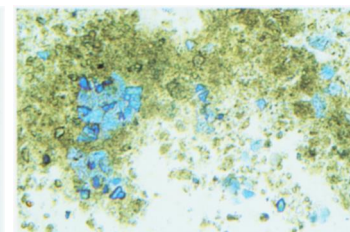
14. Detail of the *Virgin and St. John* panel, showing a surviving patch, above the coping stone of the wall at the right edge, of the blue background paint largely removed from the panels in 1941.



15. Cross-section of a paint sample of the pre-1941 blue sky, showing azurite over a dark grey underpainting and chalk ground.



16. Dispersed sample of the azurite found in sites throughout the background on both panels.



17. Dispersed sample of azurite (here with lead white) from a shadow in the Virgin's robe, shown at the same magnification by polarised light as Fig. 16.

when the setting exhibited a lack of Netherlandish detail and surface refinement that seemed to represent the surpassing instance of Rogier's reduction of a subject to its spiritual and dramatic core. This apparently intentional abandonment of the highly specific representation of outward material qualities of the subject neatly epitomised Panofsky's description of Rogier's world as 'at once physically barer and spiritually richer than van Eyck's'.¹⁵

Comparison of photographs taken soon after the panels entered Johnson's collection (Fig. 13)¹⁶ with one taken after the 1941 treatment (Figs. 18 and 19) shows the generally heightened austerity of the setting and the change in effect due to the gilding of the sky. The alterations, extreme as they were, were never seen as violating the stylistic paradigm for the artist; on the contrary, the post-treatment appearance seemed to extend from and then support a generally more favourable placement of the painting within the canon. Though the alterations were accepted without question and were even interpreted as components of style in the years after 1941, the lack of any documentation apart from the curator's and restorer's say-so left questions about the factual justification for the restoration. Mounting concern prompted the technical investigation of the painting in 1990, which also sought to determine the possible benefits of a new cleaning and restoration in conformity with present standards of substantiation, documentation and care in execution.

At the start of the 1990 examination the state of the background was of greatest immediate interest. Lacking any record of the location or appearance of the traces of gold described as having been found beneath the dark-blue background while it was being removed in 1941, the search for early gold or remnants of the blue repaints mentioned in

¹¹D. ROSEN: 'Preservation vs. Restoration', *Magazine of Art*, XXXIV, no. 9 [1941], pp. 458–71.

¹²L. VAN PUYVELDE: 'The Taste of John G. Johnson, Collector', *Art News*, XL, no. 14 [1st November 1941], p. 36.

¹³PANOFSKY, *op. cit.* at note 6 above, p. 285, note 2.

¹⁴W. BURGER: *Rogier van der Weyden*, Leipzig [1923], p. 31: 'The treatment [of the subject], abstract in itself, is increased and overcharged through the unreality of the

