The painted panel depicting the heads of Christ and the Virgin Mary in the Johnson Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (fig. 1) is a very unusual work within the oeuvre of Robert Campin and his workshop. Almost a pseudo-diptych, its iconic imagery of the two heads isolated against a golden ground is quite distinctive and apart from the mainstream of early fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting.

As well known as the Christ and the Virgin is today, its early history and provenance have remained enigmatic. It was only a few years ago that Albert Châtelet identified the wax seal on the reverse side of the panel as being that of Willem II Frederick George Lodewijk, King of the Netherlands (1792-1849). Willem II's collection was dispersed immediately after his death, but it has not been possible to trace the Campin painting in the upheaval and sales that followed.

The subsequent wanderings of the Philadelphia panel, until now ignored in the literature, can be partially charted due to Lorne Campbell's discovery of notes on the back of Max J. Friedländer's photograph of the painting, now in the files of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie. According to Friedländer, the painting had once belonged to the important, late nineteenth-century Cologne firm of the Bourgeois brothers, art dealers whose company was disbanded in the opening years of this century. The painting then was owned by the English art historian and dealer, R. Langton Douglas (1864-1931). Douglas was accustomed to consulting Friedländer on his purchases of Northern art. Friedländer, in turn, introduced Douglas and the Philadelphia lawyer and collector John G. Johnson while the latter was in London in 1907. Johnson bought his first painting from Douglas in New York later that same year, and this purchase was followed by a great many others. According to Friedländer, Johnson bought the painting in 1910. The purchase may have been made when Johnson visited Douglas in the British capital in the summer of that year, and this would help explain why there is no correspondence between the two men about its sale. In this light, the previous obscurity of the painting throughout most of the nineteenth century and its sudden emergence at the beginning of this century make sense.

Equally important, if not more so, is the early provenance of this painting. Until now Campin's panel has not been linked with any documents of commission, nor has its original venue been identified. A chance discovery has revealed that in the late eighteenth century this work was in Paris, in the incredibly rich art collection formed by Paignon Dijonval (1708-1792). Dijonval is primarily remembered for his enormous and important holdings of drawings and engravings, but he also had a choice collection of paintings. These were from the Flemish, Dutch, and French schools, but none were by Italian masters. Most were from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a few were more contemporary but, most surprisingly,
The collecting of 'primitives' at such an early date is rare but Dijonval was an antiquarian with an encyclopedic approach to the history of art, as is evidenced by the breadth and depth of his collection of drawings and paintings.

After Dijonval’s death, his entire collection passed to his grandson, Charles-Gilbert, vicomte Morel de Vindé (1759-1842). Dijonval’s paintings, together with some from his grandson’s collection, were put up at auction in Paris, beginning on 17 December 1821, and in the sale catalogue prepared by the experts Charles Pailler and Nicolas Bénard, the Philadelphia panel figured as lot 26:

HUBERT VAN EYCK,
Né à Maaseyk en 1336, mort à Gand en 1426.
26. Le Christ et la Vierge. Ces deux têtes, un peu moins fortes que nature, se détachent sur un fond or, avec pierreries imitées; elles proviennent d’un débris de volets peints à Ypres par Hubert van Eyck, et donnent une idée de la perfection à laquelle fut portée la peinture à l’huile dès sa découverte.
Larg. 16 pouce. 6 lig., haut.10 pouce. 6 lig. B.

Pailler and Bénard’s description corresponds exactly with the painting in Philadelphia: we see just the two heads, slightly less than life size, set against a gold ground, and the imitation of the pearls and red and blue gemstones set in the haloes is indeed as striking as the catalogue indicates. The measurements are telling. A pouce being equivalent to 2.708 cm, the 1821 measurements of 10 1/2 pouces by 16 1/2 pouces translate to the modern equivalent of 28.4 by 44.7 cm; this is almost identical to the actual measurements of the Philadelphia panel, namely 28.6 by 45.1 cm. Given the vagaries of old measurements and the change from one numerical system to the other, the almost exact correspondence is compelling and leaves no doubt that the two paintings are one and the same.

The identity of the purchaser of the painting is uncertain, but it matters little since less than two years later the painting was in the possession of Lambert Jean Nieuwenhuys (1777-1862), an art dealer based in Brussels. This dealer prepared a list of twenty-three ‘Gothic’ paintings he had for sale, and the third entry on this list is the Philadelphia panel, now attributed to Jan rather than Hubert van Eyck:

n° 3 Jan van Eyck. Ce Morceau est le reste d’un grand tableau, Detruit à Ypres dans la Revolution, il provient de l’ancienne Collection Dijonval à Paris. Haut 11 pouces Large 16 pouces 2300 fcs
...Deux têtes L’un représentante le Christ, l’autre la Vierge.

On 20 April 1823, Willem 11, King of the Netherlands, bought all twenty-three of these ‘Gothic’ paintings. Thus we have come full circle, and the provenance from Dijonval that we have sought to establish is, in effect, proven: as we have already seen, Willem II’s seal is on the reverse side of the Philadelphia panel.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Pailler and Bénard’s catalogue entry, repeated by Nieuwenhuys, is the statement that the painting came from the ‘remains of altarpiece wings painted in Ypres.’ While this may not be literally true, that is to say, the work may not have been painted in Ypres itself, it does suggest that this devotional image may have been commissioned for some institution or person in that area. It is worth recalling that Dijonval had acquired a major portion of his painting collection during a trip to the Netherlands in about 1731, and that he had several agents there who continued to send him works until the middle of the century. Writing in the 1820s, Nieuwenhuys wrongly presumed that it had come to Dijonval after the Revolution but, it should be remembered, the French collector died in 1792.

The association of Campin’s painting with Ypres is stimulating. In the fourteenth