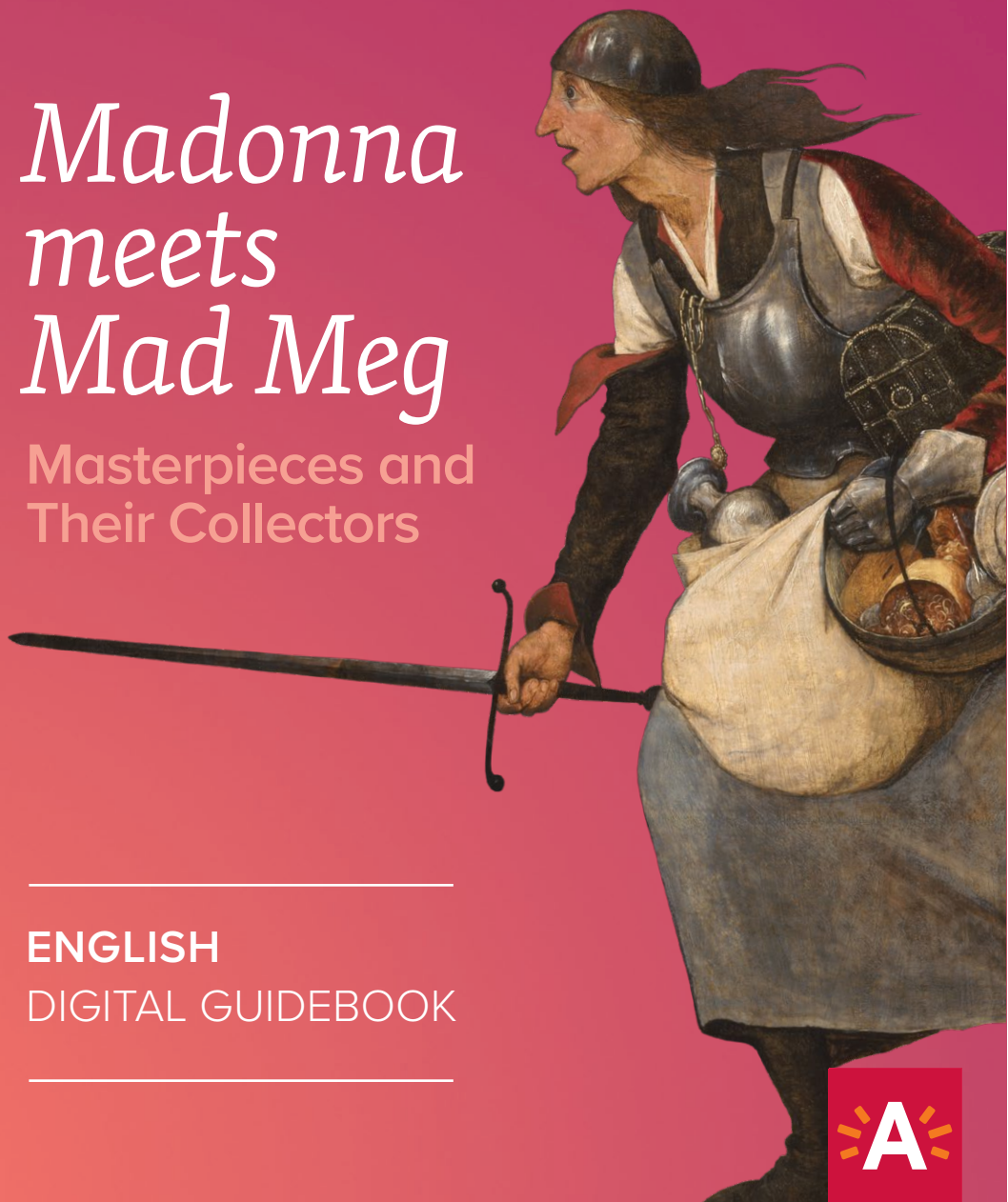




MUSEUM
**MAYER
VAN DEN
BERGH**

Madonna meets Mad Meg

Masterpieces and
Their Collectors



ENGLISH

DIGITAL GUIDEBOOK



WELCOME

Two art collectors share their passion with you here. Chevaliers Florent van Ertborn and Fritz Mayer van den Bergh will take you on a journey of discovery from Flemish and other Primitives to Pieter Bruegel the Elder. With patience and dedication, the two gentlemen assembled these treasures for Antwerp.

They hope you enjoy exploring the exhibition *Madonna meets Mad Meg*.

1

CHEVALIER FLORENT VAN ERTBORN, MAYOR OF ANTWERP

Jozef Geefs

Antwerp, 1849

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 1067

Chevalier Florent van Ertborn (1784–1840) was once mayor of Antwerp. The city was his first passion, while his second passion – art, and painting in particular – flowed naturally from the first. Our great Baroque masters were already world-famous, but Van Ertborn scoured the town and countryside for paintings by their distant forebears, the Flemish Primitives of the 15th century. This group of artists had been forgotten for many years but was rediscovered in the early nineteenth century. A rediscovery that opened up a whole new world for Van Ertborn: A world of colour, of clarity, of brilliance. He found masterpieces by Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in the smallest Flemish villages and collected 144 paintings on panel. Towards the end of his life, he almost entirely lost his sight – a painful fate for an art lover. In 1840, Van Ertborn lovingly bequeathed his collection to Antwerp for its museum. He wanted the paintings to contribute to the training of students at the academy. But he also inspired other collectors. Not least the founder of this museum: Fritz Mayer van den Bergh.