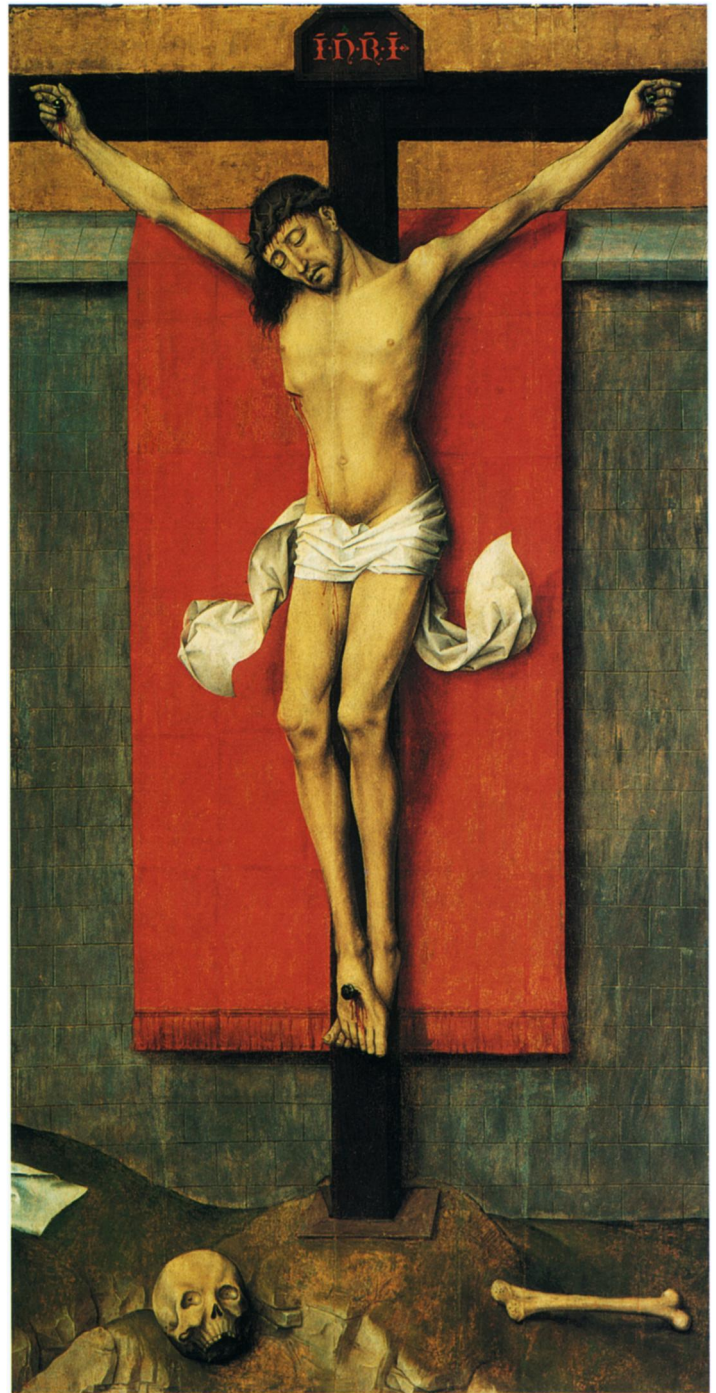
space'.

¹⁵PANOFSKY, *op. cit.* at note 6 above, p. 249.

¹⁶All pre-1941 published images of the panels derive from two large-format glass-plate negatives of very good quality, well exposed and sharp, made soon after the panels entered Johnson's collection in 1906. In 1994 an early colour postcard, probably produced in the 1930s, was found, showing the left panel before cleaning.



18. The *Virgin and St John* panel with alterations brought about by the 1941 cleaning and restoration.



19. The *Crucifixion* panel with alterations brought about by the 1941 cleaning and restoration.

the restorer's account was undertaken by careful systematic scanning of the area under magnification. Rosen had abraded his new gilding to reduce its brilliance, creating a continuous network of gaps through which it could be seen that his removal of the dark blue paint had also taken away much of the chalk ground throughout the background, in some places exposing the surface of the oak panels. Narrow margins of intact ground on which any early background might have survived were found along the frame barbe and along the edges of the Cross, Christ's head and arms and across the tops of the walls, but no gold other than that applied in 1941 was found in these or the few other scattered sites of intact ground. All paint adjacent to the background was also examined closely in the expectation that background gold, typically applied before painting, should extend at least a small distance beneath painted edges, but no gold was found to have been applied before the foreground forms were painted.

It appeared, then, that any gold encountered in the 1941 cleaning either had not been preserved or was exceedingly exiguous, perhaps no more than the sort of incidental scraps left behind by the gilding of a frame.

