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The Burgundians

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'The skilfulness and virtuosity of Jehan de Heick'

The duke abruptly decided to turn his efforts to progeny. The idea came from the Four Members of Flanders (representing Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, and the Franc of Bruges), who persuaded him in September 1428 that it was high time he furnished an heir to the throne. This was all the more urgent because the Reconciliation of Delft had made him the de facto overlord of Hainaut, Holland, and Zeeland. The delegates reminded him that those provinces had fallen into his lap because John IV had failed to beget a child by Jacqueline of Bavaria. To put it bluntly, Philip could not afford to make the same mistake.

In October 1428, as the English laid siege to Orléans, Philip sent a delegation to the King of Portugal. In February 1429, just as the most famous Frenchwoman of all time was undertaking her perilous journey from the English-Burgundian part of France to Chinon, the foremost painter of the late Middle Ages was in Avis, putting the finishing touches to his portrait of Isabella of Portugal. While in Chinon, Joan of Arc tried to convince Charles, the Dauphin, that she was on a divine mission, Jan van Eyck sent two portraits northwest from Portugal—one by land and the other by sea. Around the time that Charles, after lengthy deliberation, gave Joan his blessing to set out on her improbable series of heroic exploits, Jan the painter travelled to Santiago de Compostela to rest and make sketches. At the centre of the web of stories was Philip the Good. He held the future of France and England in his hands, had determined the comings and goings of Jan van Eyck ever since the latter's appointment as court painter in 1425, and would soon control Joan of Arc's fate.

The artist was part of a secret mission. Very few people knew their true objective, apart from the negotiators themselves—Jan van Herzele, Andreas van Toulengeon, Boudewijn van Lannoy, Gilles van Schorisse, and Van Eyck. It was neither the first nor the last time that the duke would send him on such a mission. Like Rubens in later times, Van Eyck combined his painting with diplomacy.

Little is known about his life in general, and his early years are completely lost in the fog of our ignorance. We have no idea how he found himself working for John III in The Hague, let alone what he may have been up to while he was there. His name surfaces for the first time in a Burgundian document from May 19, 1425, confirming the appointment of one 'Jehan de Heick' as court painter to Philip the Good, for reason of his 'skilfulness and virtuosity ... of which the duke had heard from several of his own people, besides which he himself had seen it and was familiar with some of his works.' He shows up on the Burgundian books as 'Deick' or 'Deecke,' otherwise known as 'de Heecq.' Philip the Good's strictly Francophone circles seem to have used the Dutch

form of the name, 'Van Eyck,' only rarely. The painter moved from The Hague to Lille, where he remained for five years. After his return from Portugal he settled in Bruges.

Although none of his works from this early period have survived, aside from a few miniatures, 'Iohannes de Heecq' must already have won sufficient fame to propel him straight into the position of chamberlain and court painter to the most influential duke of his era. He did not carry out the chamberlain's duties himself but did receive the honorarium that went with the title. His appointment also came with other benefits. Unlike ordinary painters, he could disregard the rules of the painter's guild in Lille (and later in Bruges) and avoid the associated taxes. His annual salary was supplemented by expense payments for his many travels.

Jan must have sat gazing at the future Duchess Isabella for hours. She was the daughter of King John I of Portugal and the sister of Henry the Navigator, who was no great traveller himself but did send out countless adventurers, thus laying the groundwork for the Portuguese Empire. A not insignificant detail: Isabella's mother Philippa of Lancaster was the granddaughter of King Edward III of England, who in 1337 had set off the fireworks of the Hundred Years' War. While Philip's first two marriages had been rather French in hue, this one had an English lustre, which the Flemish and Hollanders certainly appreciated from an economic perspective. But all in all, as a great-grandchild of the great Edward, Isabella had only a limited infusion of Albion, and Philip's choice of a Portuguese princess showed chiefly that he felt strong enough, by this time, to show a certain neutrality even in his marital life. He seems to have been saying he didn't need France any longer, and that even though the Treaty of Troyes was still in effect, he saw no need to do more than throw a bone to England—a bone that might serve his purposes well the next time he negotiated for English wool.

On 13 January 1429, Jan looked on as Professor Gilles van Schorisse, an expert in canon law, raised the subject of the marriage with King John of Portugal. The professor spoke Latin, and a Portuguese scholar translated the words into John's mother tongue. Their communication proceeded in this manner; the king was flattered, and Jan was permitted to start work on his portraits.

Unfortunately, the fruits of his labours have been lost, although we do still have a drawn copy from the seventeenth century. Isabella looks us straight in the eyes, just like the painter's *Man in a Red Turban* (1433). The latter painting, presumed to be one of the first self-portraits in history, has also been called the earliest example of a subject who looks the viewer directly in the eyes, but that claim can be relegated to the dustbin—at most, it's the earliest *surviving* example.

