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**SAINT DYMPHNA BY GOOSSEN VAN DER  
WEYDEN – AN UP-TO-DATE PRINCESS.**

**SOME ADDITIONS TO: ‘CRAZY ABOUT DYMPHNA:  
THE STORY OF A GIRL WHO DROVE A MEDIEVAL CITY MAD’  
(2020)**

**INTRODUCTION**

In 2020, a major exhibition brought to the Niguliste Museum (a branch of the Art Museum of Estonia) in Tallinn by the Phoebus Foundation, the largest private art collection in Belgium, focused on the St Dymphna altarpiece (hereafter: Dymphna altarpiece) from the workshop of Goossen van der Weyden.<sup>1</sup> Dated to circa 1505, the altarpiece was dismantled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after which the panel depicting the decapitation of the virgin martyr St Dymphna was lost. Thus, the panels of the altarpiece were exhibited separately. This, in turn, enabled close inspection of all the work's details, something that was impossible for most late medieval viewers, who were only able to see the altarpiece from a certain distance.

The exhibition was accompanied by a monograph reflecting on the major topics connected to the Dymphna altarpiece and presenting the results of the conservation work carried out between 2017 and

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<sup>1</sup> For the exhibition, see <https://nigulistemuseum.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/crazy-about-dymphna/> [accessed 24/07/2022].

2020.<sup>2</sup> One of the aspects the book considers is the material culture represented on the Dymphna altarpiece. Several objects depicted are compared with items from the collections of the Brussels Royal Museum of Art and History or the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the authors' searched for their material sources mainly in the Dutch and Belgian collections. The protagonists' clothing and textiles receive special attention in the monograph, most notably for the present study in the context of questions of whether the garments worn by the princess are fashionable or out of date for the period.<sup>4</sup> Lucinda Timmermans supports the argument that Dymphna's dress corresponds to 'fashionable 16<sup>th</sup> century attire', but compares it to portraits of Antwerp patrician women related to the Colibrant family.<sup>5</sup> She concludes, that Dymphna's headdress is more 'opulent and may allude to her royal origins', but does not give a contemporary example. Catheline Périer-d'Ieteren describes St Dymphna and Gerebernus as dressed in a 'traditional but outdated mode'.<sup>6</sup>

This article explores this question, taking the portraits of Habsburg and Castilian princesses painted in around 1500 and not used for comparison in the monograph as its point of departure. In this paper, I propose that the clothing and accessories of princess Dymphna are modelled on the image of contemporary Habsburg and Castilian princesses, and that such modelling has political implications.

The Dymphna altarpiece is accompanied by a cityscape of Antwerp, which receives special attention in the monograph.<sup>7</sup> The role of Antwerp as a merchant city must not be forgotten in this context, as the appearance of luxury objects in an artwork is in direct correlation with the city's milieu of merchandise, luxury production, and the marketing of the city. The article claims that the cityscape representing the merchant city and the luxury objects themselves

2 *Crazy about Dymphna: The Story of a Girl who Drove a Medieval City Mad*, ed. by Sven Van Dorst (Belgium: Cannibal/Hannibal Publishers, 2020).

3 See Joke Vandermeersch, 'Sumptuous brocade patterns', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 263 and Lucinda Timmermans, 'Clothing and Utensils as Attributes on the Dymphna altarpiece', *Ibid.*, 370–371.

4 Timmermans, 'Clothing and Utensils as Attributes on the Dymphna altarpiece', 363.

5 *Ibid.*, 363.

6 Catheline Périer-d'Ieteren, 'Painting in Antwerp around 1500: Goossen Van der Weyden and the Dymphna altarpiece', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 160.

7 Jelle de Rock, 'Landscape and Architecture in the Dymphna altarpiece', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 346.

allude to the identity of the city of Antwerp as a great metropolis for commerce and the arts.

#### THE DYMPHNA ALTARPIECE: THE HISTORY OF A DISMANTLED *CHEF-D'ŒUVRE*

The Dymphna altarpiece was originally commissioned by abbot Antonius Tsgrooten for the abbey of Tongerlo in Brabant (in modern Belgium).<sup>8</sup> The Abbey was prosperous and influential, as was abbot Tsgrooten, a great patron of the arts. He was well educated, excelled in administrative tasks, and governed the abbey well.<sup>9</sup> He commissioned several altarpieces – for example, the triptych depicting the Man of Sorrows and Virgin Mary interceding before God the Father – from the Brussels workshop of Goossen van der Weyden.<sup>10</sup> He was not only interested in panel painting but also commissioned a manuscript in the form of an antiphonary with *trompe l'oeil* motifs characteristic of late medieval Flemish illumination.<sup>11</sup> In all instances, he is immortalised among the saints and holy figures, sometimes accompanied by his motto *veritas vincit*. On the Dymphna altarpiece he is depicted on the outer wings together with Willem Sapels, his chamberlain. Unfortunately, his portrait was painted on tin foil, which has been damaged and darkened over time, making his likeness illegible.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, this process cannot be reversed. This technique was probably used because the patron could not travel to Brussels, so the workshop assistants travelled to Tongerlo and portrayed him, with the full portrait later integrated to the altarpiece.<sup>13</sup> Another similar instance

8 Georges Hulin de Loo, 'An Authentic Picture by Goossen van der Weyden and the Legend of St. Dymphna from Tongerlo', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 22 (115) (1912), 26–32.

9 Janick Appelmans, Stefan Ven Lani, 'Antonius Tsgrooten, Son of a Farrier, Patron and Prelate of a Powerful Brabant Abbey', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 79–91.

10 Goossen van der Weyden. Triptych of Abbot Antonius Tsgrooten. 1507. Royal Museums of Fine Arts Antwerp. See <https://kmska.be/en/masterpiece/triptych-antonius-tsgrooten> [accessed 10/02/23].

11 Goossen van der Weyden. Antiphonary of Antonius Tsgrooten. 1522. Brabant (region Antwerp, Mechelen, Louvain). University Library, Ghent. See <https://www.antifonarium-tsgrooten.be/eng/index.htm> [accessed 03/10/2022].

12 Sven van Dorst, 'The Patrons of the Dymphna Altarpiece Unmasked', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 96–100.

