

# ***Painters on Painting***

## Ellen Harvey on Rogier Van der Weyden

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Rogier Van der Weyden, *Last Judgement*, c. 1445–1450, Oil on oak, 87 x 216 inches

This rather battered old reproduction hangs in my studio. I've owned it since I was five, which is when I first and last saw the original. This is the painting that made me want to be an artist. The painting is Rogier Van der Weyden's *Last Judgment*, also sometimes known as the Beaune Altarpiece. According to Wikipedia, he was commissioned to paint it in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of the Duchy of Burgundy, for his newly founded Hospices de Beaune. After it was finished around 1450, it was hung in the hospital, with beds for those too sick to walk (and presumably most in need of contemplating their spiritual fate) placed directly in front of the painting. Like many altarpieces, the painting can be folded shut. When open, it's over 7 feet tall by about 18 ft wide. The outside shutters show the donors, Rolin and his wife Guigone de Salins, and grisaille scenes of the Annunciation and of Saint Anthony (good for skin diseases) and Saint Sebastian (good against the plague). The inside of the painting, which would only have been shown on special occasions, shows the risen wounded Christ surrounded by angels bearing the instruments of his passion, seated on a rainbow. Below him, the Archangel Michael weighs the souls of the dead. The Virgin Mary and John the Baptist and the twelve apostles accompanied by portraits of three women, a king, bishop, a pope, and a monk sit on fiery clouds on either side. The dead, who rise up out of the ground at Michael's feet, are weighed and then progress either towards heaven on the left side of the panel, depicted as a golden Gothic church, or on the right towards the fiery pit of hell, weeping and tearing at their hair and flesh.

We were living in Germany at the time and were on holiday in France. I remember nothing of that trip apart from this painting. I recall begging to be allowed to stay with it at the hospital and being left behind with an accommodating priest. Unlikely as it sounds, it's apparently an accurate memory. I can't remember actually seeing the painting, just that it was impossibly large, frightening, detailed and glamorous. It swallowed me up. I didn't just want to own it. I wanted to live inside it. I wanted to make something just like it.

I've often wondered what it was about this painting that so captivated me. In part, there's the sheer visual spectacle of the piece: the gold, Michael's peacock wings, the sense that you could simply step into this other richly detailed world where everything is burning and glittering forever. I remember particularly loving the red-hot sword that floats at Christ's left hand. The sheer labor and size of the painting also impresses – the fact that Van der Weyden took such trouble, such care to make this immersive experience just for you. It makes you feel how important the subject is. And what a subject! Who can resist the high drama of the Day of Judgment, that final moment of narrative collapse? I feel an immense sympathy with the desire for immortality and what I fear is a prophetic sense of fellow feeling for the damned who (interestingly enough) far outnumber the saved in Van der Weyden's vision. It's also sad – it's a kind of painting that just can't exist anymore. The apocalypse now only really exists in the movies. Even if you could paint like Van der Weyden it wouldn't work. No painting or installation of mine, no matter how large or beautiful will ever move the dying to repentance or save a soul. I look at this painting and know that I will forever fall short. I've never been back to Beaune. I think I'm afraid to.