2

CHEVALIER FRITZ MAYER VAN DEN BERGH

Jozef Janssens

Antwerp, 1901

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.1871.2

As a young collector, Fritz Mayer van den Bergh (1858–1901) avidly studied Florent van Ertborn's collection. He wanted to bring just as much beauty together himself. And over ten years he succeeded. Mayer began by collecting coins before gradually spreading his wings. He travelled all over Europe in search of treasures and was the first connoisseur in Antwerp to go in search of a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He eventually managed to buy two of them: to this day, they are the only Bruegels in this city where the master lived for so many years. Mayer's hunger for art was insatiable. He also bought sculptures, illuminated manuscripts and art objects from the 15th and 16th centuries. His mother, Henriëtte van den Bergh, shared his passion and collected with him. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh died young and unexpectedly, he was barely 43 years old. This portrait was painted after his death by a friend, based on a photograph. Henriëtte van den Bergh had this museum built after her son's death. She took great care in setting out the interior and then opened it to visitors. As a memorial to Fritz, but also as a gift to all those who come here.

3

MAD MEG

Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Antwerp? Brussels?, 1563

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0045

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh purchased this panel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in Cologne in 1894. It cost just 488 francs: no one else bid for it. Mayer van den Bergh was able to identify the subject and his discovery marked the beginning of serious art-historical research into Bruegel. The painting is the *Dulle Griet* or *Mad Meg* that had been written about in the 17th century.

Mad Meg was never copied by contemporaries or descendants of Bruegel. The painting presents an image of hell, following in the footsteps of Hieronymus Bosch. 'A Mad Meg carrying away plunder in the face of hell' was an expression in the 16th century. So Bruegel is illustrating a proverb here, while giving free rein to his imagination and sense of humour. The traditional division of roles between men and women has been reversed. Meg wears a breastplate and is armed with a sword, like the captain of a marauding army. But she also carries a saucepan... She looks like a giantess compared to the other women. This may be an allusion to the giants which featured at the time in processions and parades in Antwerp.

The painting was restored in 2018 and now looks much brighter and fresher. We can see the colours once more as Bruegel intended.

4

THE DAUPHIN FRANÇOIS, SON OF KING FRANÇOIS I OF FRANCE

Jean Clouet

France, 1520–1525

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 33

Florent van Ertborn succeeded in acquiring masterpieces of French art and bringing them to Antwerp. Jean Fouquet's unique *Madonna*, for instance, which can also be seen in this exhibition. And this royal child's portrait by the French court painter Jean Clouet – the only work by Clouet in Flanders. The portrait shows the eldest son of King François I of France. The boy, who was also called François, was born in 1518 and must have been about four or five years old when the painting was made. Clouet captures the child's high rank and costly clothing very well. You see right away that this is no ordinary young boy. He is dressed in a fine linen shirt, a golden yellow doublet and red velvet sleeves, which stand out nicely against the dark green background. The boy poses in a controlled and dignified manner, but at the same time, his gaze is innocent and naive. Take a look too at the delicate way his blond hair and the swan's down on the hat have been painted.

The crown prince only lived to the age of 18. So he never succeeded his father and disappeared into the mists of time.

5

PORTRAIT OF A LADY WITH A CARNATION

Pieter Casenbroot

Bruges, ca. 1500

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0008

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh only managed to purchase one fifteenth-century portrait. They rarely appeared on the market. And portraits of women from that period were even rarer.

This lady is dressed soberly. She wears a purple velvet robe over a white blouse and a black bodice. There is a 'frontelle' on her forehead - a little loop marking the hairline. Her hair is held in a wide band, and at the back you can just about make out part of her chignon. A fine veil completes her coiffure.

The original frame is painted in imitation marble. It is as if we were seeing the lady through a window. Did this portrait form a pair with another painting showing a religious scene? With Jesus or Mary, perhaps? If that had been the case, this lady's hands would have been clasped together in prayer. Instead of that, we see a white carnation: a symbol of fidelity and of worldly love. So perhaps this was a wedding portrait.

The lady's identity is not known. The painting is not signed either. The art historian Max Friedländer, gave this artist the provisional name the 'Master of the Ursula Legend'. Other paintings could then be attributed to the same master based on their style. After a huge amount of detective work in the archives, the artist was eventually identified in 2005 as the successful and productive Bruges master Pieter Casenbroot.

6

CRISTINA MASSYS

Quentin Massys

Leuven, 1491

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0875

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh was a connoisseur of old coins and medals. The City of Antwerp asked him to catalogue its collection of them. For his own part, he collected almost 2,500 coins and medals from his teenage years onwards. This medal with the portrait of Cristina Massys is one of the most exceptional. It was made by Quentin Massys, the city's first important painter and founder of the Antwerp painting school.

Quentin Massys was born in Leuven. His father was a smith, who taught him the trade. According to legend, Quentin started to paint because his fiancée thought it was a nicer profession. But Quentin also remained active as a goldsmith. Only four medals by him have been identified. This one is a portrait of his sister-in-law, Cristina van Pullaer. The date 1491 might provide a clue as to its significance, as that was the year in which Massys moved permanently from Leuven to Antwerp. Did he make the medal for his sister-in-law as a memento? It seems quite likely: Either way, it is a one-off.

