

## HANS MEMLING c. 1435—1495

## ARTIST FOR THE SPRING TERM

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Little appears to be known about the early years of Hans Memling. Even the exact date of his birth is uncertain, though probably he was born between 1430 and 1435 in the neighbourhood of Mainz. His family name may have been derived either from Mümling in Germany or Memelynk in northern Holland, but he himself was indisputably German; he was known as German Hans when he first arrived in Bruges about the year 1466. He came thither a fully qualified master painter, having passed his years of apprenticeship in Cologne and later in Brussels as a pupil of Roger van der Weyden. He settled in Bruges and acquired Belgian citizenship. The name of Hans Memling will always be associated with that fascinating city of bridges and belfries. Some ten years later he married an heiress called Anne Walkenaere, but he himself seems to have been a prosperous citizen and a man of property, owning several houses, and bringing up his three sons in comfortable circumstances.

Memling was primarily a painter of religious pictures, but his ability as a portrait painter was outstanding at a time when artists were only just beginning to produce good likenesses. Nevertheless, there is a characteristic sameness about his portraits; he seldom varied the pose of his sitters; they were nearly always painted in three-quarter view, looking towards the left, and there is a placid solemnity about their expressions that seems to reflect the artist's frame of mind, rather than that of the subject. His earliest known portrait is the *Man with the Coin*, which is said to represent the Italian seal-maker Nicolas Spinelli who spent a year in Flanders in the service of Charles the Bold, soon after Memling settled in the Netherlands. The face, framed by dark curls, is typically Italian, with the aquiline nose and warm brown eyes; it is a composed, meditative face. The young man is dressed in black and wears a black cap, but his sober attire is relieved by an edging of white cloth at the neck and a blue tie with ends just like a shoe-lace. In his hand he holds a coin bearing the head of Nero in profile and an inscription denoting Cæsar's imperial status. The background, as almost always in Memling's pictures, is delightful and full of surprises. A horseman stands at the water's edge watching two swans, and beyond is a wooded landscape rising to a hilly horizon. The palm tree on the nearer shore probably signified Spinelli's Italian origin. The colouring is unusual and effective. Many of the trees are autumn-tinted; a pearly evening sky merges into cerulean at the zenith where float silver edged clouds.

The famous *Donne Triptych* was probably painted in 1468 when Sir John Donne of Kidwelly, Caernarvonshire, accompanied other Yorkists to Bruges to attend the wedding of Margaret of York and Charles the Bold. Sir John was killed at the battle of Edgecote the following year. The central panel shows him with his wife and daughter, kneeling in the presence of the Virgin and Child. The grouping of the figures is beautifully balanced. On either side of the

Virgin there kneels a small angel; the one on her right holds a violin and offers an apple to the Child who turns to clutch the fruit, while His left hand crumples the pages of the book His mother is holding. The other angel, less elaborately dressed, carries a portable organ. St. Catherine and St. Barbara, tall graceful figures, stand behind the donor and his lady. There is an immense amount of intricate detail in this painting—the charming design at the back of the Virgin, the pattern on the oriental rug at her feet, the mosaic of inlaid tiles that is repeated in all these pictures, the coat of arms on the crimson columns. But whilst these show Memling to be a master of technique, it is his delightful backgrounds that reveal the poetry in his nature and show him to be a true artist. He loved to paint water and green fields. The landscape extending behind the pillars and the throne gives us a glimpse of a winding river passing a mill; a man carrying a sack of corn is about to enter the door. Again, there are two swans. The bridge in the extreme background leads to a tower. On the right a bull is grazing in a meadow, at the back of which a man on a white horse rides towards a sombre wood. The tower in the nearer foreground is the symbol of St. Barbara. The panels on either side of the main group represent St. John the Baptist with a snow-white lamb, and the youthful St. John the Evangelist, clad in red, bearing a goblet of poison. The figure peeping from behind a pillar on the left is said to be the artist himself. On the other side, a peacock is seen through the balustrade, perched on a low wall in a little courtyard; the open door in the blue-gabled gatehouse reveals a glimpse of a winding road. Memling has a wonderful power of carrying the onlooker back into his pictures. The proportions and attitudes of his figures may merit criticism by later standards, but his clever use of perspective and feeling for distance give his pictures a three-dimensional effect that is sometimes quite magical and has rarely been equalled.

The triptych painted by Memling for Brother John Floreins is smaller and more elaborate than the one described above. The pictures that compose it show marked progress in the artist's style; the composition is looser and more natural; the colouring is more varied in tone and brilliance. John Floreins belonged to the Brotherhood of The Hospital of St. John in Bruges. In 1489, many inhabitants of the city died from an epidemic of plague, and in the Hospital, Brother John was one of the few survivors. In gratitude for his deliverance he invited some of the Hospital servants to join the Order and assist him in ministering to the sick and needy. But these men were concerned only in furthering their own ends; they proved ungrateful and dishonest, and eventually obliged good John Floreins to resign his office in the community; he passed the remainder of his life as a simple brother in the Hospital. His portrait is that of the figure kneeling with a breviary in his hands beside a broken wall at the left of the main group in the central panel that illustrates the *Adoration of the Magi*, Mary holds a lively, realistic Babe on her lap; one of the Kings stoops to kiss His feet; another kneeling awkwardly on the left offers a golden flask; the third, a swarthy Ethiopian, enters from the right, doffing his cap with one hand and holding his gift in the other. Joseph has

taken the closed chalice from the monarch in front of him who is performing his act of obeisance. There are two other figures—John Floreins' younger brother standing on the extreme left, and a man looking through an aperture on the right, said by some to be the artist himself. This, however, seems unlikely, as the fellow appears surly and unkempt, which Memling most certainly was not. Do not miss the detail of the street scene behind the palisade at the back of the ox and the ass; men on horses and dromedaries advance past trees and imposing buildings. John Floreins' age is inscribed on a brick level with his forehead; see if the children can discover what it is.