13 *Ibid.*, 97.

of this on the altarpiece is the portrayal of a young woman whose presence also makes reliable the assumption that the commissioning of the altarpiece was not just Tsgrooten's solo venture but was supported by the local community.<sup>14</sup>

The Dymphna altarpiece originally had painted shutters. The outer wings were painted in grisaille and depicted St Dymphna and St Lucy and the Legend of St Lucy. The shutters have been damaged over time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the abbot Joseph Peter van der Achter (1724–1745) had the altarpiece dismantled and placed in the oratory.<sup>15</sup> The explanatory texts that were on the inner panels and accompanied the legend of St Dymphna, were also lost. Since the outer panels were placed against the wall, the humidity probably caused flaking and paint loss.<sup>16</sup> The inner wings and the central panel consisted of a series of legendary events in the life of St Dymphna. She was an Irish princess who, according to the legend, lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Her story was one of incest and martyrdom. After the death of her Christian mother, she refused the marriage proposal of her heathen father. In order to escape her father, she crossed the ocean and reached the harbour of Antwerp. A fairly accurate city view of this 16<sup>th</sup> century metropolis is depicted on the panel featuring the escape of St Dymphna.<sup>18</sup> From Antwerp, Dymphna reached the city of Geel, which later became the pilgrimage destination for those suffering from mental illness.<sup>19</sup> Caring for the mentally ill in the abode of a family remains a part of the city's identity.<sup>20</sup> Dymphna's father followed her to the sanctuary and when his proposal was again denied, he beheaded his own daughter. In the first centuries, this was the fate of many virgin saints, such as St Catherine, St Barbara and St Lucy. The last events of Dymphna's story include the miraculous finding of Lucy's remains and the placement of the sarcophagi in

14 Van Dorst, 'The Patrons of the Dymphna Altarpiece Unmasked', 104.

15 Sven van Dorst, Hilde Weissenborn, 'The Vanished Triptych: The Dymphna altarpiece digitally reconstructed', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 25.

16 Ibid., 25.

17 Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, 'Dymphna, her Historical Background and Cult', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 266–279.

18 De Rock, 'Landscape and Architecture in the Dymphna altarpiece', 346.

19 Mulder-Bakker, 'Dymphna, her Historical Background and Cult', 276–278.

20 Katharina Van Cauteren, 'Goossen Van der Weyden's Dymphna altarpiece. A material witness to something intangible', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 18.

the chapel of St Martin (a locally important saint in Geel until the cult of St Dymphna replaced him).<sup>21</sup>

The events of Dymphna's story are structured similarly on all surviving panels. The legend is told with the help of microarchitecture and landscapes that divide the scene into multiple structural layers.<sup>22</sup> This is typical for the Brabant painting of the time and, perhaps, also to be expected on the Dymphna altarpiece, as Goossen van der Weyden was a grandson of the famous Brabant painter Rogier van der Weyden. Indeed, many stylistic elements with motifs borrowed from Rogier's oeuvre have been detected in Goossen's work.<sup>23</sup> Yet, Goossen was a talented artist in his own right. He had a large workshop working on numerous large-scale altarpieces in Antwerp – one of the chief artistic centres of Brabant painting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Dymphna altarpiece also shows Goossen's talent, as it has been considered quite independent of Rogier's work.<sup>24</sup>

#### THE ANTWERP CITYSCAPE: A MERCANTILE CITY IN THE MAKING

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Antwerp rose to become an excellent city of commerce at the expense of former metropolis Bruges.<sup>25</sup> This period is often called the Golden Age of Antwerp. This rise to prominence was also encouraged by Maximilian I, who in 1484/1488 recommended the Hanseatic merchants carry out their business in Antwerp.<sup>26</sup> During the period the Dymphna altarpiece was being painted – between 1490 and 1530 – the city of Antwerp profited from trade with English textiles, German metals, and Portuguese spices, all of which were exchanged

21 Mulder-Bakker, 'Dymphna, her Historical Background and Cult', 268.

22 Périer-d'Ieteren, 'Painting in Antwerp around 1500: Goossen van der Weyden and the Dymphna altarpiece', 157.

23 Stephan Kemperdick, 'Goossen van der Weyden: Rogier's grandson between Brussels and Antwerp', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 117.

24 Ibid., 120.

25 *Medieval Bruges, c. 850–1550*, ed. by Andrew Brown, Jan Dumolyn (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 445–448.

26 Wim Blockmans, Walter Prevenier, *The Promised Lands: The Low Countries under Burgundian Rule, 1369–1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 203.

at the annual fairs.<sup>27</sup> By granting the merchants from Hanseatic and Mediterranean cities the same privileges they had had in Bruges, Maximilian I reaffirmed Antwerp's position.<sup>28</sup> This was also the period when Antwerp evolved not only into an important international exchange market as well as a producer of luxury goods, thus making these excellent items affordable to a wider clientele.<sup>29</sup> This later led the then Regent Margaret of Austria to address the magistracy of Antwerp in 1527 to complain about the use of silks: 'there is no man or woman, of whatever low status they are, who does not want to own and wear them.'<sup>30</sup> She declared the expenditure of three thousand ducats a year for those precious fabrics.<sup>31</sup> The Dymphna altarpiece, however, probably precedes these developments, for the precious garments and accessories depicted are mainly the prerogative of the aristocracy, i.e. the king and the princess.

Given the rising importance of Antwerp it is not surprising that its cityscape is an integral part of Dymphna's story on the altarpiece. Incorporating cityscapes on altarpieces is not a phenomenon exclusive to Antwerp. For example, the city view of Bruges prominently features in the works by the Master of the Legend of St Lucy and the Master of the Legend of St Ursula.<sup>32</sup> While Bruges cityscapes feature landmarks such as Notre Dame and the Belfry, the view of Antwerp is made recognisable by depicting the church of St Walburga.<sup>33</sup>

No one has proposed that the mercantile essence of Antwerp was emphasised much more than in the parallel cases of Bruges cityscapes.<sup>34</sup> This is probably because, unlike in Antwerp, the Bruges court had had close ties to the merchant elite and adopted a more

27 Jeroen Puttevils, 'Sixteenth Century Antwerp, a Hyper-Market for All? The Case of Low Countries Merchants', *Antwerp in the Renaissance*, ed. by Bruno Blondé, Jeroen Puttevils. Studies in European Urban History (1100–1800), vol. 49 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 33.

28 Ibid., 34.

29 Bruno Blondé, Jeroen Puttevils, Isis Sturtewagen, 'Silks and the "Golden Age" of Antwerp', *Antwerp in the Renaissance*, 299–300.

30 Isis Sturtewagen, *All together respectably dressed: Fashion and Clothing in Bruges during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*. PhD Thesis (Antwerp: University of Antwerpen, 2016), 127.

31 Ibid., 127.

32 Jelle de Rock, 'The Image of the City in early Netherlandish Painting. Studies in European Urban History', *Antwerp in the Renaissance*, 52–218.

33 Jelle de Rock, 'Landscape and Architecture in the Dymphna altarpiece', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 346.

34 De Rock, 'The Image of the City in early Netherlandish Painting', 127–138.

elitist identity.<sup>35</sup> This was not the case in Antwerp, which led the city to embrace the model of the 'merchant city'.<sup>36</sup> Looking at the cities through the painter's lens, we do not see 'mercantile elements' in the cityscapes of Bruges, while the view of the harbour of Antwerp on the Dymphna altarpiece conveys the identity of a merchant city.