7

PORTRAIT OF A MAN

Maarten van Heemskerck

Low Countries, 2nd or 3rd quarter of the 16th century

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 564

This earnest young man looks like ideal son-in-law material. He seems well-brought-up, calm, dignified and reliable. He holds his gloves, as if to greet us respectfully. His clothes are sober and bourgeois, but the painter has turned them into a refined ensemble thanks to the gathered collar and the strip of linen visible down to his waist. The light falls from the left, casting interesting shadows on the red wall. This is a portrait free of ceremony or self-congratulation: the man wants his likeness to speak for itself. There was no need to include a religious scene, either, as was usual in earlier periods. The young man looks like he would have interesting things to tell us about his life and times.

When Florent van Ertborn bought the portrait, he didn't know who had painted it. But its quality was obvious. The experts now attribute it to a great master of the 16th century: Maarten van Heemskerck from Haarlem, who painted lots of eloquent portraits of Dutch burghers. To the people who commissioned them, these were precious reminders of their youth or of special moments in their lives.

8

MARY MAGDALENE

Quentin Massys

Antwerp, 1514–1524

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 243

St Mary Magdalene was a wealthy, sinful woman who repented. Any sinner with a bit of money can thus take heart from her example. Unsurprisingly, Mary Magdalene was a much-loved saint in the capitalist Antwerp of the 16th century. There were a lot of millionaires here with a guilty conscience.

Florent van Ertborn was proud to get hold of a painting by Quentin Massys, Antwerp's first important painter. The master built up this composition with great refinement. The arch and Mary's shoulders repeat the round shape of the panel at the top, which creates a sense of harmony. The blue and green landscape invites us to look into the distance. If you can tear your eyes away from Mary Magdalene, that is. She is very beautiful. Her hairstyle alone, with its transparent ribbons and gauze, is compelling. Massys shows the moment when she decides to visit Christ, wash his feet with her tears and soothe them with precious ointment. Hence the open jar. What we see here is a moment of mental upheaval, a conversion scene.

MUNICIPAL RECEIVER

Marinus van Reymerswale

Low Countries, 1st half of the 16th century

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 244

Money is an excellent servant, but a bad master. In the wealthy 16th century, people knew that just as well as today. Working with money is dangerous. A Christian always has to act honestly. This painting from the Van Ertborn collection shows what can go wrong. The municipal receiver in his ridiculous red bonnet sits greedily counting up the duties on wine, beer and fish. With a nice share for himself, of course! His companion looks us deceitfully in the eye and points to the cash book. That's what it's all about! The snuffed-out candle on the shelf at the back is a reminder of the transience of life. The two men in the painting pay it no attention.

The text in the cash book shows that this is a receiver from the town of Reimerswaal in Zeeland. The artist Marinus van Reymerswale occasionally painted portraits of actual municipal receivers or tax officials at work. They commissioned paintings from him to hang in their office to reassure visitors they were dealing with an honest man. But Marinus also painted caricature scenes like this, without real portraits. These paintings were cheaper and he could sell them in series on the open market. They must have been successful, as lots of them have survived.

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

Quentin Massys

Antwerp, 1519

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.1761

This medal with the portrait of Erasmus was Fritz Mayer van den Bergh's finest discovery as a collector of coins and medals. In 1840, mayor Florent van Ertborn donated the portrait of Pieter Gillis, painted by Quentin Massys, to Antwerp. It can also be seen here. Pieter Gillis and Erasmus were friends. This medal, also made by Quentin Massys, perfectly complements Van Ertborn's donation.

Massys shows Erasmus in profile, which was an unusual choice, as profile portraits had fallen out of fashion by that time. But it meant that the medal recalled emperors' portraits on Roman coins and Erasmus was delighted with the result. Massys worked here in a refined low relief. His style had continued to evolve significantly since he immortalized his sister-in-law Cristina in 1491 on a medal in late-Gothic high relief.

The letters *ER* and *ROT* refer to the philosopher's full name, Erasmus of Rotterdam. The date at the bottom is 1519, when Erasmus was 53. The Greek and Latin texts mean: *From his writings you will know him better. Portrait from life.* Erasmus purchased the mould from Massys and used it to have medals cast for friends and acquaintances. This is a cast without the Roman god Terminus on the reverse. A friend of Erasmus had a new mould made in 1524 that left the god out so that all the attention would be focused on the scholar himself.

PIETER GILLIS

Quentin Massys

Antwerp, 1517

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 198

Painting and friendship go together brilliantly. And Antwerp provided a perfect example of this. Quentin Massys painted this portrait of Pieter Gillis, Antwerp's municipal secretary and a friend of the philosopher Erasmus. Gillis also arranged for Thomas More's book *Utopia* to be published. So he was a very important humanist.

This portrait from the Van Ertborn collection is half of a diptych. The other one shows Erasmus. Both men are sitting in the same room. Erasmus is writing, while Gillis holds a letter from Thomas More and points to a book by Erasmus, with the title *Antibarbari*: a plea for classical texts to be used in education. Erasmus and Gillis commissioned the double portrait together, as a gift for their friend Thomas More in England. Each paid half. More received the gift in Calais in October 1517 and he was delighted with it.

A diptych with portraits of two friends: that was something new. The friends in question were famous, and so Quentin Massys himself made several copies of it. The originals are in England, but Florent van Ertborn was fortunate enough to get hold of this contemporary response. Massys might even have painted it for Erasmus or Pieter Gillis themselves.