A few examples of portraiture are known from antiquity, but the practice faded with the rise of Christendom, which for a long while looked darkly on the depiction of human beings, and of Christ in particular. This attitude gradually relaxed, although human features remained sketchy for quite some time. Profiles of monarchs on coins likewise lacked individual traits.

Portraits worthy of the name did not emerge until the fourteenth century, often in the service of marriage negotiations or simply as a way of asserting the symbolic presence of a deceased or imprisoned ruler. This development went hand in hand with a growing interest in the individual on the road to the Renaissance.

Because so few panels from the pre-Eyckian period survived the ravages of history, experts are unlikely ever to reach a consensus on just how forward-looking Philip's court painter was in this domain. A portrait of John the Fearless from around 1405, attributed to Johan Maelwael (Jean Malouel), shows that in any case there were experiments with profile portraiture before Van Eyck. An anonymous portrait from the 1350s of his grandfather John the Good (King John II of France) is regarded as the earliest surviving portrait painting not from the ancient world. The king was a prisoner in London at the time and is depicted in this small painting as an ordinary man, far removed from the majestic figures in miniatures decorated with gold leaf. Others contend that this work must predate his reign, in view of its simplicity. Whatever the case may be, if you ever find yourself in front of John the Good's portrait in the Louvre, consider that he is the man at the root

of this entire book. If he had not made a gift of Burgundy to his son Philip the Bold, you would be reading a different history altogether.

Van Eyck's status as grand master of the portrait can hardly be denied, but it would be going too far to regard him as an artistic UFO that simply fell from the sky. Even the scarce examples available make it clear that he followed in the footsteps of Burgundian painters such as Maelwael and Melchior Broederlam, although he outshone them with his sense of detail and unprecedented handling of light. One glance at his presumed self-portrait from 1433 is enough. The head and the turban are brought out in exquisite detail by the light against the dark background, in striking contrast to the flat, stylized faces in the work of Broederlam and Maelwael.

The drawn copy of Isabella's portrait demonstrates that by 1429 Van Eyck had already mastered these techniques. He also uses the kind of *trompe l'oeil* effect familiar from his later work. The left hand of the future duchess of Burgundy rests on a stone ledge, a kind of windowsill over which her fingers seem to be curled. Philip was perfectly willing to meet the demand for an heir as long as he had some guarantee of a desirable bride. That was part of the reason he had sent the best portraitist of his day. If Van Eyck sent him a picture of a beautiful woman, he could bet his life she would be a *beauté* in the flesh.

On 4 June the Burgundian delegation received a message from the duke, who expressed his enthusiasm about Isabella. The king of Portugal and his daughter were elated.

In the early autumn the delegation set out for home. The small group had grown into a fleet of two thousand knights, soldiers, and courtiers. For Van Eyck, their departure must have come as a relief. Finally, he would have time to finish his deceased brother Hubert's monumental altarpiece *The Lamb of God*. But he would have to remain patient a little while longer.

A series of storms drove apart the fleet. It even briefly seemed that the new duchess might be in mortal danger, but the missing princess finally set foot on shore in Sluis (L'Écluse) on Christmas Day. It had been a long ordeal, for both the voyagers and Philip, but the moment he saw her, he recognized her lively features from Jan's portraits. The Burgundian ladykiller was won over completely, taking as his motto *Aultre n'auray*, 'I shall have no other.'

'With these rattles you can make heroes'

After the official wedding ceremony in the main church in Sluis on 7 January, the new duchess was brought in a procession to Bruges. There Isabella was received with a fanfare by seventy-six trumpeters; the celebration was so elaborate she hardly knew where to look. A lion's paws spouted red and white wine. A deer tinkled a constant stream of mulled wine. A squirrel held a jug running over with rosewater. These three animals were carved from wood and painted to look almost alive. There was no place for her to rest her eyes. The Burgundian *horror vacui* prevailed, as it had so often before; everything was crammed full, fuller, fullest. Bruges had been transformed into a festival of triumphal arches, decorations, and *tableaux vivants*.

The guests came from all points of the compass and wore the most colourful variety of raiment. Even the palette with which Jan van Eyck had painted the brand-new bride must have seemed pale in comparison to the motley masses that swarmed the streets of Bruges on 8 January. Afterwards, chroniclers had to work overtime to complete their fulsome descriptions of the most prominent guests, which read like a *Who's Who* for 1430. One effusive annalist recorded 5,000 participants; another wrote of 150,000 onlookers—although the triumphant number-juggling in such chronicles should always be taken with a grain of salt. Many houses were hidden from view by scaffolding put up for the occasion, where the locals rented seats to whoever wished to see the wedding procession go by. Philip had transformed his economic capital into one great theatre.