It has been pointed out that the Antwerp city view lacks a few prominent contemporary buildings, such as Notre Dame.<sup>37</sup> This gives prominence to the older building, such as the church of St Walburga dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, which helps to make the city look 'ancient'.<sup>38</sup> This principle is akin to the one followed when depicting saints or holy figures in outdated attire to signal they lived in the past.<sup>39</sup> Considering the cityscapes of the time, not aiming for verisimilitude is unsurprising. Indeed, there was probably never an intention to depict a city view accurately in the Netherlandish painting. Rather, they tended to encompass important landmarks put together in a jigsaw puzzle-like manner without taking too much notice of the real alignment and distance.<sup>40</sup>

#### BRUSSELS AND ANTWERP PAINTING THROUGH THE LENS OF MATERIAL CULTURE

The attention given to different materials (metal, glass, textile) and their light-defined textures are essential to the Netherlandish art of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Antwerp painting is, of course, subjected to the same criteria. Just as in other cities, great significance is given to the textures, types, and preciousness of textiles. This is only natural for a city that is engaged in the trade of textiles and whose elite wears the finest of garments. This is equally true for painting

35 Jelle De Rock, 'The City Portrayed. Patterns of Continuity and Change in the Antwerp Renaissance City', *Antwerp in the Renaissance*, 239.

36 Ibid., 239.

37 De Rock, 'Landscape and Architecture in the Dymphna altarpiece', 348.

38 Ibid., 346.

39 Ene Lamp, 'Hermen Rode Niguliste altar hiliskeskaja kostüümi pildiseeriana', *Kunstist Eestis läbi aegade. Uurimusi ja artikleid* (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1990), 140–141.

40 Craig Harbison, 'Fact, Symbol, Ideal: Roles for Realism in Early Netherlandish Painting', *Petrus Christus in Renaissance Bruges: An Interdisciplinary Approach (Papers presented at the 'Petrus Christus in Renaissance Bruges' symposium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 10 to 12 June 1994 ...)*, ed. by Maryan W. Ainsworth (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 21–34.

and sculpture that take their inspiration from real life, but are also fashioned according to the artists' needs.

Prominent predecessors, the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden among them, took great interest in elaborate textiles, the most prominent case being the Flémalle panels. In these, sumptuous brocaded textiles are depicted behind Saint Veronica<sup>41</sup> and the Virgin Mary, and great attention is given to Veronica's veil,<sup>42</sup> a delicate, transparent fabric necessitating the greatest painterly skill.<sup>43</sup> His follower Rogier van der Weyden, the grandfather of Goossen van der Weyden, also gave attention to the rendering of precious textiles. The 'Descent from the Cross' is not only exemplary for its psychological depth but also for depicting costly wool, silk, and fur.<sup>44</sup> It is known from workshop practices that he reused the pattern designs on numerous works and was exact in his rendering of luxurious velvets.<sup>45</sup>

The same attention to detailed textiles was to be expected from the Antwerp workshops of the time. One of the most studied instances in this respect is the Workshop of Antwerp anonymous, the master of Frankfurt, active in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Several cloths of gold with silk patterns (at least three separate ones) resurface in their works again and again. The use of these designs was probably reserved for the workshop and its assistants.<sup>46</sup> Although workshops might have been protective of their designs, the circulation of motifs and patterns cannot be excluded from the argument. Indeed, we have information that pattern books and designs were shared between Netherlandish artists.<sup>47</sup>

41 Master of Flémalle (Robert Campin?). Saint Veronica with the Veil. Ca 1428–1430. Städel Museum, Frankfurt. See <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/saint-veronica> [accessed 10/02/2023].

42 Master of Flémalle (Robert Campin?). Madonna breastfeeding. Ca 1428–1430. Städel Museum, Frankfurt. See <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/madonna-and-child> [accessed 10/02/2023].

43 Lisa Monnas, *Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 128.

44 Rogier van der Weyden. Descent from the Cross. Before 1433. Museo Nacional del Prado. See <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-descent-from-the-cross/856d822a-dd22-4425-bebd-920a1d416aa7> [accessed 10/02/2023].

45 Monnas, *Merchants, Princes and Painters*, 130–135.

46 Stephen H. Goddard, 'Brocade Patterns in the Shop of the Master of Frankfurt: An Accessory to Stylistic Analysis', *The Art Bulletin*, 67 (3) (1985), 405–409.

47 Lorne Campbell, 'The Early Netherlandish Painting and their Workshops', *Le dessin sous-jacent dans la peinture. Colloque III: Le problème Maître de Flémalle-Van der Weyden*, ed. by Dominique Hollanders-Favaert, Roger Van Schoute (Louvain-la-Neuve: Collège Érasme, 1981), 53–54.

In terms of depicting textiles, the Goossen van der Weyden workshop was no exception among the Antwerp workshops as it dedicated the same amount of labour to painting rich silks, velvets, and gold cloth. For example, in the 'Donation of the Kalmthout', in Berlin, a rich cloth of gold functions as *drap d'honneur* behind Virgin Mary.<sup>48</sup> The clothes of the donors are trimmed with fur and are in bright red and blue colours to indicate luxury. The clothing references a Rogieresque tradition, as it is more compatible with the fashion of the 1450s.<sup>49</sup>

The same attention to detail can be seen in 'Virgin and Child' in Basel.<sup>50</sup> In this painting, St Mary with the little Jesus is lovingly depicted with a lemon and cherries on the windowsill together with a vase with lilies and irises that symbolise Mary's chastity and suffering. The anthropomorphic jug closely resembles two objects made in Pesaro or Faenza in Italy in 1480<sup>51</sup> and kept in the Victoria and Albert museum<sup>52</sup> and the Louvre.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the Colibrant triptych<sup>54</sup> incorporates the same vase.<sup>55</sup> This is an indication that such a vase was from the workshop's immediate environment, which is not surprising considering the status and scope of the city of Antwerp.<sup>56</sup> The Colibrant altarpiece also features several rich garments, like the cope of cloth of gold of the approaching angel and the rich garments of the witnesses to the marriage of Mary and Joseph.

48 Goossen van der Weyden. Donation of the Kalmthout. Ca 1511–1515. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Kemperdick, 'Goossen van der Weyden: Rogier's grandson between Brussels and Antwerp', 119).

49 Till-Holger Borchert, 'Goossen van der Weyden and the Flemish Primitives', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 149; Timmermans, 'Clothing and Utensils as Attributes on the Dymphna Altarpiece', 363.