PEASANT COMPANY BY THE HEARTH

Pieter Aertsen

Amsterdam or Antwerp, 1556

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0105

The Louvre in Paris and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam were both interested in buying this painting when it came up for sale in 1899. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh brought it to Antwerp. The signature and date can be seen below the young man with the paper crown: *PA 17 April 1556*. In what is a unique touch, Pieter Aertsen was so proud of his painting that he inscribed the work with the exact date on which he finished it.

Pieter Aertsen is an undervalued artist who, in the course of his work, managed to reinvent both still life and genre painting – that is to say scenes from everyday life. He might have taken his cue for this from texts about painters in classical antiquity. Aertsen shows us a group of people celebrating in an everyday environment. The Feast of the Epiphany perhaps? Or maybe this is Carnival time. The food suggests winter, but we see a green landscape through the door. The birdcage is a clue that we are looking at a brothel. The man on the stool has had too much to drink and stares sadly into his empty jug. There is an erotic undertone to many of the gestures, while the food (sausages, carrots and mussel-shells) is also suggestive. The meat roasting on the spit is a direct allusion to the sexual act: the virtues of moderation and chastity are not held in very high esteem in this establishment... It is possible that Pieter Aertsen later inspired Pieter Bruegel and his peasant scenes.

13

LANDSCAPE WITH THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

Joachim Patinir

Before 1515

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 64

In the 16th century, Master Joachim Patinir of Antwerp discovered the world, as it were. He was the first artist to paint fully-fledged landscapes. Not just glimpses of local scenery, but ‘world landscapes’ – scenes in which the world’s variety is brought together on a small scale. The landscape had a spiritual significance: it was here that human beings had to complete their life’s pilgrimage and choose between good and evil.

In the foreground on the left, the Holy Family is fleeing to Egypt. Everywhere the newborn Jesus passes, idols topple from their pedestals. If you look in the middle ground, you can see soldiers of King Herod murdering any boy under the age of two. You can also see how the villagers mislead them when they ask about the refugees. The soldiers have chosen evil, the villagers good. The idols and the villagers’ deception are mentioned in the apocryphal gospels – early Christian writings about Jesus, which were not included in the Bible. They were extremely popular in Western Europe in the Middle Ages.

This is an early work by Patinir. So what you are looking at is one of the first true landscapes to be painted in Europe. It was an invention that won Patinir international fame. This pioneering work from Antwerp simply had to be in Van Ertborn’s collection.

ROCKY LANDSCAPE WITH ST JEROME

Joachim Patinir

Antwerp, 1st quarter of the 16th century

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0030

Patinir always worked with a high horizon. He often painted fanciful rock formations too, which recall the landscape of his native region near Dinant. In this painting, he combines those Ardennes rocks with a Brabant village, a misty Italian coastline and Alpine peaks in the distance. It is the world in pocket format: a world landscape.

Should you choose a life of pleasure? Or one of spiritual growth? The dilemma is clearly visible in this painting. In the idyllic parts of the landscape, people have opted for pleasure. But the steep cliffs with the cave are the home of the religious hermit St Jerome. He made the first Latin translation of the Bible and later withdrew into the wilderness to meditate.

The small size of this panel suggests that it was intended for private worship. Panel and frame are made from a single piece of wood. The little painting was probably done for an Antwerp humanist. As a translator and theologian, Jerome was held in high esteem by Renaissance scholars.

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh had a lot of sympathy for Jerome. He owned as many as seven paintings of the saint. He bought this panel from the Paris art dealer Chevalier in 1899.

REST ON THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

Gerard David

Bruges? Antwerp?, 4th quarter of the 15th century, 1st quarter of the 16th century

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 47

Gerard David's work acted as a bridge between the Flemish Primitives and the art of the 16th century. He developed this type of image in Bruges and enjoyed immense success with it in the Antwerp art market. So the panel fitted into Van Ertborn's collection perfectly.

The Holy Family is resting on its journey to Egypt, where it will seek refuge. Mary sits on a rock in the foreground, breastfeeding her baby. The child turns away for a moment and plays with a rosary. Fresh green plants grow in a neat row along the bottom, each symbolizing a different aspect of the Madonna. Notice the wicker travelling basket, too. Joseph, wearing a straw hat, is taking a nap in the middle ground, while the donkey – the family's means of transport – grazes nearby. The landscape on the left is entirely open, but in the middle and on the right, we see lots of wonderfully detailed trees. The forest is a place of reflection and it functions here in the same way as the desert into which the first Christians withdrew as monks. Medieval abbeys were often built in forests. The painting works for us in the same way: we can withdraw into it and reflect.

LANDSCAPE WITH THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Herri met de Bles

Southern Netherlands, 2nd or 3rd quarter of the 16th century

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0031

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh bought this landscape by Herri met de Bles in October 1894 in Cologne. At the same auction where he purchased Bruegel's famous *Mad Meg*. Mayer was the only one interested in that painting. But there was another bidder for this landscape. All the same, the final price was still relatively low.

Herri met de Bles was a follower of Joachim Patinir. He often signed his works with an owl: you can see one here in the middle of the painting, above the fishermen and to the left. In the foreground on the left, the risen Christ has joined two of his disciples on the road. They do not recognize their master at first, but they invite him to the inn in the castle on top of the mountain, where you can see Christ blessing the bread through a double window. It is only at that moment that the disciples' eyes are opened and they realize who their companion is. This landscape invites you to enjoy all the details: the key characters in the narrative do not stand out. Only when you spot them do your eyes open to the true meaning. Life in this world is a pilgrimage. And you need to keep your eyes peeled along the way.

