Introduction

One must begin somewhere. And yet, the point at which one begins assumes inordinate importance, for it tends to be regarded as the point from which everything flows, like the spring of a great river—and this it cannot be.

Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting, I: The Van Eycks and Petrus Christus*

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Detail of 6

This book considers the artistic production of northern Europe from the middle of the fourteenth century to the turn of the sixteenth. Of course, any chronological boundaries are by their nature artificial, cutting across continuities and creating a starting point where none may have existed. In this case the choice of where to start, and where to stop, has been governed by reasons which are primarily art historical or cultural, and they are necessarily fluid: some objects and documentary material from outside this period are included because they shed important light on earlier or later practices.

Although there are many continuities which can be drawn between our period and the preceding centuries,[1] the last decades of the fourteenth century arguably present an artistic sea-change in many ways: they saw the beginning of a boom in the level, range, and scale of artistic production, as the number of artists active in the towns of northern Europe, and particularly in Paris, the Burgundian Netherlands and southern Germany, began to increase dramatically, a pattern which was to continue throughout the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth (see Part II). This increase reflected, and helped fuel, a burgeoning demand for images of all kinds from a wider range of the population than ever: by *c.*1500 we have extensive documentation for the private ownership of images of all sorts by a broad cross-section of society: merchants, craftsmen, clergy, lawyers, doctors as well as members of the nobility; this is much harder to find prior to 1350. In the church as well as in the home, the desire for commemoration and the needs of salvation were increasingly met in visual terms: memorials, tombs, private chapels, and their furnishings proliferated in ecclesiastical interiors, which were much more densely adorned with images around 1500 [**168**] than they would have been in around 1350, and indeed than at any point in their later history given the tumultuous events of the following centuries, the implications of which are discussed in Part I.

The latter half of the fourteenth century was also a period when the emphasis on the visual in many realms became more intense and widespread: ritual events began to utilize figurative props in a more marked way, be they the coronation ceremonies of the kings of France, the glorious entries of the Burgundian dukes into their towns, the celebration of New Year and other festivities at the courts of Europe, or liturgical dramas enacted most intensely around Easter and Advent (discussed in Part V). It is this period, too, which is charted by historians of dress as a key moment in the development of fashion in the modern sense, as clothing became more complex in construction,

1 Michelangelo
The Virgin and Child (the 'Bruges Madonna'), marble, 1503–6.

more frequently subject to change in its forms and shapes, and more nuanced as an indicator of status. Because of this, perhaps, dress at our period is a particularly vivid and vital tool in visual imagery, where it could convey complex meanings and a range of subtle associations, aiding narrative construction as well as creating emotional and dramatic impact.[2]

This period was also witness to great technical innovation and virtuosity. In the late fourteenth century new art forms, or refinements in already established ones, were developed (although not, as is sometimes supposed, in the realm of oil painting, which was a well-established method in every sense, see pp. 30–31). The boundaries of what was possible in metal, stone, wood, glass, and wool were pushed to its limits. These developments were, in large part, prompted or precipitated by the enlightened patronage of the European courts: the French royalty in Paris and the regional capitals of Dijon, Angers, and Bourges; the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV in Prague; Sigismund of Luxembourg in Budapest; and the court of Richard II in London. These patrons had the money and the desire to commission monumental, ambitious, expensive, and innovative projects. The level of technical achievement and visual invention in works like the *Parement de Narbonne* for Charles V of France (d. 1380, **194**), the *Goldenes Rössl* for his son Charles VI (d. 1421, **24**), the *Well of Moses* for Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (d. 1404, **146, 147, 148**), the Angers *Apocalypse* tapestries for Louis, Duke of Anjou (d. 1384, **143, 144, 145**), or the *Très Riches Heures* [**74, 75, 76**] for Jean, Duke of Berry (d. 1416), is extraordinary, and in some respects reached a peak in these objects. Technical experimentation and a different prerogative, that of speeding up the production processes involved in image making, lay behind the most influential of new media of the period: printmaking. Early prints were of a modest nature,

2 Hans Memling
The Virgin and Child with Angels (the 'Pagagnotti Triptych'), oil on Baltic oak, *c.*1480.
This panel is the centre part of an altarpiece made for Benedetto Pagagnotti, a Florentine Dominican and bishop. He never visited the Netherlands, and must have commissioned or been given this work through an agent there. It was well known to Florentine painters in the 1480s and 1490s, who copied elements of its landscape with precision.

simple woodcuts aimed at the lower end of the market [**46**], spurred on by the need for reasonably priced religious images. By the end of our period, with the development of intaglio printing from engraved metal plates, prints had the potential for a level of sophistication quite beyond this, with the complex engravings of Martin Schongauer (*c.*1435/50–1491, **91**, **96**) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528, **84**). These were displays of artistic invention and technical mastery, designed for a different consumer and budget, and they were hugely influential Europe-wide (see Part III).