While the fact that no earlier gold could be detected in 1990 did not in itself establish the appearance of the original background, the discovery of scattered remnants of background paint that had survived Rosen's cleaning settled the question beyond doubt. These remnants were the only pre-1941 materials found wherever the full thickness of the ground survived (Fig. 14). Ranging from bare traces to thick patches several millimetres across, all exhibited a consistent stratigraphy of chalk ground covered by a deep grey underpainting, followed by a thick layer of coarsely ground azurite (Fig. 15). Samples of this blue – the only blue found in the background – were compared with samples of unquestionably original blue from the Virgin's garment: both were



20. Detail of the area around the base of the Cross after the removal of the 1941 restorations, showing areas of a light tan-coloured *imprimatura* exposed in 1941.



21. Detail of the head of St John after the 1993 restoration.



22. *The Mocking of Christ*, by the circle of Fra Angelico. Fresco. (S. Marco, Florence).

found to be azurite of identical particle size distribution (Fig.16 and 17). The justification offered in 1941 for the removal of the painted backgrounds was contradicted on each point by the 1990 findings; contrary to what had been believed since 1941, Rogier van der Weyden's original sky had not been gold, but the deep blackish-blue that had been mistaken for repaint and removed.¹⁷

Rosen's description of the background blue as 'oily' and of the eighteenth century appears to have been due to his observation of prominent drying cracks in the paint. This fault, most commonly associated with unsound techniques that arose in the eighteenth century, does, however, occur in fifteenth-century paintings.¹⁸ The presence of such a defect, incompatible with a popular belief in the perfection of Flemish technique, would have lent credibility to the restorer's declaration that the background paint was not of the period. His 'technical' opinion carried particular weight when linked with the failure of the unmodulated dark-blue sky to meet expectations of stylistic consistency conceived within the limits of 1930s scholarship.¹⁹

The dark background, which is now established to have been both exceptional and authentic, may be regarded as a further manifestation of the reach of the artist's stylistic concerns and influences. An observation of particular interest in this regard was made in 1981 by Penny Howell Jolly, who proposed a direct relationship between the form and colouring of the Philadelphia and Escorial *Crucifixions* and the frescoes painted by Fra Angelico and his shop for the cells at S. Marco in Florence.²⁰ To the similarities Jolly noted between the Philadelphia *Crucifixion* and the *Mocking of Christ* in cell 7 at S. Marco (Fig.22) can now be added the dark sky above the wall in both works and in other frescoes at S. Marco, making the stylistic connexion even more striking than when first proposed. The background of the Philadelphia painting, so readily accepted in its post-1941 gilded state as a vestige of medievalism, may have represented quite the opposite in its original form: it can be seen as evidence of a remarkable late-career openness to new sources and advanced form, specifically the artist's determination to apply distinct characteristics of the Netherlandish idiom and his own style to Italian motifs and composition. Thus the reconciliation of traditions and styles effected in the Philadelphia painting was less between gothic and mid-fifteenth-century Netherlandish

¹⁷Rosen and Marceau were outspoken proponents of technical study and documentary research in questions of authenticity. In his essay 'Conservation and Technical Research' (*Philadelphia Museum Bulletin*, XXV, no.184 [January 1940]) Marceau stresses the need to 'eliminate choices predicated solely upon opinion and conjecture', and notes that the gathering and expert interpretation of factual data 'greatly increase the factor of safety in restoration and conservation'. Rosen espoused an uncomplicated scientism and saw technical study as a distinguishing feature of the emerging professionalism of the field. His treatments, however, indicate a limited aptitude and affinity for the disciplined application of science to the study of paintings and his efforts to align himself with progressive practice of the day depended less on demonstrations of technical knowledge than on the intensity of his moral outrage at the perceived mistakes of past generations of restorers (see his article cited at note 11 above). This, combined with an inadequate familiarity with technical and stylistic characteristics of various schools of painting, led him to purge paintings of actual or suspected restoration with a single-mindedness that often resulted in removal of original paint.

¹⁸Among the many occurrences of this sort of cracking in fifteenth-century works, a particularly germane example is the Virgin's blue mantle in the Boston Museum of Fine Art's version of Rogier's *St Luke painting the Virgin*.

¹⁹Though the dark sky is unusual, no scholar writing before the 1941 cleaning seems to have found it problematic enough to question in print.