50 Goossen van der Weyden. Virgin and Child. Ca 1515–1525. Kunstmuseum, Basel, Inv. G 1958.29.

51 Elfriede Scheil, *Fayencen in der Malerei des Mittelalters*. Dissertation (unveröffentlicht) (1977), 129–130.

52 Jug with a face relief. Tin-glazed earthenware. 1480. 16.5 × 18 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. See <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O160541/jug/> [accessed 10/02/23].

53 Jug with a face relief. Tin-glazed earthenware. 16.3 × 19.5 cm. Louvre, Paris. See <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/rl010117921> [accessed 10/02/23].

54 Goossen van der Weyden. The Colibrant Triptych. 1516. St. Gummarus's Church, Lier. See <https://artinflanders.be/en/artwork/triptych-colibrant> [accessed 10/02/23].

55 Kemperdick, 'Goossen van der Weyden: Rogier's grandson between Brussels and Antwerp', 120.

56 Blondé, Puttevils, Sturtewagen, 'Silks and the "Golden Age" of Antwerp', 315.



FIG. 1. GOOSSEN VAN DER WEYDEN. THE SAINT DYMPHNA ALTARPIECE. CA 1505. DYMPHNA'S FATHER PROPOSES TO HER. ILLUSTRATION: THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION.

The material world of the Dymphna altarpiece is varied, as it depicts textiles, fur, and goldsmith's work. The colours, forms, and chosen styles refer to power relations and the position of those depicted. The symbolic communication can have positive or negative connotations, depending on the status of the person depicted. This is, for example, the case with the heathen ambassadors of the king who are depicted in yellow and wearing turban-like headgear to indicate that they are 'non-believers'.<sup>57</sup> This political iconography stems from the notion of the Turk or the Moor (known as Saracens at the time), who were considered non-Christian and at the time of Renaissance humanist revival, also 'barbarians'.<sup>58</sup> In short, in this case, material culture was used for negative communication to exclude the non-Christian through decorum.

The king and the princess are depicted in rich cloth of gold with real-life ancestors (Fig. 1). Interestingly, the heathen king is depicted according to the general political iconography of a king, that is, with a fleur-de-lis crown and ermine garment with blue sleeves, reminding us of typical decorum at the French court. In the Dymphna monograph, a parallel is drawn between the king's attire and a rich velvet cope in the collection of the Brussels Museum of History and Art.<sup>59</sup> The cope is made from so-called *griccia* velvet, particularly common in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, and displays an undulating pomegranate pattern.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, there is a chasuble in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that has a great similarity in pattern, although a different colour scheme (Fig. 2A and 2B).<sup>61</sup> Similarly, as the garment of a king, this velvet is the so-called *velluto alluciolato*, which exhibits massed gold loops (known as *bouclé*). Goossen van der Weyden has a pointillist impasto technique to convey them without ever really using gold or the

57 Detlef Mostaert, 'The Clothes Make the Man: The Headdress makes the Heathen', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 341.

58 Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 8–9, 43–44.

59 Velvet cope. Fifteenth century. Italy. Royal museum of Art and History, Brussels (Vandemeersch, 'Sumptuous Brocade Patterns', 262).

60 Ibid., 263.

61 Velvet Panels from a chasuble. Mid 15<sup>th</sup> century. Italian. Silk and metal thread. Metropolitan Museum, New York. See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/227919> [accessed 10/02/23].



FIG. 2A. GOOSSEN VAN DER WEYDEN. THE SAINT DYMPHNA ALTARPIECE. CA 1505. DETAIL. THE KING'S GARMENT. ILLUSTRATION: THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION.

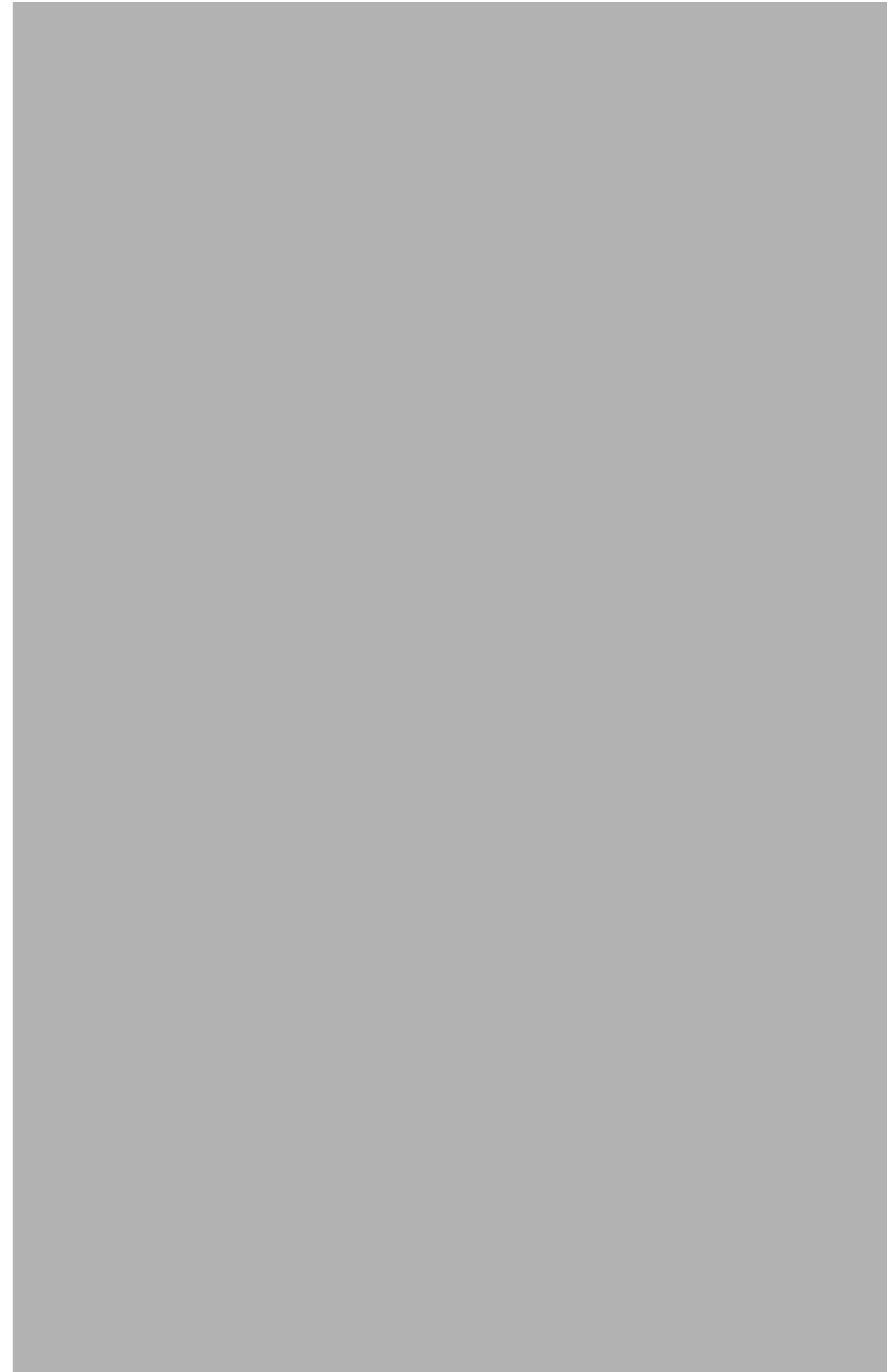


FIG. 2B. VELVET PANELS FROM A CHASUBLE. MID 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY. ITALIAN. SILK AND METAL THREAD. ILLUSTRATION: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK.

indication of the loops *per se*.<sup>62</sup> However, with the knowledge of textile weaves, it is clear that the workshop aspired to depict these kinds of velvet, as they were the most valuable at the time. These textiles correspond to the position of the king.

