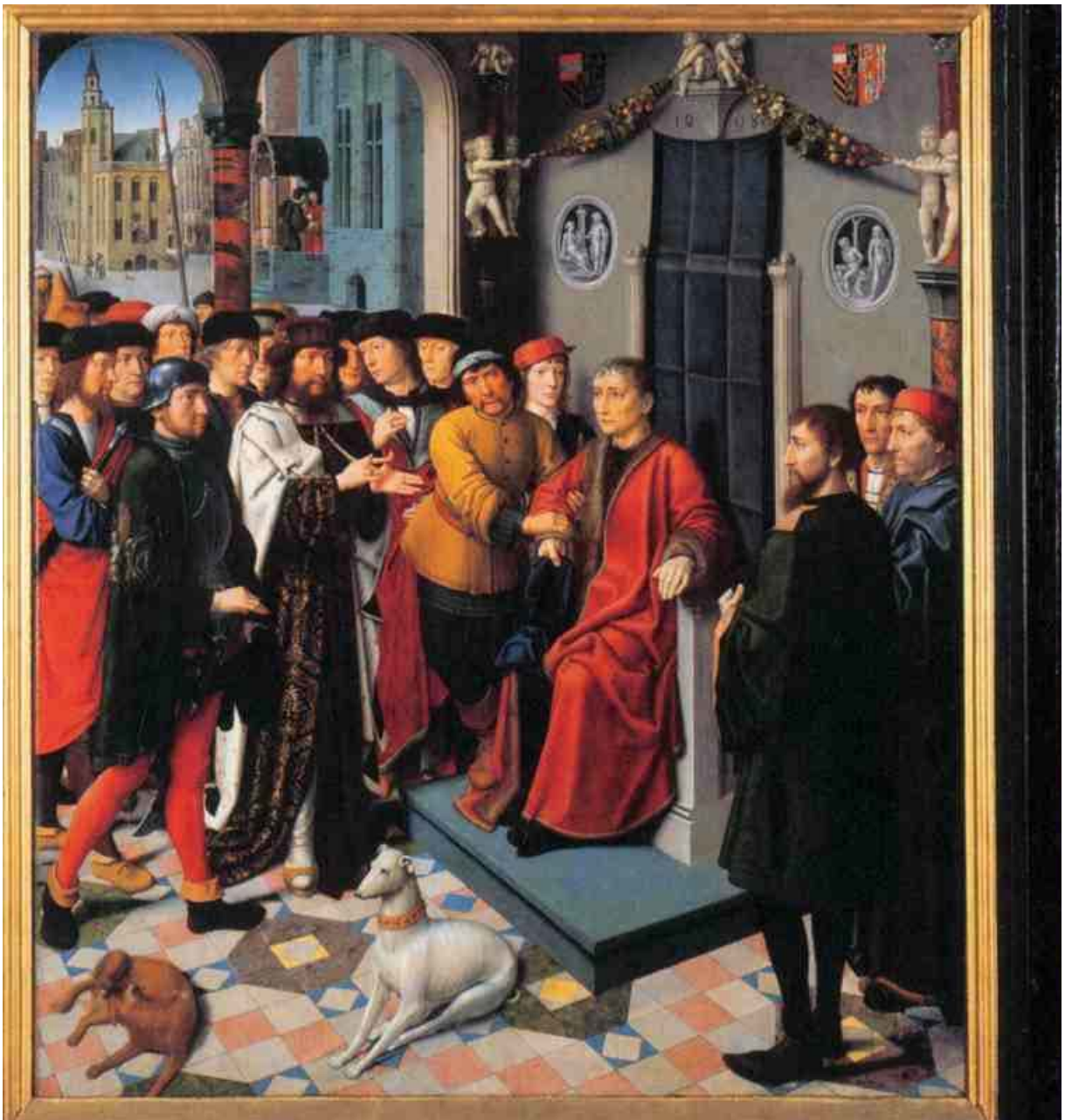


## Visual Law

In 1498, when Gerard David completed the *The Judgement of Cambyses*, the portrayal of secular subjects in a diptych—a format long associated with religious subjects—was established enough in Early Flemish art to merit little comment. Nonetheless, David's painting was then, and remains now, extraordinary for its overt

political messaging and graphic depiction of violence.