Herri met de Bles is thought to have painted the Road to Emmaus around 12 times. Mayer van den Bergh's painting is viewed as the point of reference for them all.

VIEW OF HUY FROM AHIN

Lucas van Valckenborch

4th quarter of the 16th century

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 30

Florent van Ertborn did not only buy Flemish Primitives. Sixteenth-century masters appealed to him too, including this work by Lucas van Valckenborch. The landscape is that of the Meuse valley, with a view of Huy. You can identify the town from the collegiate church, the Namur Gate and the fortress on the cliffs. In the right foreground, the painter has included an iron foundry. Metalworking had been an important activity in the Liège region since the early Middle Ages. There is a nice rural detail in the left foreground, where a swineherd throws a stick to knock acorns out of the tree for the pigs.

There is an effective example here of colour perspective, with a dark foreground, lighter middle ground and pale colours on the horizon to suggest depth. This is still a world landscape, but one that now has realistic elements: which was new. Lucas van Valckenborch was born in Leuven and initially worked in Mechelen. He developed Calvinist sympathies, which meant he had to travel to Liège and Aachen in the 1570s to avoid persecution. It was there that he made the sketches on which he based this painting. Van Valckenborch produced other paintings too showing Huy and the Meuse valley – art lovers of his time could not get enough of them. From our point of view, the painting is a marvellous window onto this part of the world in the past.

MAYER VAN DEN BERGH BRIVIARY

Master of Maximilian and Workshop, Gerard Horenbout, Gerard David, Master James IV of Scotland

Southern Netherlands, ca. 1500

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0618

This was Fritz Mayer van den Bergh's most expensive purchase. The complete illuminated manuscript in the Flemish Primitive style was auctioned at Christie's in London in 1898. It sold for 1,420 pounds sterling, or 35,500 Belgian francs – 71 times more than *Mad Meg*.

It is a breviary: a prayer book for use on each day of the ecclesiastical year. It contains a calendar, all 150 psalms, a list of the major Christian festivals and prayers for the saints.

The breviary was made in the Southern Netherlands in the 'Ghent-Bruges style' at the end of the 15th century, by which time book printing had already been around for 50 years or so. All the same, hand-decorated books were still popular in elite circles. The best workshops were involved in their creation and they cost a fortune. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh paid a lot for this book, but even so its original owner probably paid more. The breviary was most likely made for Queen Maria of Aragon and Castile, the wife of King Manuel I of Portugal. This is suggested by the fact that it features a lot of Portuguese saints as well as five pages of Portuguese text explaining how to calculate the date of Easter. If you browse through the breviary you will find children's games, daisies, violets and strawberries, beautiful saints, and rituals to give meaning to each occasion.

ADORATION OF THE MAGI

Master of the Antwerp Adoration

Antwerp, 1519

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 208-210

In the early 16th century, painters in Antwerp produced work for the international open market. Rather than waiting for a commission, they painted series of works that they then sold at the city exchange. The Three Kings were a popular theme, which gave painters the opportunity to depict exotic costumes. The paintings could also be used anywhere: churches, abbeys and the homes of wealthy connoisseurs all over Europe. If so desired, the owner's portrait and patron saints could be added afterwards. As in this case, where St George and St Margaret are featured in the side panels.

We call the painters of this period the Antwerp Mannerists. They painted *alla maniera di* – in the manner of – Italian Renaissance artists. This led in practice to rather busy scenes, although the anonymous artist has achieved a supreme level of quality. Because of that, the art historian Max Friedländer gave him the provisional name the Master of the Antwerp Adoration. Friedländer carefully analysed the work and was then able to attribute other panels to the same master. The kings' costumes could give today's fashion designers an idea or two!

BANQUET OF HEROD

Juan de Flandes

Spain, 1496–1499

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0009

Our great artists were not homebodies: their work was so famous that they received international commissions and invitations to work abroad. The painter of this scene was called Juan de Flandes – ‘Jan from Flanders’ – who became court painter in Castile to Queen Isabella. Between 1496 and 1499, he painted an altarpiece for the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores in Burgos featuring scenes from the life of St John the Baptist, patron saint of Isabella’s father. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh acquired one of its five panels on 13 December 1899: the others are scattered around the world.

You would not want to get on the wrong side of *these* ladies. John the Baptist criticized King Herod for marrying his sister-in-law, Herodias. She was furious and began to plot her revenge. During a feast, Herodias’ daughter Salome performed a provocative dance for Herod, who rewarded her by promising her anything she asked for. Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist. Herod reluctantly had to agree. You can see it all here: the triumph of Salome and Herodias, the regret of Herod. The table is empty. The platter with the severed head is right at the centre. Herodias grips a knife, ready to do further damage. The table’s rock-crystal legs are as cold and hard as the women themselves...

PORTRAIT OF A MAN

Michiel Sittow

4th quarter of the 15th century, 1st quarter of the 16th century

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 537

Florent van Ertborn bought this panel as the work of an unknown Flemish master. We now know that the unidentified Flemish Primitive actually came from Estonia. Michiel Sittow was born in 1469 in Reval, now known as Tallinn. Through the network of contacts of the powerful Northern European trade alliance, the Hanseatic League, he found his way to Bruges. It is possible that he trained there with Hans Memling. He turns up again later in Spain, where he became the court painter to Queen Isabella of Castile in 1492. Sittow collaborated with the Flemish painter Juan de Flandes on the St John Altarpiece for Miraflores, from which a panel is also shown here. Sittow worked at the courts in England, Flanders and Denmark too before returning to Estonia. He was a real globetrotter. His royal patrons thought very highly of him.