²⁰P.H. JOLLY: 'Rogier van der Weyden's Escorial and Philadelphia *Crucifixions* and their relation to Fra Angelico at San Marco,' *Oud Holland*, XCV, no.3 [1981], pp.113-26.

than between the latter and a branch of roughly contemporary Florentine painting that, if distinct from Northern painting in forms, shared the subjective essence of Rogier's art.²¹

Compelling as the case may be for formal derivations from Angelico, in the context of Rogier's subject – which is not just the Crucifixion, but the supreme transitional moment of Christ's death – the dark background assumes specific narrative and iconographic purpose. The featureless deep blue sky signifies the darkness falling between the sixth and ninth hours of the Crucifixion, with the very instant of death indicated by the just-closing eyes and ashen flesh of Christ and St John's staggering posture as he moves forward to accept the weight of the Virgin, who swoons in final collapse, her fingers interlaced not neatly in a conventional gesture of supplication but in the fumbling grasp of a human grief that in the moment eclipses piety.²² The dark sky, which must have seemed a deeply dramatic and unsettling pall to Northern eyes then accustomed to rich architectural or landscape settings, also suppressed the silhouette and symbolism of the Cross, emphasising Christ's corporeal suffering. The effect registered so powerfully that in 1936 one writer admiringly described the 'blank black background, no continuation of the cross,' and the astonishing effect of Christ's hands 'nailed to dark, formless space'.²³

The 1990 examination revealed other, less immediately apparent, changes made in 1941, which unaccountably involved characteristically Rogierian features. The singularly affecting abstract power of the Philadelphia *Crucifixion* is based on the synthesis of an Italian compositional breadth and Rogier's particular genius for the expressive design and disposition of compositional elements. Although losses interrupting form due to the 1941 cleaning had long been evident, before the 1990 examination the very strength of the painting's design made it impossible to imagine the importance of a level of illusionistic content which had been altered or lost in the cleaning. The painting had always represented an austere extreme of the artist's style, and its striking breadth had been commented upon before the 1941 cleaning, but the effect of starkness was so marked afterward that one writer observed: 'Nothing remains of the picturesque details of everyday life', and that the scene is 'so strongly saturated with light that, despite the softness of the flesh tints and the hues of the costumes, one gets the impression of an almost abstract patterning of pure colors'.²⁴ The 1990 examination established, however, that the painting was originally more varied chromatically and more tactile in conception than the general features dominant after 1941 suggested, and had originally exhibited a carefully measured balance between spare, imposing design and fidelity to Netherlandish representational specificity and rich substantiality of surface. The correlation of surviving fragments and traces of the original

surface to features clearly present in the early photographs and in other paintings by Rogier showed how principal pictorial elements had formerly been balanced and enriched by refinements and naturalistic detail not recognised as authentic in 1941 nor known to be missing for fifty years thereafter.

Rogier's evocation of the observed world in specific terms was restrained in the Philadelphia *Crucifixion*, and by that very fact each detail reflected rigorous choice. What we can now interpret as streaks of glazes suggesting water staining down the wall were mistaken by Rosen in 1941 for darkened varnish and largely removed, also disrupting fine gradations of shadows cast on the wall by the cloths of honour. Patches of green moss and rings of ochre-colored lichens were almost completely removed, along with other touches applied to differentiate individual stones in the wall. The cloths of honour, (described in 1913, 1936 and 1939 as 'scarlet',²⁵ but post-cleaning as 'flaming vermilion'),²⁶ particularly that of the right panel, showed the loss of some hatched and stippled crimson glazing in the creases and shadows, with the somewhat greyed original surface of the vermilion broken through in patches. Across the bottom, not just glazes, but large patches of the once-continuous, smoothly blended yellowish to emerald opaque greens of the grassy foreground had been removed (Figs.13, 18 and 19). This damage, caused by the pursuit of brighter colour beneath glazes that had turned brown and were mistaken for darkened varnish, randomly exposed areas of a tan-coloured imprimatura (Fig.20) that has at times been misinterpreted as representing soil, as distinct from the authentic rocks extending into the painting from the bottom edge. The translucent imprimatura, applied after completion of the underdrawing but before painting began, controlled the absorbency of the ground, but it also served to reduce the contrast of an underdrawing that in places provides only a general or inchoate idea of forms which were left to be developed and refined during painting. In the shaded side of the hillock at right, and around the shadow cast by the skull at left, the underdrawing can be seen much as it would have appeared to the artist as painting began.

