Hans Memling’s *Last Judgement* in Gdańsk: technical evidence and creative process*

‘New data’ and an attribution

Studying the materials and techniques that were used by early Netherlandish painters has become an indispensable part of art-historical research into the works of these masters. It can therefore be applauded that in the last few years a prestigious project, employing a variety of technical methods, was carried out in order to investigate the execution of one of the masterpieces of fifteenth-century Flemish art: the *Last Judgement* in Gdańsk, attributed to Hans Memling (figs. 1 and 10). This project, in which a large international team of researchers participated, was co-ordinated by Iwona Szmelter of the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. She has appeared as lead author in several English language summaries of the research. In 2013, Iwona Szmelter and Tomasz Waźny presented some of the first results in Warsaw at the congress of the International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC).1
In their paper they mention that in the nineteenth century the painting was ascribed variously to the Van Eyck brothers, Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memling, and although the authorship of the latter has now generally been accepted, they are of the opinion that this attribution is still questionable. Szmelter and Ważny refer to dendro-chronological analysis from which it appears that the wood for the triptych’s support could have been delivered to the workshop of the artist by the end of 1460. They then assume that a contribution to the painting by Rogier van der Weyden, who died in 1464, cannot be excluded. Proceeding from this premise, they announce their hypothesis of Van der Weyden’s participation, noting that infrared reflectography reveals an initial composition in the Gdańsk altarpiece that is similar to Rogier’s Last Judgement in Beaune.

Two more reports on the research into the Last Judgement in Gdańsk were published in 2014 and 2015: the first by Iwona Szmelter in collaboration with team researchers Laura Cartechini, Aldo Romani and Luca Pezzati and the second with Philippe Walter and Hélene Rousselie. These longer studies mention the various methods of technical investigation that were applied in the project: infrared scanning at different wavelengths and an impressive array of instrumental analyses resulting in the identification of pigments that proved to be typical of the period. According to the authors of the 2014 study, ‘A corpus of technical documents and stylistic studies has now been assembled to shed light on the possible double authorship of the monumental triptych by Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memling and provides essential insights into their working methods’. Great significance is attached to the observation that, originally, in the underdrawing of the central panel, mainly executed in a liquid medium with brush, the two arma Christi angels nearest Christ were placed lower, their outlines visible under some of the apostles, and their positions were changed in a later stage of the underdrawing with a dry medium. The authors call ‘this spectacular evolution of the central composition’ a discovery. It has long been known, however, that the two angels were altered and in 1994, at the international Memling colloquium in Bruges, Molly Faries presented a reconstruction of their original positions on the basis of her infrared reflectography study of Memling’s Last Judgement (fig. 2). Faries explained which stages can be discerned in the underdrawing of the central composition and gave reasons for the alteration of the angels. She detected occasional vague lines that precede a more definite layout, the main figures of which were executed exclusively in brush; in this layout the two groups of apostles were absent and the two angels were placed closer to Christ. At a later stage, the apostles were inserted, making it necessary to situate the two angels higher in the composition, and these interventions were freely sketched in a material resembling black chalk.

Comparing the underdrawing of the painting with that of Rogier van der Weyden’s Last Judgement in Beaune, Szmelter and her co-authors find in both works ‘typical graphology “T” lines, hatches and numerous freehand changes’. They refer in particular to the nearly identical figures of Christ in both works and speculate that parts of the Gdańsk Christ may be the result of mechanical transfer, apparently disregarding the fact that Rogier’s Christ is nearly twice the size of Memling’s. Besides the change in the positions of the two angels, the authors of both the 2014 and 2015 studies also report the presence of small corrections, probably done with black chalk, and they note a lack of underdrawing in the portraits of the donors on the exterior, the portrait of the female donor being executed ‘alla prima in a Proto-Renaissance style’. Although the authors presuppose the participation of many hands, they conclude that the Last Judgement was likely begun by Van der Weyden and was probably completed after his death in 1464 by Memling, who, as is generally accepted, must have worked in Rogier’s atelier before he established himself a year later in Bruges.

A publication about the project from 2016 is written by Iwona Szmelter alone and entitled ‘The impact of new data for identification and authorship: the case of the Last Judgement, triptych from the National Museum in Gdańsk, a Northern Renaissance work,