Michiel Sittow painted portraits that are full of character. He used a palette of soft colours which he applied in thin layers of translucent paint. He moulded his figures brilliantly using light and shade. This elegant young man gazes modestly, perhaps even a little sadly, into the distance. He holds a little book in his left hand. Notice the refined finish of his shirt collar and the initials on his ring.

NATIVITY OF CHRIST, RESURRECTION AND ST CHRISTOPHER, TWO PANELS FROM THE 'ANTWERP-BALTIMORE QUADRIPTYCH'

Flanders? Meuse-Rhine region?, ca. 1380

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0001

These little panels were painted around 1380, long before van Eyck. They were intended for use when travelling. Four panels from this travel altar have been preserved. Two of them are in the United States, and Fritz Mayer van den Bergh bought these two in Paris in 1898 from the Carlo Micheli collection. Micheli worked at the Louvre, where he made plaster casts. He was also a collector, who put together a fabulous ensemble of medieval artworks. Elsewhere in this exhibition, you will see a tower altarpiece, an altarpiece with female saints and a Christmas cradle that also used to belong to Micheli. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh had to take out a loan to buy the collection. His mother chipped in too. Mayer later picked out the finest items to keep and sold the rest. Most art collectors turn into dealers at some point...

Micheli believed that these little paintings came from the Carthusian abbey of Champmol in Dijon. It's an important clue, because that's where the dukes of Burgundy had their mausoleum. This little altar probably belonged to Duke Philip the Bold. The scene with St Christopher would have been important for travellers. He was the saint who protected faithful Christians from an unexpected death while travelling. If you look in the water, you can make out a mermaid with a mirror, symbolizing the temptations and dangers of the world.

The painter chose some unusual details: Joseph is shown in *The Nativity* cutting open his stockings to make a cloth in which to wrap the Baby Jesus. Those stockings are a relic to this day in Aachen Cathedral. In *The Resurrection*, meanwhile, angels open the tomb and Christ is still wearing his crown of thorns. This is his rebirth.

CALVARY

Antonello da Messina

Venice, 1475

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 4

The Flemish Primitives were so famous in their time that Italian painters too wished to emulate them. Antonello from Messina, in Sicily, learned to paint like a northerner. He studied the paintings of Flemish Primitives in Naples and Venice. Da Messina mastered the northern oil painting technique, with its deeper and richer colours. He also painted with a northern eye for detail: notice the flowers and the little rabbit in the foreground, for instance, below his proud signature. The serene composition, by contrast, is still very Italian.

Only 46 paintings by Antonello are known, 12 of which are signed, and ten signed and dated. This is the only painting of his in Belgium. Florent van Ertborn acquired this masterpiece in 1824, from a Ghent collector. He traded it for some Baroque paintings. Antonello da Messina expresses the grief of Mary, sitting below the cross, in a sober and restrained way. She is desperate, almost turned to stone. The apostle John still seems very young. The good and bad thieves writhe on their instruments of torture, while Christ retains his dignity. If all the suffering in this scene becomes too overwhelming, the viewer can find consolation in the deep, serene landscape that runs away towards the blue Mediterranean Sea.

NATIVITY

Brussels, ca. 1500

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MBB.0954

Henriëtte van den Bergh and Fritz Mayer collected textiles together. She liked embroidery and lace best. Between them, mother and son acquired over 200 pieces. Fritz Mayer bought this finely woven Brussels tapestry in Paris in 1893, at the sale of the famous Spitzer collection of textiles. He paid just 7,500 francs, even though the estimate was 12,500. A real bargain. The figures resemble ones in paintings by Hugo van der Goes, in a sense the expressionist amongst the Flemish Primitives. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh was one of the first Belgian art collectors to show a renewed interest in his work. Tapestry weaving was a major luxury industry in our region. You can find Brussels tapestries in castles and palaces in every corner of Europe. This *Nativity* is unusually small. All the same, there is still room for the Christ Child, Mary, Joseph, two shepherds, two midwives, three angels and the donkey. The tapestry will surely have inspired its original owners in their prayers and when meditating on their faith. Fritz Mayer had it painstakingly restored in the best tapestry workshop in Schaerbeek. The faces have been drawn particularly finely. The border is filled with bunches of grapes, figs, quinces, roses and lilies.

**VIRGIN AND CHILD, ST CATHERINE, ST BARBARA,
MARY MAGDALENE AND ST AGNES**

Mechelen, ca. 1500

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0404

These holy women in their gilded altarpiece come from the Micheli collection, which Fritz Mayer van den Bergh purchased in Paris in 1898.

Large pieces of this kind stood on church altars in the Middle Ages. And later, wealthy people would order smaller versions for their homes or private chapels. It took a group of people to produce an altarpiece of this kind. A carpenter constructed the oak case, while a woodcarver made the decorations. The individual statues in walnut were produced in series by sculptors in Mechelen. They were known as 'Mechelen dolls' and they allowed customers to pick out their favourite saints. The owner of this altarpiece chose some very nice ones. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is obviously the most important of the saints. Barbara on the right and Catherine on the left, meanwhile, are early Christian martyrs: women who paid for their faith with their lives. A polychromist painted their clothes to look like brocade. And then there was the gilder, too, as well as the unidentified artist who painted the side panels. The one on the left shows the female apostle Mary Magdalene, with the martyr St Agnes on the right. The backs of the shutters are decorated with the patrons' coats of arms linked by a loving bow.