The guests were astonished by the *entremets* – amusements, edible or otherwise, between the main courses of the wedding banquet. The biggest surprise was a blue ram with gilt horns, which it used to tear its way out of an enormous pasty. The same floury edifice also gave issue to a giant, who entertained the audience by frolicking with a woman dwarf who was prancing about. The duke was beaming. He had acquired the minuscule woman in Hungary for a small fortune. And look, someone was riding a roasted pig. Nearby, a stuffed boar pooped radishes when you tugged on its curly tail. Need I mention that they gobbled and guzzled on a gargantuan scale? Or that for days on end Bruges, like Cambrai in 1385, was overrun with knights who risked their lives in jousts? Or that everyone who was there would never forget it, and would tell the whole story to whoever would listen?

Let me reassure you, dear reader, that after the detailed account of the wedding festivities in Cambrai, we won't repeat the whole performance here. If you can, imagine that earlier wedding, but larger, more lavish, and more luxurious. Imagine the wedding to end all weddings. Imagine the ultimate peaceful display of power. It was no coincidence that the coats of arms of Philip's dominions showed up in the scenes played out at the table. What appeared to be ingenious ceremony was, in fact, sophisticated marketing. Philip used gastronomy and fine art to showcase his power – and to make it abundantly clear to all that the good grandson was more than a match for his bold grandfather. Some people *really* know how to flaunt it. His wife was permitted to play her role, too, of course, but above all, the marriage was the duke's coronation as king of Burgundy's histrionic monarchy.

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Where exactly did Philip the Good acquire his fondness for razzle-dazzle? Well, for one thing, he stood on the shoulders of his grandpa, who had drunk in the pomp of the French court as a young prince and later used his own feasts and funerals to put Burgundy on the European map. But the ducal flair for marketing through spectacle owed at least as much to a fairy-tale castle inherited from Margaret of Flanders. The Hesdin estate had fired the imagination of Margaret's husband Philip the Bold, and it inspired his grandson to still greater flights of fancy. Telling the story of this legendary theatrical monarchy without mentioning Hesdin would be like sitting down to a banquet without barrels of Beaune.

Robert of Artois, one of the most famous knights of the thirteenth century, amassed a peculiar collection of machines and ornamental novelties in Hesdin from 1288 onwards. Best known to Belgian historians as the French commander felled by a Flemish mace on 11 July 1302, Robert was not only a warrior but also a dreamer.

Amid the chaos of his relatively short life, John the Fearless had not had much time to be enchanted by the wonders of Hesdin, but his son Philip fell under their spell from boyhood: the water-spouting sculptures, the distorting mirrors, the traps that sent unwary visitors plummeting onto feather-filled sacks, and the bridge that plunged whoever tried to cross it into the moat. Carnivalesque pranks like these were all the rage. In one room you were dusted with flour; in another, it rained indoors. You might run into a talking machine – a wooden hermit or an owl. On a writing desk lay a book of ballads, which was so beautifully illuminated that guests couldn't help leafing through it. But as soon as they did, they were whacked by still other devices. Those who persisted received another shower. Water was central to this amusement park *avant la lettre*. As an admirer of female beauty, Philip must have enjoyed the idea of clever gadgets that blew women's skirts up into the air and then sprayed their legs with water. Hesdin also boasted mechanical monkeys and lions, which thanks to their ingenious craftsmanship could walk both forward and backward. The whole thing seemed highly artificial, but it worked, and guests are said to have been delighted by the strange jumble of practical jokes and illusions.

To achieve all this in the late thirteenth century, Robert of Artois had drawn on the latest advances in military and agricultural technology. New discoveries in timekeeping and clockmaking also came in handy. Hesdin was not so terribly far away from Arras, the first centre of the cloth industry, which had flourished before Ypres and Ghent—only later would prosperity and innovation begin migrating northwards. As a voracious reader of chivalric romances, Robert had noticed that his beloved heroes were warned of danger by mysterious trumpet blasts and then rescued by flying wooden horses or directed to safety by talking owls. This fictional magic formed the inspiration for the astonishing place that made such an impression on Philip the Good, who as duke would engage in a similar project of organizing reality according to his own invented narrative.

Philip had the dilapidated castle in Hesdin restored, made a few improvements of his own, and hired a 'master of amusement machines' to keep all the *engins d'esbattement* in working order. He would exploit the technology of concealed mechanisms, bellows, and feathers to the fullest in the famous *entremets* of his banquets and feasts.

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The mobile display tables in Bruges, most comparable to present-day parade floats, held not only novel dishes, but also mechanical creations: fountains, fish that could roll their eyes, and other creatures that released refreshments on command. Everyone could see they weren't real, but their workings remained secret, like a conjuring trick. After making a few rounds of the hall, the big engines disappeared as if by magic, and the audience was left wondering how on earth it had all been done!