The subjects on the supporting shutters are the *Presentation in the Temple*, and *The Nativity*. In the latter, Mary kneels in adoration beside the new-born infant who lies on a corner of her blue cloak. Two tiny angels kneel behind Him with rapt expressions. Joseph, clad in a lovely shade of reddish pink, stands further back, shielding the flame of a lighted candle with his hand in a most life-like manner. He has a black hood and his wallet, too, is black. Two figures can be seen at a doorway in the back. Above the thatched and gabled roof of the stable, rays of light come from a star suspended in front of indigo clouds. This triptych has pictures on the outer sides of the shutters as well as on the interior. On the left, St. Veronica is shown holding the napkin that bears the imprint of Our Lord's features. The figure on the right is that of St. John Baptist. Here he bears a strong resemblance to the St. John of the Donne triptych; it seems obvious that Memling used the same model in both cases. In the Floreins triptych, the Baptist is depicted seated. He has a red instead of a blue mantle over his robe of camel's hair. A sheep stands beside him. St. John sits meditating on his part in the baptism of Our Lord—the incident is being enacted in the background. The landscape with the delicately painted saplings, cool reflections and exquisite atmospheric effects of sky and cloud is altogether delightful. Two hawks hover aloft, and a flight of other birds is just visible lower down. There is something fascinatingly surrealistic about Memling's backgrounds—not that they are in the least disintegrated or symbolic, but there is a dream-like quality about them that projects the beholder into the realm of poetic imagination. The colours, too, are dream-like in their purity and the vividness of their contrasts.

Memling's masterpiece is usually considered to be the series of pictures he painted to adorn the shrine of St. Ursula in Bruges. They show incidents from the life of the saint during her pilgrimage to Rome and the return journey that ended in her martyrdom at Cologne with her newly espoused husband and eleven attendant maidens. Ursula, the patron saint of schoolgirls, was a lady of royal blood who became betrothed to Colon, a British prince, on condition that he accompanied her and her retinue on a pilgrimage to Rome. They travelled down the Rhine, stopped at Basle, crossed the Alps into Italy, and upon arrival in the Holy City the Prince was baptized and the Pope solemnized the marriage of the royal couple, subsequently returning with the bridal party. But when they got back to Cologne, they found the city had been captured by the Huns. Ursula, refusing

to submit to the advances of the barbarians' leader, was cruelly put to death, together with her attendants, Prince Colon and all his followers. The legend states that certain relics of the saint and her damsels were preserved in a wooden casket, and it is a fact that on October 21st, 1489, some such remains were taken from their resting place and enshrined in the beautiful oak reliquary made especially for their reception. If possible, let children see a photograph of the whole shrine so that they can get some idea how Memling's pictures were used to decorate this unique treasure. The shrine itself is only about three feet long by two feet high, therefore it can be visualised how small the pictures are—three panels on either side and a taller, narrow one on each gabled end. There are six circular medallions on the sloping roof. The supporting work is exquisitely carved. The first pictures in the series, shows the arrival of Ursula and her band at Cologne. The princess, attired befitting her rank, is being assisted by her maidens to step from the ship on to the jetty that skirts the gatehouse and buildings flanking the waterfront. One lady carries a box; men are lifting luggage out of the ship. The travellers are entering the city through an archway. Through a pair of open windows, an angel is shown appearing to Ursula as she sits up in bed, presumably preparing for her tragic end. Within the city, the massive Gothic Cathedral, with its carved buttresses and pinnacles, looks impressive against the sky; to the left are the churches of St. Martin and St. Mary and the Bayenturn. The composition of the picture is most satisfactory; the masts and rigging convincingly natural. The background shows that Memling was a master of architectural drawing. In the next picture, the ships have reached Basle. Then comes the arrival of the pilgrims in Rome, where the Pope blesses Ursula, while the Prince and some of his followers are being baptised in a large font: the embarkation from Basle; the arrival at Cologne, where the ships are attacked by the barbarians; and finally the murder of the saint by a mild-looking man in armour with a bow and arrow. Memling was incapable of depicting scenes of violence; a thoughtful calm pervades all his work, often coupled with a hint of melancholy. He was always idealistic; crude realism was not for him. Thus, to-day, his pictures have a peculiar charm; they are restful and refreshing, intellectually satisfying, spiritually uplifting.

Besides the shrine of St. Ursula, three other memorable works by Memling can be seen in the Hospital of St. John; *The Sybil*, *The Marriage of the Virgin*, and the *Adoration of the Magi*.

Memling's greatness is indubitable. His weakness lies in the way in which he crowded too many incidents into one picture. He likes to show a sequence of events portrayed simultaneously; this tends to detract from the unity of the whole. There is often too much to look at in his pictures, too many figures, a super-abundance of detail, as, for example, in that great panoramic composition known as *Christ, The Light of the World*. But his grouping and construction are good, his portraits, whether realistic or idealized, put him on a plane apart from the other artists of the Bruges school, and are reminiscent of some of the great Italians. His work gives ample evidence of his character.

He took infinite pains, yet without being sentimental. It is obvious that he was a sincere and devout Christian, something of an intellectual, a gentle-hearted man who abhorred brutality, a true lover of beauty. Rightly has Memling been called the Fra Angelico of the North.