The figures escaped any significant damage. They have suffered only minor incidental losses, mostly along old repairs of splits in the panels, and light wear in some shadows, but the character of their paint surfaces had been little altered by cleanings (Fig.21). Panofsky attributed differences he saw between the setting and the figures after cleaning to artistic choice. His description is of a painting whose setting is pushed in its harshness almost unbelievably from the style of mid-fifteenth-century Flanders: 'Our glance is blocked by a grim stone wall hung surprisingly with two cloths of honour of flaming vermilion . . . this wall rising behind a barren strip of land . . .'. He then contrasts the stridency of 'this severe yet tremendously colourful background' with the figures, where

²¹The other frequently cited evidence of Rogier's exposure to Tuscan painting is the affinity between his Uffizi *Lamentation* and the predella painting in Munich by Fra Angelico of the same subject from the S. Marco altar-piece.

²²A similar gesture, suggesting both prayer and hand-wringing, is seen in the Magdalen in the Prado *Descent from the Cross*. The two paintings share a strong sense of an arrested transitory moment, largely an effect of the figures' unstable postures; and it is worth noting that for the pose of St John in the Philadelphia painting Rogier returned to the same awkward footing devised for the man supporting Christ's legs in the *Descent* – legs crossed, left heel lifted and right toe pointing out. See also S.N. BLUM: 'Symbolic Invention in the Art of Rogier van der Weyden', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* [1977], p.119, where the multivalence of the Virgin's pose in the Philadelphia painting is noted.

²³S. SKIDELSKY: 'Two panels by Van der Weyden on Exhibit in Philadelphia', *The*

Washington Post [13th December 1936]. This piece, by the Art Editor of the *Washington Post*, is valuable as the lengthiest descriptive treatment of the *Crucifixion* before the 1941 cleaning. In preparing the piece Skidelsky wrote to Henri Marceau requesting bibliographical information (correspondence in the Johnson Collection archives) and the article, written by a non-specialist for a popular audience, represents an interesting attempt to place the painting and its specific pictorial means in the context of a survey of the scholarship of the day.

²⁴J. LASSAIGNE: *Flemish Painting. The Century of van Eyck*, Geneva [1957], p.93.

²⁵W. R. VALENTINER: *Catalogue of a Collection of Paintings and some Art Objects, Flemish and Dutch Paintings*, II, Philadelphia [1913] p.13, nos.334 and 335; SKIDELSKY, *loc. cit.* at note 23 above; RICHARDSON, *loc. cit.* at note 7 above, p.64.

²⁶PANOFSKY, *op. cit.* at note 6 above, pp.249 and 285.

'the treatment of form and movement are far from abstract and ascetic,' and in which the 'flesh tones and soft colors of the garments create a harmony no less rich for being subdued'.²⁷ This contrast between setting and figures was in truth a product of restoration. The original treatment of the scene, if comparatively austere, can now be seen as more generally and uniformly consistent with the conventions of fifteenth-century Netherlandish illusionism in creating a convincing perceptual continuity between the holy setting of the painting and surroundings familiar to the viewer.²⁸

As the examination revealed the extent and nature of damages caused by the 1941 cleaning, it also brought to light difficulties arising specifically from the restoration carried out by Rosen. The painting was marred by the uneven application and pronounced discoloration of the 1941 varnish (already prompting its removal from the figures of St John and the Virgin in 1962) but the greater problem was the 1941 retouching. Though it dealt tentatively with even the most prominent disruptions of surface and form, it was coarse, and particularly conspicuous where seen alongside the superb craftsmanship of areas of preserved original surface.²⁹