### DYMPHNA: AN UP-TO-DATE PRINCESS

Dymphna is clothed in a recurring manner on all the surviving panels of the altarpiece. On the outer wings, she is depicted in grisaille, which only enables comparisons with fine linen, which was also a luxury textile. On the inner wings, her robe is presented in an identical way in all subsequent scenes. She wears a rose silk (or velvet) dress made of cloth of gold corresponding to her social status and royal background (Fig. 1). As the dress encompasses gold thread on a foundation weave of silk, it qualifies as cloth of gold (no matter the amount of gold thread).<sup>63</sup> Cloth of gold was mainly produced in cities such as Florence, Venice, Milan, and Lucca, but during the completion of the altarpiece, also in Spain.<sup>64</sup>

Dymphna's hood is of black velvet decorated with embellishments of gold. If we were to find parallels to her princess garment, we could first turn to her contemporary princesses. The first comparison I would like to draw is with Margaret of Austria (1480–1530), the daughter of Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian I. In the year of the completion of the Dymphna altarpiece, around 1505, Margeret would have been 25 years old. After the tragic death of her mother in 1482, she was promised to the doyen of France. While only 3 years old she was sent to France, educated in the best manner, and prepared for her future role.<sup>65</sup> The marriage was cancelled for political reasons in 1493.<sup>66</sup> Instead, the prince married Margeret's stepmother Anne of Brittany.

62 Sven van Dorst, 'A Look behind the Scenes: The creation of the Dymphna altarpiece', *Crazy about Dymphna*, 243.

63 Monnas, *Merchants, Princes and Painters*, 299.

64 Lisa Monnas, *Renaissance Velvets* (London: V&A Publ., 2012), 11.

65 Philippe Lorentz, 'Children's Portraits. Between Politics and Family Memories', *Women of Distinction. Margaret of York & Margaret of Austria*, ed. by Dagmar Eichberger (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 116; Dagmar Eichberger, 'Margareta of Austria: A Princess with Ambition and Political Insight', *Women of Distinction*, 49–51.

66 Dagmar Eichberger, 'A Renaissance Princess named Margaret. Fashioning a Public Image in a Courtly Society', *Melbourne Art Journal*, 4 (2000), 4–24.

Margaret of Austria was a very rare case among young princesses at the time, since she was portrayed numerous times in her life, from very early childhood until her widowhood at the time of her regency over the Netherlands. Most of her portraits (even the childhood ones) were intended for marriage negotiations.<sup>67</sup> One of her most significant portraits dates from 1490–1491 and was painted while she was eleven years old and still betrothed to the future king of France (Fig. 3A and 3B).<sup>68</sup> Her dress and headgear have a striking resemblance to the attire of St Dymphna. She wears a dress of rich red velvet with cuffs and trimmings of ermine. Her neckline is characteristic of the Franco-Burgundian costume of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and the early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>69</sup> She holds a rosary of pearls, which is probably an allusion to her name (*margarita* is pearl in Latin).<sup>70</sup> Her hood of black velvet is similar to Dymphna's but much more sumptuous in its golden ornaments. Her inventory of 1493 proves that the dress and jewels depicted, such as the gold chain with the fleur-de-lis pendant (probably a gift from her fiancé Charles) belonged to her trousseau.<sup>71</sup>

It is interesting to note that if the Dymphna altarpiece takes the dress of Margaret of Austria as its model, the king (Dymphna's father) is modelled generally on French iconography with a fleur-de-lis crown and ermine cope with blue sleeves (Fig. 1). The saint's refusal of her heathen father's proposal on the Dymphna' altarpiece is as if a reversed version of the Margaret of Austria story. However, this may be an overinterpretation, as the fleur-de-lis motif was not only restricted to the French court.<sup>72</sup>

The same dress, probably the best one Margaret had, is featured in other courtly portraits but with slightly more modest in accompanying

67 Lorentz, 'Children's Portraits. Between Politics and Family Memories', 116.

68 Jean Hey. Portrait of Margaret of Austria. 1491–1495. Metropolitan Museum, New York. See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459072> [accessed 10/02/23].

69 Paul Matthews, 'Apparel, Status, Fashion. Women's clothing and jewellery', *Women of Distinction*, 148.

70 Eichberger, 'A Renaissance Princess named Margaret. Fashioning a Public Image in a Courtly Society', 10.

71 Ibid.

72 The crown of English Queen (Bohemian crown). Western-Europe. Ca 1370–1380. Gold. Enamel. Sapphires. Rubies. Emeralds. Diamonds. Pearls. Museen der Bayerischen Schloßerverwaltung. Schatzkammer, München (Renate Eikelmann, 'Goldemail um 1400', *Das goldene Roessl: ein Meisterwerk der Pariser Hofkunst um 1400*, Reinhold Baumstark, ed. by Reinhold Baumstark [München: Hirmer, 1995], 109).





FIG. 3A. JEAN HEY (CALLED MASTER OF MOULINS). MARGARET OF AUSTRIA. CA 1490. ILLUSTRATION: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK.

