Jan van Eyck
and the Madonna of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin

More is known about the life of Jan van Eyck than of any other important Netherlandish painter of the fifteenth century, and yet the development of his art, especially before the completion of the Ghent Altarpiece in 1432, remains a disconcerting if not embarrassing issue for scholars of Dutch and Flemish painting*. The problem of the evolution of his early style focuses on a few key monuments, and the controversies arising from two of these, the Hand G miniatures in the Turin-Milan Hours and the Ghent Altarpiece itself, are so familiar that they need no explanation here. But the problem grows, and the issues posed by a third major work, the so-called Madonna of Chancellor Rolin (Figs. 1-4) have only recently been raised. Some scholars see the panel as the work of Van Eyck’s very earliest period, executed probably in Liége before he entered the service of the Burgundian court in Flanders in 1425, and thus as a clear demonstration that his style had fully matured before he left the Mosan valley—where he allegedly was born and first trained—to settle in Flanders. This dating completely disrupts the more generally accepted chronology of Jan van Eyck’s oeuvre. The Rolin Madonna is usually dated in the middle thirties and is taken to indicate that his style crystallized only after he had been in the service of Philip the Good for five or ten years. The later dating is more convincing in terms of the style. The same neatly confined interior space that tightly encloses the large figures, the same rigid symmetry and hushed immobility of the figures themselves are found in the Wedding Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and the Madonna of Canon George van der Paele, painted in 1434 and 1436 respectively, while the Madonna, mature and stately, is the type that appears in his other works of these years. It is not surprising then that the arguments put forth for the earlier date rest not so much on evidence of style as on aspects of the iconography. Who is the donor kneeling before Mary? What city is depicted in the panoramic landscape seen through the loggia?

The identification of the donor as Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of Flanders and Burgundy from 1421–1462, has been generally accepted. Born about 1376 near Autun, Rolin came from a family well-established

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1. For a useful summary of the evidence for Van Eyck’s origins and early activity in the Mosan valley see J. Lejeune, Les Van Eyck-Peintres de Liége et de sa cathédrale, Liége, 1956, pp. 18 ff. The theory that Van Eyck’s earliest works were executed in Liége (including the Madonna of Autun) was first seriously proposed but not published by M. Henrotte in a paper, ‘La Vierge du Chancelier Rolin de Jean van Eyck et la ville de Liége’, delivered at a meeting of l’Institut archéologique liégeois in 1938—see J. Philippe, Van Eyck et la genèse mosane de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas, Liége, 1960, pp. 79 ff. In a recent study by Jan Goris, Jan van Eyck geen Luikenaar, Arendonk 1967 (privately published), arguments for his origin in the Kempen district have been put forth.


in that part of Burgundy, and his own name became immortalized in the annals of Autun and Beaune as one of their most illustrious citizens\(^4\). The wealthy chancellor made numerous donations to both towns. He had a family chapel in Autun where he was buried, and he founded a hospital in Beaune, bestowing upon it some of his richest vineyards that produced and still produce famous wines that carry his name. For this hospice Rolin commissioned Rogier van der Weyden to paint the famous polyptych of the *Last Judgment* still to be seen there, and it has been suggested that the panel in the Louvre was originally executed for Rolin’s chapel in the church of Our Lady in Autun. It was recorded as being in that church as early as 1705\(^5\). Furthermore, the face of the kneeling donor is like that in other presumed portraits of Rolin, and judging from his appearance, a date in the middle thirties, when he would have been between fifty-five and sixty, seems justifiable\(^6\).

Those who argue that the panel is a much earlier work, executed before Jan would have come in contact with the Burgundian chancellor, identify the donor as John of Bavaria, who was Prince-Archbishop of Liège from 1390 to 1418 and later Count of Holland, Zeeland and Hainault, with his residence at The Hague until his death in 1425\(^7\). This identification must be considered seriously since John of Bavaria is the earliest of Van Eyck’s documented patrons. Reliable records inform us that Jan worked for him at The Hague between 1422 and 1424\(^8\). To erase any connections between the painting and Rolin, it has been suggested that the famous work found its way to his home town and church as part of the loot taken from Liège by the Burgundians when they pillaged the city in 1468. Other portraits identified as John of Bavaria, however, do not resemble the donor in the Louvre painting at all\(^9\).

Turning now to the city in the background of the picture, the astonishing naturalism and the infinite detail of the landscape have led many scholars to believe that the panorama must have been based on a sketch of a particular site. The first to describe it at length, Courtépée, who saw it in the sacristy of the collegiate church in Autun in 1778, identified the city as Bruges, the place with which Jan van Eyck was traditionally associated\(^10\). Others have described the city as Autun, Rolin’s home, while others again have described it as Maastricht, London, Prague, and, more recently, Geneva, for a variety of reasons that do not concern us here\(^11\). The only one of these cities that still preserves its fifteenth-century appearance, namely Bruges, in no way resembles Van Eyck’s sprawling town. In a somewhat more convincing fashion, the cityscape has also been interpreted as a sort of fanciful pastiche of Netherlandish

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10. C. Courtépée, *Description du Duché de Bourgogne*, Dijon, 1778, III, pp. 451-461. Courtépée noted that there were over 2000 figures in the landscape.