The *Crucifixion* was cleaned and restored in 1992–93. The removal of even merely suspected repaints in the 1941 cleaning meant that the varnish and retouching applied then were virtually the only restoration materials present. Just fifty years old, the restorations were readily distinguishable and, though their removal from paint surfaces rendered fragile in places by the previous cleaning required time and care, it presented no extraordinary complications. The 1992 cleaning made fully apparent the widely differing states of various passages, presenting a hierarchy of problems to be addressed in the subsequent effort to reinstate a sense of the painting's pre-1941 unity of effect. The approach of the 1993 restoration was shaped by recognition of two principal deficiencies of the preceding one: its lack of factual justification for elements introduced by the restorer and its failure to lessen the likelihood of the sort of misreading of incidental damage as intentional artistic effect that is seen in the post-War literature. Therefore, a primary aim of the 1993 treatment was the restoration of damaged elements of the complex of known original formal qualities, but only to the extent that the precise character of those qualities could be established from the combined technical and documentary evidence. Reconstructive retouching, carried out where volume, relief, colour and compositional equilibrium were most disrupted, was taken only as far as could be substantiated by close reference to all

reliable indications of the work's pre-1941 appearance.³⁰ Larger areas of retouching were carried out in a modulated *rigatino* technique of fine vertical strokes that makes restorations distinguishable from intact original paint on close viewing, reducing the potential for confusion over the extent of reconstruction in passages most damaged by the 1941 cleaning.

The spurious gold background posed an exceptional problem. At no time was its removal considered justifiable, as no further original surface beyond the small scattered fragments of background paint already found stood to be revealed. The gold also marked a significant, if unfortunate, phase of the painting's history and, even with the care taken in examining the area in 1990, the possibility remained that the gilding could yet conceal information of future interest. The gold was nevertheless an essential falsification, imposing an unacceptable barrier to comprehension of some of the most basic aims and achievements of the work. By its transformation of the original dark, recessive background into a bright, flat, reflective surface, the 1941 gilding worked aggressively against the image, to a degree scarcely imaginable until a preliminary masking-out of the gold showed how obviously the painting's colour and modelling had been developed by the artist in reference to an overall lower value scale. Evaluation of a range of possibilities over a period of months showed that a carefully adjusted facsimile of the former dark sky, applied over the gold, most suitably suggested its pre-1941 appearance and effect. As carried out, the restoration of the sky duplicates the colour, texture and thickness seen in the fragments of the original background and in comparable fields of azurite found in other paintings of the period, but can easily be removed to reveal the 1941 gold if any future generation desires (Fig.23).

Due to circumstances of pre- and post-War scholarship and the drastic change in the state of the painting in the intervening 1941 restoration, a number of authentic features that lent unique distinction to the Philadelphia *Crucifixion* have not received scholarly consideration. Though the painting was accepted and generally praised by eminent scholars before 1939, none provided a detailed analysis of its stylistic characteristics or specific support for their appraisals of its quality. The comparatively superficial descriptions of the time are due at least in part to the fact that the painting, which has left Philadelphia only once since 1906,³¹ was not readily accessible to the European scholars whose opinions were most influential. Their reliance on black-and-white photographs

²⁷*Ibid.*, p.285. Richardson and then Panofsky both considered the painting's full and sophisticated colouring as one of its principal strengths. The view of the panels as grisaille or 'demi-grisaille', traceable to Friedländer's inaccurate early description, persists in the literature; however, it is difficult to believe that anyone viewing the painting directly with an unprejudiced eye would be inclined to such a description. The draperies, possibly in deference to Carthusian taste (see JOLLY, *loc. cit.* at note 20 above, p.119) are pale yet pure tints, the Virgin's shading to a fully saturated deep blue and St John's to a deep burnt crimson, but unlike the sort of demi-grisaille seen, for example, on the exterior of the Ghent altar-piece, the setting is dominated by large areas of varied and strong colour, and even the wall of grey stone was enlivened with glazes and strewn with highly coloured detail.