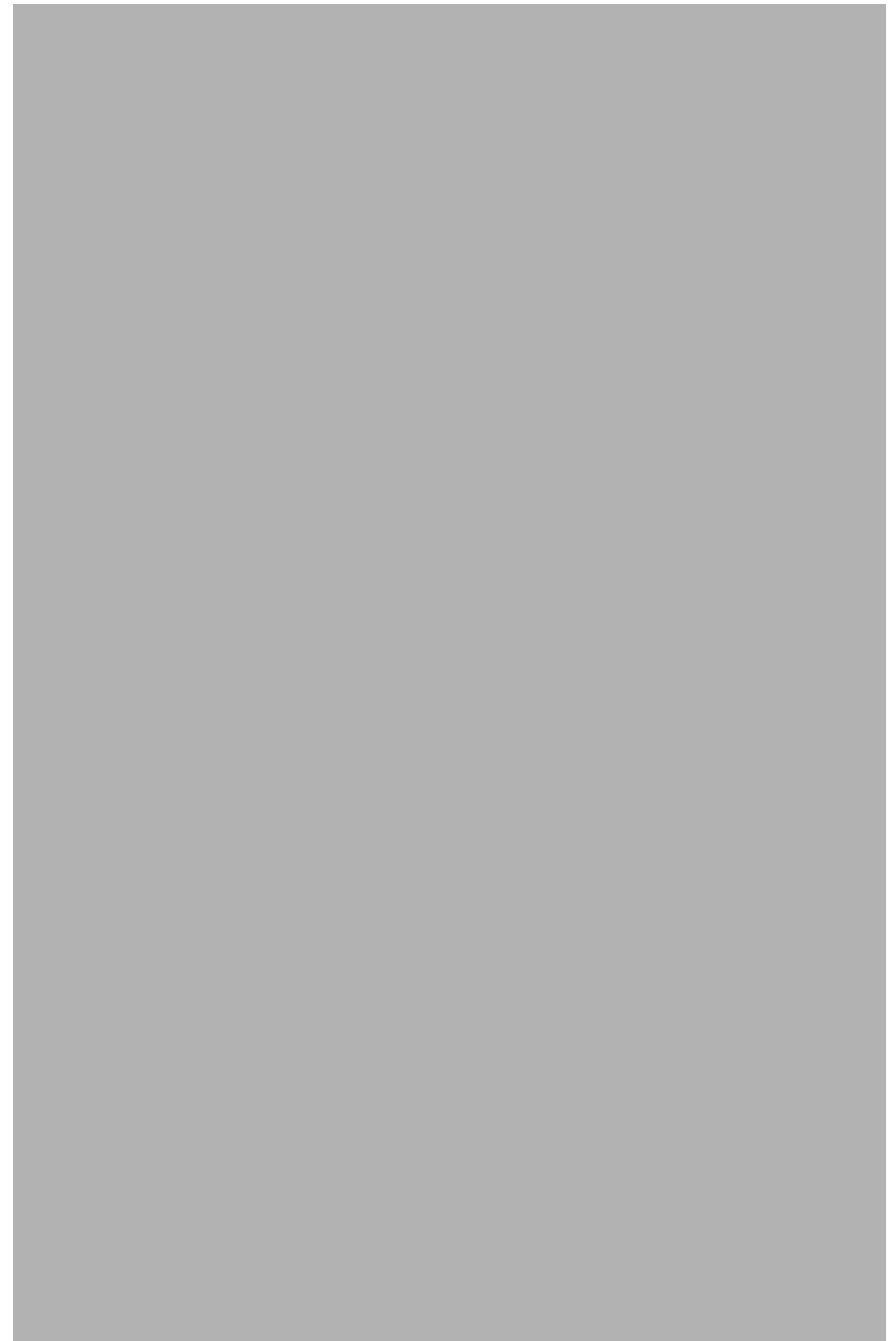


FIG. 3B. GOOSSEN VAN DER WEYDEN. THE SAINT DYMPHNA ALTARPIECE. DETAIL. SAINT DYMPHNA. CA 1505. ILLUSTRATION: THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION.

accessories.<sup>73</sup> She wears a dress similar in fashion but now from cloth of gold in portraits by Jan Coninxloo (Fig. 4).<sup>74</sup> These portraits were used for the marriage negotiations with the Spanish court.<sup>75</sup> She and her brother Philip married the Spanish heirs Juan and Juana of Aragon-Castile respectively in 1497. Juan died only six months after the marriage.

In 1501, Margaret married Philibert of Savoy. After the death of her second husband in 1504, she did not marry again, although some plans had been made with England.<sup>76</sup> The last portraits of her wearing similar garments date to about the same time.<sup>77</sup> Although the fashion may have changed by then, Margaret was still marketed using the same image.<sup>78</sup> Margaret returned to the Netherlands after the death of her brother Philip in 1506, which roughly corresponds to the completion date of the Dymphna altarpiece. She became the official regent of Netherlands in 1509.<sup>79</sup> The Habsburg-Burgundian heirs were more acceptable to the former Burgundian Netherlands where Maximilian I always remained a foreigner.<sup>80</sup> This and the absence of male heirs made the regency and the political position of Margaret possible.<sup>81</sup> During her regency, which lasted successfully until her death in 1530, she adopted the political image of a virtuous widow as opposed to someone on the marriage market.<sup>82</sup>

It is interesting to note that the same fashion principles are adopted also on the courtly portrait of Juana of Castile, the spouse of Philip

73 Master of the Legend of Magdalen. Portrait of Margaret of Austria. 1480–1530. Louvre, Paris. See <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010061663> [accessed 10/02/23].

74 Pieter van Coninxloo. Diptych with Philip the Fair and Margaret of Austria. Ca 1495. National Gallery, London. See <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/probably-by-pieter-van-coninxloo-diptych-philip-the-handsome-and-margaret-of-austria> [accessed 10/02/2023].

75 *Women of Distinction*, Cat. 46, 139–140.

76 Matthews, 'Apparel, Status, Fashion. Women's clothing and jewellery', 148.

77 Pieter van Coninxloo. Margaret of Austria. Ca 1500. Windsor, the Royal Collection. See <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/6/collection/403428/margaret-of-austria-1480-1530> [accessed 10/02/23].

78 Matthews, 'Apparel, Status, Fashion. Women's clothing and jewellery', 148.

79 Barbara Welzel, 'Widowhood: Margaret York and Margaret of Austria', *Women of Distinction*, 108.

80 Dagmar Eichberger, 'Margareta of Austria: A Princess with Ambition and Political Insight', *Women of Distinction*, 51.

