1. What was Michelangelo’s opinion of Northern Renaissance painting? What do his comments tell us about the differences between Northern and Southern painting? What are the general characteristics of Northern Renaissance painting?

He thought it was too raw in its expressive emotion. He thought that it would appeal to the spiritually devout but not to the rational mind. It lacks mathematical structure. It was obsessive about the external “exactness” of things. He thought that the painting tried to do everything and so did nothing well.

2. Where did the belief that Van Eyck invented oil painting come from? Did he?

Vasari. No. Many artists were already experimenting with combining oil and tempera techniques. None mastered oil like Van Eyck, however.

3. Was Jan van Eyck the only master artist to work on the Ghent Altarpiece?

No. His brother Hubert likely started the piece and Jan finished it. Hubert perhaps did the sculpture for the frame and some of the panels. It is difficult to ascertain who did what.

4. What did the original frame of the Ghent look like? What was the experience of the altarpiece both open and closed supposed to emulate?

It looked like the façade (front) of a Gothic cathedral. When open the panels were supposed to emulate the experience of going inside of a cathedral to celebrate All Saints Mass.

5. Describe the iconography of the Ghent closed. What are sibyls? Prophets?

The Annunciation, with sibyls (ancient prophets) and prophets (from the Old Testament of the Bible – prophets are individuals who predict future events, in this case the coming of Christ), John the Baptist, John the Beloved (also called John the Evangelist) and the patrons, Jodocus Vydt and Isabel Barluut.

6. How are John the Baptist and John the Beloved depicted on the Ghent? Why are they painted in grisaille? Why are the Johns featured on the Ghent?

They are depicted in grisaille (monochromatic) probably to blend in with sculpted images that use to be part of the original frame. John the Baptist is here because the church for which this altarpiece was made was dedicated to St. John the Baptist, and John the Beloved is here because he wrote about All Saints Day which is depicted in the interior of the altarpiece.
7. Who are Jodocus Vijd and Isabel Borluut? How do their representations compare to Italian portraits?

Patrons for the Ghent. They are not idealized like Italian portraits. They are presented as if in prayer, and not strictly in profile.

8. In general, who do the various groups along the bottom of the Ghent represent? How does their presence add to the theme of the interior?

All the saints of Heaven. The center theme refers to the celebration of All Saints Mass.

9. How do Van Eyck’s representations of Adam and Eve compare to Masaccio’s?

Masaccio’s is more classical in its use of contrapposto (understanding of anatomy), canon of proportion (idealized form), monumental nudity (no cover), and use of chiaroscuro (a sense of atmosphere and setting). The figures demonstrate Alberti’s theories of “istoria” or appropriate gestures to express emotion.

Van Eyck’s figures lack emotion (something that is unusual for Northern painting which often shows raw emotion yet of a kind different from Alberti’s description) and are more medieval in their sense of emotional detachment. Van Eyck pays closer attention to surface texture and describes the surface in great detail (differentiating between hair, flesh, foliage). Van Eyck’s figure are not in a natural setting.

10. What scenes are depicted above the heads of Adam and Eve? Why are these scenes and Adam and Eve represented on the panel? What is the likely intended message?

Cain and Abel offerings to God (God approves of Abel’s but not Cain’s)
Cain killing Abel.

They are here to show that the sins of Adam and Eve are pass onto the next generation.

The sin of man is greeted in the overall altarpiece, not with damnation, but with the promise of salvation – the beautiful entry into the heavenly Jerusalem (Heaven) is seen.

11. What is the contemporary source for the fruit that Eve holds in her hand?

Van Eyck had seen the fruit during his trips to Portugal and Spain (it tells us that he is well-traveled and interested in representing the religious story in a contemporary context like the Italians were). The fruit is called an “Adam’s
“apple” and was, according to legend, the forbidden fruit that Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

12. How is the trinity represented in the interior of the Ghent?

Down the center of the altarpiece when opened are seen the large image of God the Father, the dove of the Holy Spirit, and then the lamb on an altar with a cross represented Christ. Blood spills from the lamb into a chalice indicative of the wine of the Eucharist.

13. Who is the likely subject of Van Eyck’s *Portrait of Tymotheos*? Why are the words “Leal Souvenir” included?

(Skip for now)

14. Describe the theological significance of the light coming into Van Eyck’s church depicted in *Madonna in the Church*. Why is Mary depicted so large?

The clue to the meaning is on the weaves of Mary’s gown in an inscription that reads “She is more beautiful than the sun, she is found before it. For she is the brightness of eternal light and the unspotted mirror of God’s majesty.” Mary brings eternal life to the world by bearing Jesus. She brings light into the world (meaning hope, wisdom, and salvation).

There use to be an inscription on the frame of the piece (now lost) that read, “As the sunbeam through the glass passes but not stains, so, the Virgin, as she was, a virgin still remains.” Thus the light symbolizes her virginity. Her ability to bring light into the world is dependent on her own purity.

15. Compare and contrast Van Eyck’s *Madonna in the Church* and Leonardo’s *Madonna of the Rocks*.

(I’m going to let you come up with your own ideas here using the above facts.)

(Stop here for now)