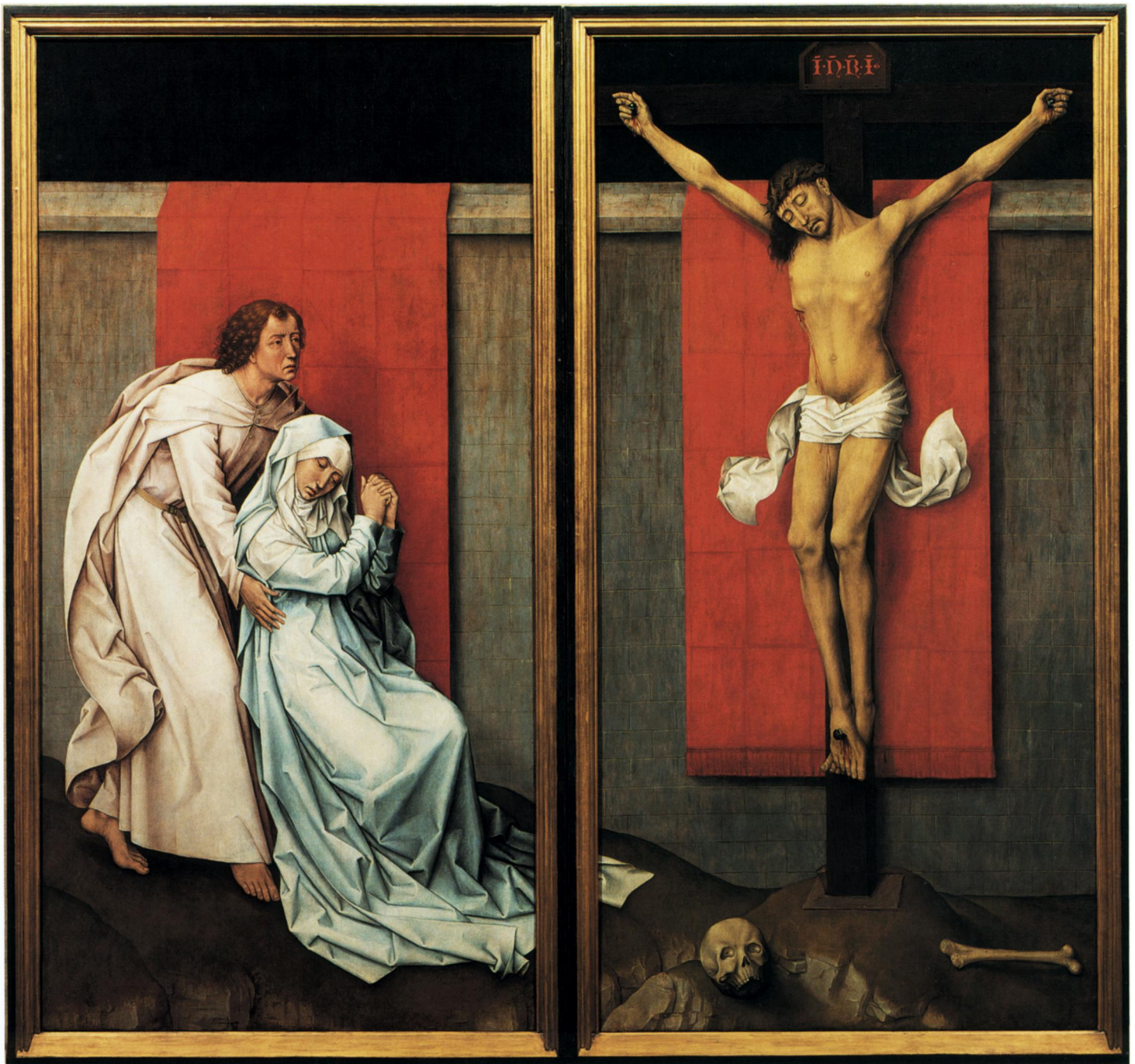
²⁸JOLLY, *loc. cit.* at note 20 above, p.120. If, as Jolly suggests, the Philadelphia *Crucifixion* was painted for a Carthusian monastery, the wall's stonework, weathering, lichens and mosses would have evoked the enclosed exterior spaces familiar to that order.