81 Wim Blockmans, 'Women and Diplomacy', *Women of Distinction*, 97.

82 Barbara Welzel, 'Widowhood: Margaret York and Margaret of Austria', 103–112.

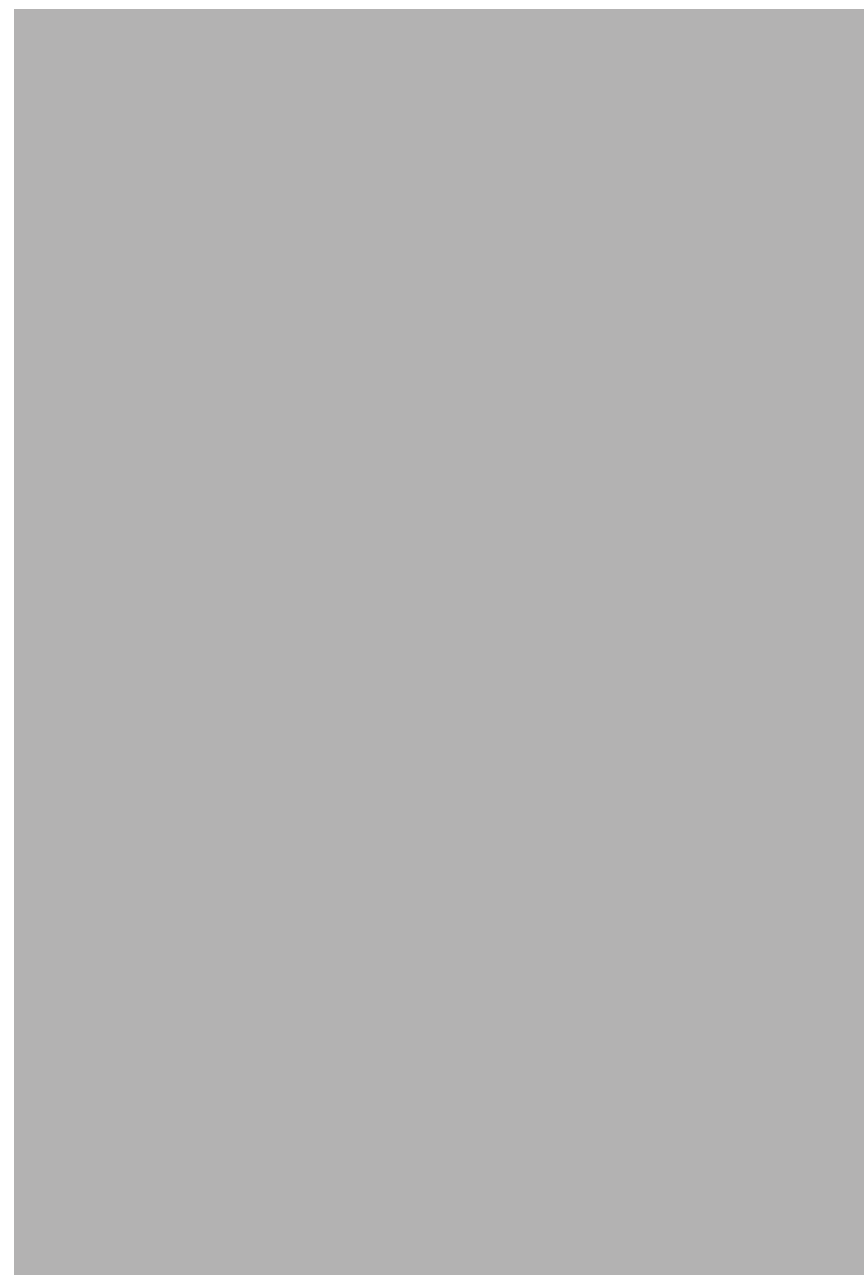


FIG. 4. PIETER VON CONINXLOO. DIPTYCH WITH PHILIP THE FAIR AND MARGARET OF AUSTRIA. CA 1495. ILLUSTRATION: NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON.

(Fig. 5).<sup>83</sup> She wears a red dress and black velvet headgear with gold embroidery and embellishments quite similar of the Franco-Burgundian fashion of the day. It is known that the princesses wore the fashion of the courts they were betrothed to.<sup>84</sup> Clothing and accessories were also a possibility way to make statements. For example, Juana of Castile-Aragon changed her Burgundian clothes for Spanish to oppose her husband's pro-French alignment.<sup>85</sup> Margaret of Austria, on the other hand, wore a Spanish dress to her betrothal with Philibert of Savoy.<sup>86</sup> In this way, fashion and clothing were a form of political communication among women to display their alliance and virtue.

One last special instance of Margeret's depiction I would like to mention is on an altarpiece by an anonymous Master from 1499 (Fig. 6).<sup>87</sup> On the inner wings, Margaret of Austria is juxtaposed with the Virgin and Child. She is shown kneeling on the right panel adoring the Virgin in front of the *prie-dieu* and with a fireplace behind her. Although the master of this altarpiece is unknown, Jan de Hervey has been proposed as a possibility.<sup>88</sup> On the altarpiece, she wears headgear very similar to that of St Dymphna and her dress of cloth of gold has similar traits to the saint's (the neckline might be different, but the sleeves correspond to the depiction of Dymphna). This is one of the last images in which Margaret of Austria is not shown in her widow's weeds, probably because the painting may have been made before the death of her second husband. This corresponds to the time when the Dymphna altarpiece was probably painted, drawing upon the model of the former official portrait of Margaret of Austria, which was now exchanged for the new portrait of the virtuous widow.

83 Master of the Legend of Magdalen. Juana of Aragon-Castile. After 1495/1496. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. See <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/2442> [accessed 10/02/2023].

84 Matthews, 'Apparel, Status, Fashion. Women's clothing and jewellery', 147.

85 Ibid., 150.

86 Ibid., 151.

87 Master of 1499. Diptych of Margaret of Austria with Virgin and Child crowned by two angels. 1501–1504. Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent. See <https://www.mskgent.be/en/collection/1973-a> [accessed 10/02/23].

88 Sacha Zdanov, 'Quelle identité pour le Maître de la Légende de sainte Lucie? Révision des hypothèses et proposition d'identification', *Koregos. Revue multimédia des arts, Reporticle*, 76 (2013), 6.

