The Story of the Ghent Altarpiece

Barbara Short
Iowa State College

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker
Part of the Home Economics Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker/vol31/iss5/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Homemaker by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
ONCE UPON A TIME in the little town of Ghent, Belgium, two brothers named Van Eyck painted eighteen panels of an altarpiece for the cathedral of Ghent. About 600 years later, the seventeen remaining panels were sent to Pau, France, for safe-keeping. That was in 1940, and was just at the beginning of the altarpiece’s 5 year adventure before returning to its home.

"Both Hitler and Goering wanted it. Goering, in 1941, had sent a personal delegate to bring it back to Berlin, but was unsuccessful in getting it. August 3, 1942, it was taken from Pau by orders from Hitler approved by Vichy, and the seventeen panels (one had never been recovered after its theft in 1933 by an employee of the cathedral of St. Bovian, where the altar-piece belongs) were removed to Germany.

"The two men were, undoubtedly, influenced in their removal of the Ghent altarpiece by the fact that the end panels had been in Germany from 1816 until their return to Belgium by the Treaty of Versailles in 1918. They had been purchased by an Englishman named Edward Solly, who lived in Germany, and who later sold them to the King of Prussia.

"The altar is reported to have been taken directly from Pau to Neuschwanstein, Germany, where it was uncrated, and the surface blisters that had developed were treated by a Munich restorer. From there it was sent late in the summer of 1944 to Alt Aussee, Austria, where it was photographed by the restorer with the paper still glued to the surface where the

(Continued on page 18)
Because . . .
you have a sparkle that
terms alone can't describe!
and besides . . .
you have a smile that's out
of this world!
and furthermore . . .
there's someone who wants
your picture to show off to
his friends.
so why not . . .
let our expert photography
put you in pictures now.

Hill's Studio
Phone 347  2530 Lincoln Way

Christmas Time
is
Cleaning Time
Dry Cleaning
That:
Remove More Spots
Leaves Color Brighter
Gives Better Press
Has Less Odor

Ames Pantorium
FREE PICK-UP AND DELIVERY
410 Douglas  Phone 33

the Ghent Altarpiece
(Continued from page 10)

blisters had been treated.

"Now, at Alt Aussee, a small town near Salzburg,
was the largest of the repositories for German looted
objects of art. A salt mine was the hiding place
selected, not by the Nazis, but by Austrian art experts,
who made various kinds of tests verifying their
theory that since salt absorbs moisture, it would have
a conditioning and drying effect upon the outside
air let in through the ventilating system. Furthermore,
they found that the temperature and humidity remain
quite constant regardless of season: humidity about
65% and temperature about 45-50°F. Paintings,
ivories and textiles wouldn't be harmed in the
constant conditions of the mine, and parchment would
be rejuvenated if it had been too dry.

"The civilized world would have suffered an almost
unimaginable loss if the eight cases marked 'Marble -
Don't Drop,' but really containing bombs, had been
used for the purpose for which they were intended;
to blow up the mine in case of a German defeat. The
Nazis didn't want these treasures to fall into American
hands.

"A professor from the University at Vienna, also
connected with the Vienna museum, had been for
some time employed as a specialist for art preserva-
tion in the Alt Aussee and Laufen mines. Unknown
to his Nazi employers, he worked with the resistance
movement and learned of a group of reliable miners
from the mayor of Bad Aussee. On April 13, 1945,
the professor was informed that the local Nazis in-
tended to blow up the mine by means of bombs which
had been smuggled into the mine 3 days previously
in the boxes marked 'Marble.'

"He kept in touch with the operators of the mine
and members of the resistance movement and later
stated, 'Thanks to the cooperation and to the heroic
attitude of the gallant miners, we escaped from the
Gauleiter's (a Nazi official) evil scheme. I succeeded
in protecting our precious goods until the arrival of
the American Forces who came in time to save these
invaluable treasures for the whole world.' The miners
did their part by cutting the long fuses the Nazis
left trailing after them and by using some of the
explosive to close the entrance to the shafts.

"At the initial inspection of the mine by Fine Arts
personnel after its discovery by Allies in May, 1945,
only nine panels of the Ghent altarpiece could be
seen, since the others were in a section of the mine
that had been blocked off by demolitions. These nine
panels had been brought forward by civilians in
charge of the mine who may have heard rumors of
the threatened demolition by the Gauleiter and who
placed them in a small chamber near the entrance
to the long tunnel.

"This famous altarpiece Hitler had intended to
locate at Linz, Austria, in a museum to be built in
memory of his mother. 'The Adoration of the Lamb,'
which is the name given to the Ghent Altarpiece
because of the story it tells, was to be the most im-
portant work placed in the new museum. But instead,
it was the first of the looted objects to be returned
to its owners. Flown to Brussels, it was officially
delivered to the Belgian government, August 22, 1945,
after having been a little over 3 years in enemy terri-
tory."