DIPTYCH OF ABBOT CHRISTIAAN DE HONDT

Master of 1499

Ghent, 1499

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 255-256-530-531

Florent van Ertborn bought this diptych in 1827 from the last abbot of the Abbey of the Dunes, on the North Sea coast. It had hung there for almost three hundred years. The abbey itself has long since disappeared.

Intact diptychs are hard to come by. This is a little masterpiece by an unknown master from Ghent. On the left we see the tall figure of the Virgin Mary, filling a church building. In fact, she herself is the Church. On the right, Abbot Christiaan de Hondt kneels in his room praying to Christ's mother. His chamber is very comfortable. You can even make out some oranges, which were expensive, exotic fruits at the time. A small diptych of exactly the kind we are looking at here can be seen against the blue hanging of the bed. Christ is depicted on the back as the saviour of humanity. Alpha and omega – the beginning and the end – appear on the cloth behind him. The other panel bears the monogram *CH* (for Christiaan de Hondt) and the date 1499. A later abbot, Robrecht de Clercq, had his own sober portrait added after 1519. A unique example of recycling, even back then...

PHILIPPE DE CROY

Rogier van der Weyden

Brussels, 1460

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 254-254bis

This masterpiece from the Van Ertborn collection is a unique portrait of a nobleman from this region. His name was Philippe de Croy, Lord of Sempy. Philippe came from Hainaut. He lived from 1435 to 1511 and was an important figure at the court of the Duke of Burgundy. He later took the side of the King of France.

The great Brussels Flemish primitive Rogier van der Weyden painted the portrait himself. He invented this type of painting: a portrait accompanying an image of Mary or Christ. Together, they formed a diptych, which served as a costly demonstration of a person's individual piety. It goes without saying that only the wealthiest citizens could afford a work of art like this. Piety and social status were never far apart. The three-quarter view of the face and the hands clasped in prayer: that was the Van der Weyden formula for portraits. Look how beautifully Philippe's purple doublet stands out against the green background. And what about the details in the gold neck chains, the gold rosary and the handle of the sword? Subtle and gorgeous.

MARIA LACTANS

Follower of Rogier van der Weyden

Brussels, 2nd half of the 15th century

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0004

This little painting came onto the market in 1900. Unusually, it was in its original frame, stamped with a Brussels mark, and with the original date of 1481 or 1488 painted on it. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh consulted the leading art historians about this purchase. They were enthusiastic and concluded that the artist who painted this Madonna was an accomplished follower of Rogier van der Weyden.

Rogier was one of the greatest Flemish Primitives – an artist who allowed space in his paintings for emotion. The image of a young mother breastfeeding her baby is a homely one in keeping with domestic devotion to the holy. The painting emphasized to its devout owner the importance of Mary's role in the salvation of humanity. She is the one, after all, who brought the saviour into the world and who cares for him. The Christ Child holds an apple to signify that he is the new Adam who has come to redeem humankind from the first Adam's original sin.

There are hinges on the sides of the frame, which tells us that this Madonna was once the central panel of a triptych. She hangs here next to the portrait of Philippe de Croy to give you an impression of how his diptych might originally have looked.

MAN OF SORROWS

Southern Netherlands, ca. 1460–1470

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0317

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh bought this sculpture in Paris in 1900. We don't know the sculptor's name, but he was a marvellous artist. He has worked out the alabaster down to the smallest details. This Man of Sorrows is comparable to a Flemish Primitive painting. But it is every bit as impressive from all viewing angles.

The risen Christ stands upright and shows the wounds in his hands, feet and right side that he suffered during the Crucifixion. He wears a costly chasuble, on which he is also standing. Beneath it we see grass with flowers. Two kneeling angels carry burning candles, while two more, hovering angels hold the chasuble open. The one on the left grasps the spearhead with which Christ's side was pierced. His counterpart on the right probably held the three nails with which Christ was pinned to the cross. The angel at the top, lastly, holds Christ's crown of thorns. These torture devices are the *Arma Christi*, the instruments of the Passion. But it was through that Passion or suffering that he conquered death.

The sculpture refers to the Catholic mass, with the chasuble and the candles. Note also the droplets of blood below the wound in Christ's side in the form of a bunch of grapes. The Man of Sorrows encouraged his original owner to meditate on humanity's salvation from sin and death.

THE LAMENTATION

Master of the Prado Salvation (alias Vrancke van der Stockt) or workshop

Brussels, 4th quarter of the 15th century

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0003

This painting comes from Valladolid in Spain. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh acquired the work in 1899 from a Parisian who thought Rogier van der Weyden was the painter. It is actually the work, however, of a follower of Van der Weyden. Art historians have given him a provisional name, allowing them to attribute other paintings in the same style to the master. This makes things clearer and leads to new discoveries.

The Lamentation of Christ is very much a late-medieval theme. The emphasis is on the human suffering of Christ the Redeemer, his mother Mary and his followers. The painter shows that suffering and arouses the compassion of the viewer, whose attention and empathy will make him or her a better person. The panel probably formed part of an altarpiece in a church.