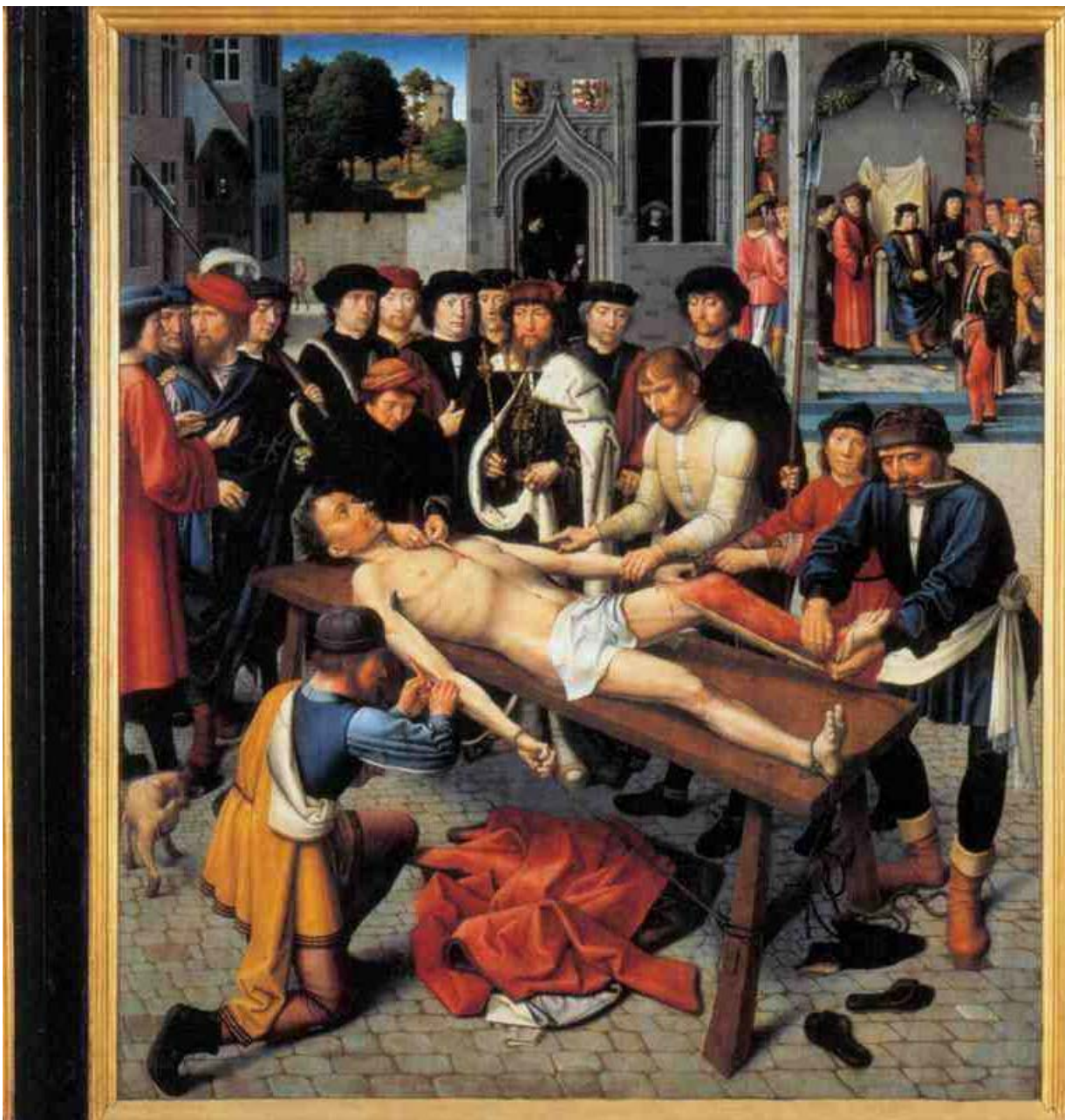
The diptych was commissioned by the aldermen of Bruges; a city that between 1482–1492 was in a state of turmoil following its rebellion against Maximilian of Austria. After the intervention of the pope and the Holy Roman Empire, Maximilian became regent



of a defeated Bruges in 1492. It was in this context that *The Judgement of Cambyses* was commissioned; a visual reminder to the people of Bruges that failure to conform to the regime would incur harsh penalty. The panels depict the Persian story of Sisamnes, a corrupt judge flayed alive by order of King Cambyses. The left panel shows the arraignment of the judge by the

king. One of Sisamnes crimes, accepting a bribe from a merchant, is shown in the background. The right panel shows the flaying of Sisamnes. It also shows, in the upper right, Sisamnes successor judge, his son Otanes, sitting on a chair draped with his father's skin.

Unlike traditional diptychs, which were hinged so as to be used as portable religious mementos or church altar pieces, *The Judgement*





of *Cambyses* panels were hung as ‘justice panels’ in the justice hall of the Bruges city hall. Miergroet (1988: 133) concludes that David had little if any artistic discretion, being under instruction as to the subject and iconography by the Burgundian court. The painting went through several redraftings before completion, and its under-drawings reveal the scruffy dog licking its rump (panel one) to be a final addition. So too was the street dog scratching itself at the feet of the chattering noblemen (panel two). It is tempting, although possibly fanciful, to imagine that this intrusion of everyday informality was a subversive commentary on the context and purpose of the commission by the artist; particularly when set against the gruesome relish with which the flayers carry out their task under King Cambyses’ inscrutable gaze, in a setting embellished by the iconography of public law and governance.

Not only did *The Judgement of Cambyses* go through several adaptations in production, but also in its cultural significance. From its origins in a tale recounting punishment of judicial misconduct, to its reimagining as a public work to warn against judicial and political non-conformism, *The Judgement of Cambyses* lives on as a political message in the contemporary world.

In 2019 it became the subject of a Russian court case when a creditor in a bankruptcy case, Stanislav Golubyov, sent Krasnodar Regional Appellate Court documents in an envelope

decorated with a copy of David's painting. In response the court demanded an explanation to determine ‘whether it was a display of disrespect to the court’ and ‘whether there are grounds for imposing a fine ...’. In December 2012 a copy of the painting was paraded by protestors at Moscow’s Zamoskvoretsky district court, following the sentencing of Maksim Luzyanin to four-and-a-half years in prison for participating in protests against Vladimir Putin. Similarly, supporters of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko displayed a poster of the painting at a 2012 hearing where she was appealing a seven-year prison term for alleged corruption (Coulson 2019). It is hard to imagine that David—despite his commission’s clear purpose to function as what Miergroet (1988:133) calls a ‘painted political manifesto’—could have imagined that *The Judgement of Cambyses* would live on as a visual message about law and governance over half a millennia after its completion.

## References

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