²⁹Rosen's minimal yet wilfully apparent retouching was accepted by some at the time as a logical compromise between the extremes of leaving damage completely visible and restoring to the point of falsification. In a 1961 panel discussion on 'The Aesthetic and Historical Aspects of the Presentation of Damaged Pictures', Edward S. King, Director of the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, invoked the names of Rosen (who had founded the Gallery's technical laboratory in 1934) and fellow-participant

Richard Offner as mentors in matters of restoration. King explained that his institution was in principle sympathetic to Offner's categorical opposition to retouching ('... that once alteration of the original was accepted the way was open for easy compromise, invention and license'). In practice, however, King could not accept leaving damage fully exposed and deferred to Rosen, believing him to be 'uncompromising in his insistence on the preservation of [the damaged work of art's] original character'. See *Problems of the 19th and 20th Centuries, Studies in Western Art, Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art*, Princeton [1963], IV, pp.152–62, 184–85).

³⁰The 1993 restoration was substantiated point-for-point by comparisons between the painting's surface, the early photographs and effects seen in other works by the artist and shop. For example, the large *Crucifixion* at the Escorial, another late painting of large scale and similarly broad design, exhibits points of handling in the foreground directly comparable to that seen in the early photographs of the Philadelphia painting and indicated by preserved paint in otherwise damaged areas. Though less directly applicable to the Philadelphia restoration, first-hand study of the meticulously detailed and beautifully preserved Prado *Descent from the Cross* (being restored by Maite Davile during the same period) afforded a fuller appreciation of the range of Rogier's style over the decades.

³¹The painting was lent to the Worcester (Massachusetts) Art Museum in 1939 for the Worcester-Philadelphia Exhibition of Flemish Paintings.



23. The *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John* after the 1993 restoration.

permitted comment on little more than general design and made critical evaluation of other (particularly Friedländer's) opinions impossible.³² When in 1939 the scholarship of the preceding decades was finally challenged, it was precisely because E.P. Richardson could not help noting the striking disparity between the painting's superb quality, colour and completeness viewed first hand and the prevailing scholarly conception of the panels as near-grisaille exteriors of altarpiece shutters, suggesting shop production, or an incomplete triptych. After the War, Richardson was joined in his enthusiasm for the painting by Panofsky and others, as the study of Netherlandish painting was entering a phase of new complexity in the analysis of style, iconography and technique, but by that time the object of analysis itself was materially dis-

torted by the 1941 restoration. From then until 1990 it was never suspected that what were considered to be two of the painting's more notable attributes – the gold background and an exceeding starkness – were products of restoration that weakened or directly conflicted with authentic qualities. The understanding that is now possible of the visual and material character of a number of original features removed or diminished in 1941 provides a factual basis for further analysis of their broader stylistic implications and their part in the formal and textual coherence of the work. The rediscovery of fundamental aspects of a major work's strengths and refinement, lost to scholars for five decades, presents an opportunity for a truer measure of the boundaries of Rogier's ambitions and accomplishment.

Philadelphia Museum of Art

³²Another important quality of the Philadelphia painting that could not be appreciated in the study of photographs alone is its imposing scale, witness Friedrich Winkler's strange statement that '[the Philadelphia painting] has too small figures to be

able to say anything more exact [about its date] with assurance' (*Der Meister von Flémalle und Rogier van der Weyden*, Strassburg [1913], p.51). The figures are well over half life-size.