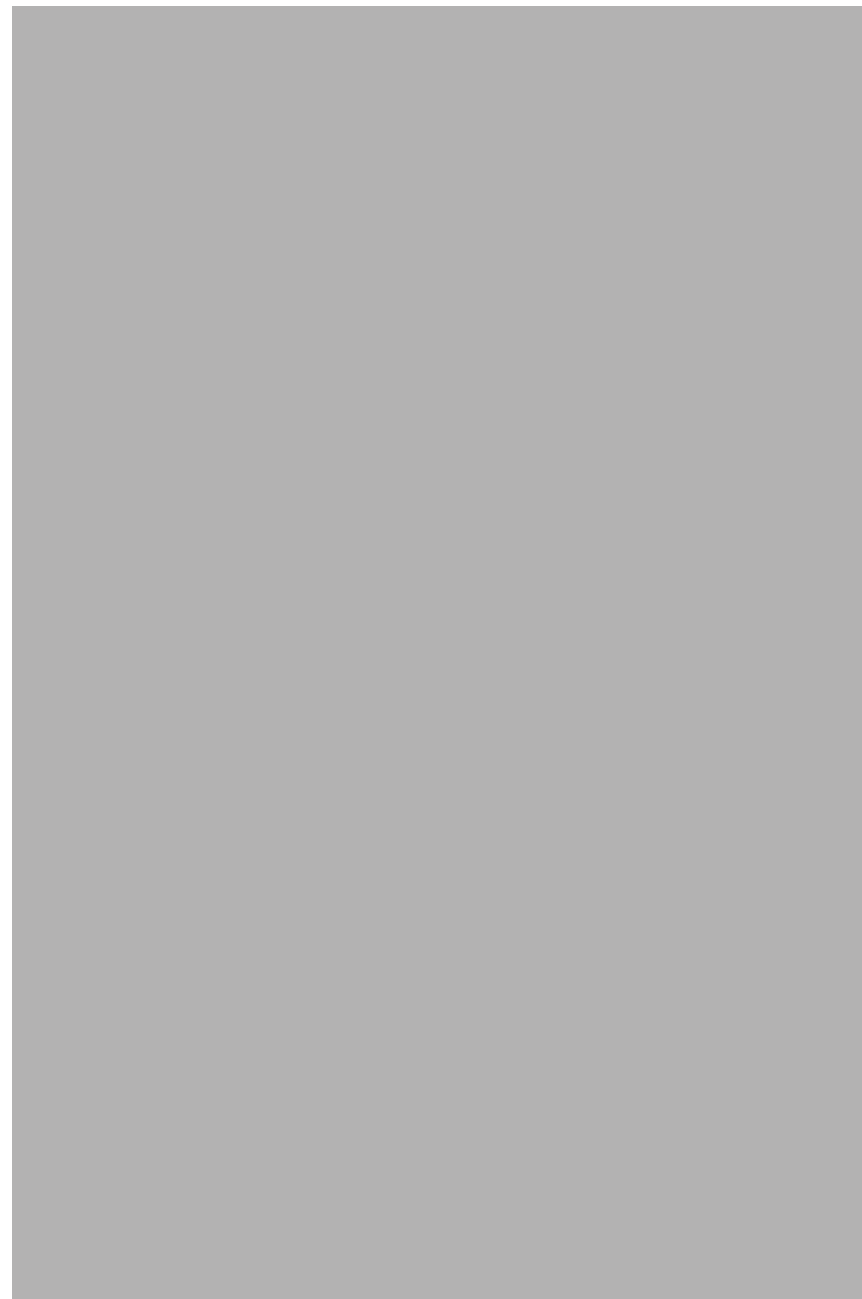


FIG. 5. MASTER OF THE MAGDALEN LEGEND. JUANA OF ARAGON-CASTILE. AFTER 1495/1496. ILLUSTRATION: KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA.



FIG. 6. MASTER OF 1499. DIPTYCH OF MARGARET OF AUSTRIA WITH VIRGIN AND CHILD CROWNED BY TWO ANGELS. 1501–1504. ILLUSTRATION: MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, GHENT.

## CONCLUSION

The Dymphna altarpiece is a rich source for material culture studies. The dress and accessories of the princess Dymphna and her father correspond to the fashion trends and the textiles sold at the time. The Irish king is clad in first-rate cloth of gold with boucle wefts (*velluto alluciolato*), of which examples have been found in the textile collections of different museums. These textiles allude to those produced in Italy and Spain but sold in nearby Antwerp (only 40 km away from Tongerlo). Similarly to the depicted textiles, the Antwerp cityscape with mercantile elements alludes to the city's identity as an important merchant city and metropolis trading in textiles and patronising the fine arts. The cityscape functions like a trademark

on the Dymphna altarpiece, particularly as this was also the time of the rise of Antwerp, the beginning of its so-called Golden Age. In short, the identity of Antwerp is communicated both through the cityscape and through the goods depicted.

The young princess Dymphna is modelled on the example of modern princesses of the time, following the Franco-Burgundian fashion of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It might be that these were the last days of this trend for dresses, although the political implication of adopting the model of the Habsburg or Castilian princesses is clear. Princess Dymphna is depicted according to the highest standards, emphasising her importance and power. The Habsburg-Castilian princesses also wore fashion for diplomatic reasons, to convey a potential political message.

The workshop of Goossen van der Weyden reached for the highest possible role model in depicting Dymphna. This entails knowledge of courtly portraits, which is not surprising given the ties between painters and workshops. It also entails knowledge of the political power of the dress and textiles the royals shared and the adoption of it for the painterly needs. This was all suitable for clients such as the Tongerlo abbey, for it made it possible to raise St Dymphna through political communication to the status of a real-life princess. Dymphna is an up-to-date princess akin to Margaret of Austria, whose image was marketed and distributed at the time of the completion of the altarpiece. This means Dymphna was made comparable to contemporary princesses. Whether this was fully intentional is, however, impossible to answer definitively. Yet, the political importance of dress and accessories at the courts, as well as the fact that the notion of this importance was shared by workshops of painters, leads us to believe that the choice of dress and accessories was usually consciously made.

**KERTTU PALGINÖMM:** SAINT DYPHNA BY GOOSSEN VAN DER WEYDEN – AN UP-TO-DATE PRINCESS

**KEYWORDS:** HABSBURG NETHERLANDS; MARGARET OF AUSTRIA; NETHERLANDISH ART; MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES; LATE MEDIEVAL DRESS; LATE MEDIEVAL TEXTILES

## SUMMARY

In 2020, two major exhibitions brought to Tallinn by the Phoebus Foundation, the largest private art collection in Belgium, opened at the Art Museum of Estonia. While the exhibition at the Kadrioru Art Museum exhibited numerous works from the Golden Age of the Flemish painting, the exhibition at the Niguliste Museum made the Dymphna altarpiece from the Goossen van der Weyden workshop (ca 1505) its focus. The altarpiece was dismantled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after which the panel depicting the decapitation of Dymphna was lost.

The exhibition was accompanied by a monograph reflecting on the major topics connected to the Dymphna altarpiece and presenting the results of the conservation work carried out between 2017 and 2020. One of the aspects the book considers is the material culture represented in the Dymphna altarpiece.

The clothing and textiles of the protagonists receive special attention in the monograph, for example when questions such as if the garments worn by the princess and the king are fashionable or out of date are raised. This article explores this question taking the portraits of Habsburg and Castilian princesses painted in around 1500 and not used for comparison in the monograph as its point of departure.

In this paper I propose, that the clothing and accessories of princess Dymphna are modelled on the image of contemporary Habsburg-Castilian princesses, and that such modelling has political implications. The role of Antwerp as a merchant city must also not be forgotten in this context, as the appearance of luxury objects in an artwork is in direct correlation with the city's milieu of merchandise, luxury production, and the marketing of the city.

## CV

**Kerttu Palginõmm** (PhD) is a curator at the Niguliste Museum. Her main research areas include the art and material culture of the Burgundian and Habsburg Netherlands, with particular interest in luxury goods in Netherlandish painting. She has curated several exhibitions, for example, *The Glory of the Cathedral* (University of Tartu Museum 2017–2018) and *The Power of Things* (Art Museum of Estonia – Niguliste Museum 2018–2019). Palginõmm has published articles, and edited and co-authored catalogues.