Christ's tormented body has been lifted down from the cross and is turned entirely towards the viewer. The apostle John supports his body. Mary holds her son's head and presses her cheek to his. Her left hand emphasizes the wound in his side. Mary Magdalene kneels to the rear on the right. The other women are relatives. All the attention is focused here on the mental suffering: there is no landscape to be seen.

ANNUNCIATION

Follower of Rogier van der Weyden

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 396

Florent van Ertborn bought this panel in Germany in 1833. It was believed at the time that the painter was Hans Memling in Bruges. Art historians now think that the panel was painted by an unidentified assistant of Rogier van der Weyden.

This painting of the angel telling Mary that she is to bear the Messiah is beautifully serene. To people in the 15th century, it depicted an important moment in world history. The moment when the coming of a saviour was announced. Mary kneels at her prayer stool in an attractive, airy room. An angel hovers there, bringing a message from God. He carries a herald's staff and tells her the news that she will fall pregnant if she accepts God's plan. The lilies in the vase symbolize Mary's virginity, while the dove represents the Holy Spirit. Through the open window, we look out over a green landscape with a road. This serene image is sure to have given its first viewers a feeling of harmony and reassurance.

CHRISTMAS CRADLE

Brabant, 2nd half of the 15th century

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0402

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh acquired this object as part of the Micheli collection from Paris. Having researched it, he discovered that it was a Christmas cradle. These were used by nuns, primarily in the Low Countries, to pray and meditate during the Christmas period. They set it up in the choir of their church and placed a Jesus doll in it. To nurture their love for the Christ Child, they rocked the cradle. The silver bells at the bottom would then tinkle, recalling the angelic choir that greeted Jesus' Nativity. Laypeople sometimes had movable Christmas cradles in their homes, too. Around 27 of these objects still exist around the world, of which this is one of the most beautiful.

There are painted scenes on the narrow ends of the cradle: the angel's annunciation to Mary and the visit that the pregnant Mary paid to her cousin Elizabeth, the future mother of the prophet John the Baptist. These are the two most important New Testament events before the birth of Jesus. There are figurines of Mary and her mother Anne at the top. The focus here is firmly on Christ's female lineage.

MADONNA SURROUNDED BY SERAPHIM AND CHERUBIM

Jean Fouquet

France, 1454–1456

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 132

This is, perhaps, the most unusual work in the Van Ertborn collection. All the same, it is undoubtedly the best painting ever produced in 15th-century France. The artist who made it was Jean Fouquet.

This Madonna too was originally part of a diptych. The panel with the patron's portrait is now in Berlin. It was commissioned by Etienne Chevalier, treasurer to King Charles VII of France.

Mary looks as white and taut as a marble statue. Her throne is surrounded by red and blue angels. This wasn't just something the artist invented: the red angels are seraphim, burning with love for God. They rank the highest. The blue angels or cherubim come next, symbolizing God's mercy. The Christ Child points out the patron's portrait to his mother, to commend Etienne Chevalier to her grace.

According to a 17th-century French historian, the king's mistress, Agnès Sorel, was the model for the figure of Mary. That might seem shocking nowadays, but in the 15th century earthly beauty was used to refer to the divine.

TOWER ALTARPIECE WITH THE INFANCY OF CHRIST

Dijon, ca. 1395–1400

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0002

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh acquired this tower altarpiece as part of his purchase of the Micheli collection. According to Carlo Micheli, the piece came from the Carthusian abbey of Champmol near Dijon. If so, it would have belonged to the dukes of Burgundy, who had their mausoleum there. All the gold leaf and costly blue pigment certainly point in that direction. The tower altarpiece must have cost its first owner a fortune.

In the side panels, the artist has painted five scenes from the Infancy of Christ. The Nativity in the stable, with the midwife Zelomi, is shown on the left, together with the Adoration of the Magi. And on the right you can see the Presentation in the Temple, the Massacre of the Innocents on Herod's orders and the Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. Motifs have also been stamped in many places in the gilded backgrounds.

Was this originally a reliquary, with a holy relic kept in the empty niche in the middle? Or did it stand on top of a larger, painted altarpiece in a church with the figure of a saint at its centre? Either way, this is an example of painting from before the time of the Flemish Primitives. Its unidentified maker wanted it to be realistic, with a sense of depth and full of emotion. Looking at these 600-year-old scenes, you can still feel that emotion.

MADONNA AT THE FOUNTAIN

Jan van Eyck

Bruges, 1439

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), Inv. 411

Florent van Ertborn bought this little scene in 1835 from the parish priest in Dikkelvenne in East Flanders. The frame was cut from the same piece of wood as the panel, and was painted in imitation pink and grey marble. Van Eyck inscribed it with his motto, *Als ich can*, meaning 'to the best of my ability'. And with his signature and the date too: 'Johannes van Eyck made and finished me in the year 1439.'

Every aspect of the little scene encourages love for the Madonna. The tender way she holds her baby, her refinement, her deep blue cloak. Blue was the royal colour of fidelity and loyalty. Two angels hold up a cloth of honour behind Mary. She stands on it too, so that she does not have to come into contact with the wet grass. Clear water tinkles down into a bronze basin, symbolizing Mary as a source of life. All the flowers are symbolically linked to the Madonna, who was seen as the loveliest bloom of all. Roses, irises, violets, lily of the valley and daisies flower at different times in nature, but here they do so together. It was a much-loved work by Jan van Eyck and several copies of it are known. Happily for us, though, this is the sublime original.

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