The wealthy guests sat among otherworldly scenery designed and painted by Jan van Eyck's workshop, watching mechanical dolls that sprayed water in their faces if they weren't careful. Fine art was combined with crafty inventions and crude jokes – whatever it took to astonish the spectators.

After three days of eating, drinking, and gawking had worn everyone down into a state of exhaustion, Philip took it up a notch. At a solemn gathering, he founded the Order of the Golden Fleece. In the cloth industry so vital to Philip's provinces, the term 'fleece' then referred specifically to tufts of wool that had already been cut off the sheep but were still clumped together. And in this context, of course, the name also referred to the ram with the golden fleece sought by Jason and his unforgettable Argonauts in classical mythology. As the guests realized at once, the ram with gilt horns that had escaped from the pasty a few days earlier had been a spectacular foreshadowing of this event.

Philip the Good was eager to associate his brand new chivalric order with Jason's well-established heroism, in no small part because he had absorbed the ancient tale with his mother's milk. It was told in a series of monumental murals commissioned from Melchior Broederlam by his grandfather Philip the Bold. As a boy, the duke had puzzled out the adventures of the Argonauts from the walls of Grandpa's castle in Hesdin. The marvellous *engins* in this enchanted palace could create the illusion of thunder, lightning, or rain, and little Philip must often have imagined that he was accompanying Jason on his quest. He later had the chance to soak up every detail from the *History of the Destruction of Troy*, a medieval bestseller by Guido delle Colonne in the library of Philip's father John the Fearless. That history was slightly different from the ancient tale, but it was the version everyone knew almost by heart in those days. The ram was guarded by snakes and dragons, but with the help of Medea's magic, Jason got his hands on it. He slaughtered the animal, skinned it, and returned with its golden fleece, the head and legs still dangling from it. This image inspired the pendant of the necklace that members of the new order received and were expected to wear at all times. The talisman had protected Jason and his companions from all harm – why shouldn't it do the same for Philip the Good and his followers?

The duke saw his knightly order as a religious brotherhood charged with defending the honour of Christendom and, if necessary, leading a new crusade. A few of the most pious members grumbled a little about being associated with the heathen Jason. Fortunately, a scholar soon dredged up the figure of Gideon, an Old Testament hero who had likewise had wondrous adventures involving a sheepskin. This left each member free to draw inspiration from the story he preferred; Philip, in his heart of hearts, would always be an Argonaut. In fact, the dukes of Burgundy felt sure they were descended from the (equally mythological) Trojans and saw no difficulty in merging the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.

Before long, the membership of the Order of the Golden Fleece was the greatest honour to be gained in Philip's dominions. "Call them toys," Napoleon would say of his *Légion d'honneur* almost four centuries later, "but with these rattles you make heroes. Call it vanity, but vanity is a human weakness." Philip the Good would not have contradicted him. His knights not only possessed the golden playthings around their necks, which contrasted nicely with their scarlet robes, but also enjoyed legal immunity. They did, however, have to undergo "fraternal admonition." This ritual custom was intended to ensure that the order would retain the greatest possible moral authority, and it offered a way of resolving private conflicts without involving outsiders. During the annual chapter, the members were allowed to accuse each other openly of unpaid debts, excessive swearing, or overly blatant adultery—although one might well wonder whether anyone dared to bring up that last topic in the presence of the sovereign of the order. In the seventeenth century, the obscure author André Favyn insinuated that the order's name was a tribute to the golden pelt of Marie van Crombrugghe, then Philip's mistress.

Like the knights of the Order of the Star founded by his great-grandfather John the Good, the members of Philip's order swore fealty to him both on and off the battlefield. But the duke did not see the Order of the Golden Fleece purely as a nostalgic club for military daredevils. By commanding the loyalty of these senior members of the Burgundian aristocracy in a manner as prestigious as it was personal, he created a networking club of the most exclusive sort, as well as the impression of state unity. At the same time, it was a way of putting the high nobles of recently acquired principalities in his debt.

Philip's Order of the Golden Fleece also sent an international message to the world: a richly brocaded, bejewelled, and velveted middle finger raised to France and England, no less sincere for all its ostentation. It was part of the natural order of things for the two great kingdoms to have their own chivalric orders, like those of the Star and of the Garter. But all at once a duke was, without apology, putting himself on equal footing with the French and English rulers.

His gesture spoke volumes. *Take a good look: I have joined you in the first rank, and even if I'm not a king, the glory of my wedding alone outshines your lustre. I can even get away with taking a wife who is not from one of your great houses.* On 10 January 1430 in Bruges, Philips presented himself to Europe's economic and aristocratic elite as a sovereign prince who would take no lessons in humility from anyone. Whether his guests, bedazzled by glitter and glamour, recognized Philip's declaration of free agency was another matter. In any case, subsequent events would soon make his intentions unmistakable.