Underdrawings in Some Paintings by Cornelis Engebrechtsz

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Introduction

1.1 Underdrawings and sinopias as a preparatory phase in painting.

An exciting and relatively unprobed world of form exists beneath the painted surface of most fifteenth- and sixteenth-century northern panel paintings. This graphic sub-structure of the painted composition may offer vital information about the artist and his working procedure. Due to a new technique of examination of paintings devised by the first-named author, called infrared reflectography, this preliminary structure, the underdrawing of the painting, can be effectively viewed and analysed.

This paper will discuss characteristics of underdrawings in paintings of an early sixteenth-century Leyden master, Cornelis Engebrechtsz. It will focus on three documented altarpieces by Engebrechtsz and two smaller panels attributed to him. Underdrawings are comparable to sinopias in mural painting. Sinopias of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries represent the final stage of compositions first outlined on the arriccio in charcoal and then in some earth pigment. Underdrawings on panels were made with a brush or some drawing tool perhaps on the basis of a preliminary charcoal drawing which was later effaced. Both are the final stages of preliminary drawings executed directly on the support and conceived as guides for the execution of the work.

Despite their similar functions, the peculiar demands of the fresco technique encouraged a different emphasis for sinopias than that found in underdrawings of panels. Sinopias, covered by the intonaco before the application of paint, were less im-

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important to the artist for specific details than for overall organization of forms. The rapid application of paint demanded by the fresco technique further encouraged broad forms and simplified shapes. Underdrawings for panel painting could offer more specific information for the artist. The problems of speed of execution did not weigh as heavily for panel painters. Underdrawings, moreover, remained visible to the artist for some time during the execution of the painting. Artists could elaborate on their basic composition by shading and defining forms with systems of hatched lines or washes. They could develop individual characteristics of figures, particularly gestures and facial expressions. They could introduce details of landscape and architecture. Indeed, for the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century northern painters, a thorough underdrawing was of paramount importance and seems to have been a standard practice.

Although the use of cartoons and preparatory drawings for mural paintings in Italy is now fairly well understood, the relationship of underdrawings on panels to preliminary drawings on paper in the north is a complex one that is still unresolved. Very few independent preliminary drawings are known from the north. Cartoons and small workshops drawings were introduced in Italy by the mid-fifteenth century; yet little evidence is available to substantiate their use in the north in that period. The most specific reference to the use of cartoons in the north is found in Carel van Mander's long poem on the fundamentals of painting, *Den Grondt der Edel Vry Schilderkonst*, published in *Het Schilder-Boeck* in 1604. He writes:

Our predecessors [he afterwards names Van Eyck, Albert Dürer, Lucas van

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5 R. Oertel, 'Wandmalerei und Zeichnung in Italien', *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, Band 5, Heft IV/V, March, 1940, 217-314. Oertel's early and outstanding contribution covers the development of this preparatory phase in Italian medieval and renaissance mural painting. He established that cartoons, preparatory drawings made independent of the support and transferred later on to the wall by various techniques, came into use only by the middle of the fifteenth century in Italy. For a differing interpretation see Tintori and Meiss, *Paintings*, 18-32.

The problem of the introduction of cartoons has interesting implications for early workshop procedures. Tintori and Meiss, *Paintings*, 17f, argue that although the introduction of cartoons was 'to facilitate repetition of the same pattern', by the mid-fifteenth century on, 'the purpose of the *spolvero*, and later the cartoon proper, was to fix not the repetitive but the unique'. In many sinopia drawings some figures are drawn in great detail with careful hatchings and rendering of shadows while others are only cursorily indicated. Such variations of technique and emphasis within the same fresco probably reflect the selective use of cartoons. Such a technique is even recommended by Cennini, *Il Libro*, 87, for transferring gold brocade designs. In the sinopia drawings of the Cappella della Visitazione, Castelfiorentino (*Frescos from Florence*, No. 48), it is possible that the more elaborate drawings permitted assistants to carry out the painting stage. Cartoons may have also been used to a great extent in drawing the sinopia. The Castagno sinopia drawings in the refectory of Sant 'Apollonia, Florence (*Frescos from Florence*, No. 41) would represent such a more complicated case because of the use of a 'spolvero'. See: E. Borsook, *The Mural Painters of Tuscany*, London 1960, 152; also, U. Procacci, *Sinopie e Affreschi*, 67f.

6 The Dresden portrait drawing by Van Eyck of Cardinal Albergati is a well-known example. This drawing is clearly a preparation for the portrait now in Vienna. For a recent transcription of the color indications on the drawing see: A. L. Dierick, *Van Eyck*, Ghent 1970, 4.

7 F. Winkler, *Jahrbuch der (königlich) preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 60, 1939, 212-216. Winkler has shown that a fifteenth-century drawing in Berlin (KdZ 1031) is a design for an altarpiece in Stötteritz near Dresden. There are color indications on this drawing. See also, K. Arndt, 'Gerard Davids 'Anbetung der Könige' nach Hugo van der Goes', Münchenner Jahrbuch bild. *Kunst*, 1961, 153-75. Taubert, 'Zur kunstwissenschaftlichen Auswertung', 152f, has shown that in paintings from the group of Gerard David punched cartoons were used to transfer detail drawings onto the panel.