Our period closes around 1500 when an artistic tide starts to turn: the Burgundian Netherlands, for over 100 years the dominant force in Europe in terms of its artistic output and influence (see Part II), begins to give way to Italy, and particularly to the towns of Florence, Venice and Rome. Northern products continued to dominate the international market for some years, but Italian art became increasingly influential and desirable, particularly following the arrival in Brussels of Raphael's tapestry cartoons from Rome in 1517. It is, however, the arrival in Bruges in 1506 of the marble *Madonna* by Michelangelo [**1**], sent there by a Flemish merchant, Alexandre Mouscron, which represents our symbolic turning point: the muscular child, so typical of Michelangelo, is a stylistic direction which many artists in the north as well as the south were to follow in the next century and beyond, dictating taste for the next few hundred years and becoming by far the most admired object in Bruges (a position it maintains to some extent to this day). Yet it is simultaneously representative of the impact northern art had had throughout Europe in the preceding century: the Virgin is a type that surely alludes to those of Hans Memling, whose paintings were well known in Florence [**2**]. This is both visually evident and historically plausible (see Chapters 7

and 10), even if we are slow to accept an artist like Michelangelo learning from northern ideas.

The geographical boundaries of this study are perhaps more artificial than the chronological ones, in a Europe which had such a fluid political map, and where trade routes by land and sea dictated relationships and contacts as much as the physical proximity of countries and natural borders like the Alps: Genoa, Lucca, Milan, Florence and Venice arguably had as much commercial contact with Paris, Bruges, Cologne, and Nuremberg as they did with each other (see Map 1). Moreover, in treating the north (an entity encompassing everything north of the Alps and west of Krakow and Vienna) as distinct from the south (which is basically for our purposes the Italian peninsula), we reinforce a long tradition in art historical literature which implies that Italy was a homogenous and discrete society from its northern neighbours. That neither of these ideas is entirely or even partly tenable is widely recognized, yet we continue to separate out the two regions in how we teach and write about their artistic production. We mostly specialize in one area or the other, rarely crossing the Alps to consider the continuities, despite concerted and accelerating interest of scholars in particular artistic relationships between these regions.[3] While it would be preferable to try to dissolve the boundary of the Alps (which proved relatively easy for most travellers and traders of the period to overcome, either by sea route or land), the scope of this study does not permit it, given that Italy has been covered admirably in another book in this series.[4] The juxtaposition with Italy is, however, fundamental in other ways: we have historically viewed northern achievements of this period though the lens of Italy (or more properly Florence), mostly to the detriment of northern works. We still are prone to assuming Florentine superiority and dominance at the period, a particularly deep-seated belief in Anglophone countries, and one rarely challenged sufficiently. This issue is addressed in Part I.

Even without Italy the range of this book as implied by the generic term 'northern' is potentially vast. Although this study encompasses examples of objects made as far east as Krakow (image heading chapter 16), as far north as Stockholm [**127**], and as far south as Zaragoza (**134**; Spain for our purposes is also northern, given its political affinities and artistic leanings), such a range can only be attempted with a thematic approach, which makes no attempt at a balanced coverage of all regions at this period. Without doubt, and unashamedly, the bias in this study is towards works made in Paris and Dijon (mostly before 1420), in the towns of the Burgundian Netherlands (Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Tournai and Antwerp) and Germany (such as Lübeck, Colmar, Cologne, Ulm and Nuremberg after *c*.1450). These centres and regions were, at varying points, the most commercially and culturally successful, and the areas of greatest industrialization. Their importance is vividly conveyed in the travel account of Pero Tafur (*c*.1410–*c*.1484), a nobleman from Castile, who in the 1430s undertook an extensive journey across Europe. Setting out from Gibraltar, Tafur had sailed to Genoa and travelled through Italy, stopping in Florence, Rome and Venice, from where he took a ship via the Greek islands to the Holy Land. From there he travelled to Egypt and Constantinople, returning westward across the Alps to Germany, reaching the Low Countries in 1438. In all these places he saw and recorded many marvels, such as the pyramids and bazaars of Cairo, and miraculous images in Constantinople.

However, it was the towns of Bruges, Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels which seem to have impressed him most. Here, in northern Europe, were the most cosmopolitan cities he had seen anywhere, where one could buy the greatest range of luxury goods, including works of art. Bruges, he thought, was 'one of the greatest markets in the world', and he witnessed greater commercial activity there than in Venice, since, he said, in Bruges all the nations of the world could be found engaging in trade. Tafur was particularly astounded by the range and quality of the produce: he noted that 'anyone who has money and wishes to spend it will find in the town alone everything which the whole world produces'. The sheer scale of the trade which took place fascinated him: with awe he recounts that he has been told that, at certain times, 700 ships a day sailed from Bruges. Antwerp, Bruges' rival as the commercial centre of Europe, left him lost for words: 'I do not know how to describe so great a fair as this. I have seen others at Geneva in Savoy, at Frankfurt in Germany and at Medina in Castile, but all these together are not to be compared to Antwerp.'[5] The reasons why we no longer perhaps see these centres quite as Tafur did are explored in Part I. Places such as Bruges and Antwerp specialized in the making and selling of goods rather than in the production of raw materials, and these centres were also the most geared up for the exportation of their products. Tafur, commenting on the lack of local agricultural produce in Bruges, noted that its 'extraordinarily industrious' inhabitants exchanged 'the work of their hands' for the 'products of the whole world … so that they have everything in abundance'. Many of the exported goods manufactured in the cities of the north were luxury items; the range and nature of these exports are considered in Part II.

The geographical scope of this book is one reason why it is not structured chronologically or around artists' biographies; the thematic approach selected here is also beneficial for other reasons. Although there are some famous artists whose careers we will investigate (Part III), a biographical structure privileges the artist as the context for the work and can sideline other contexts (such as media, location, use, and processes of production). Moreover, it does not easily encompass works made by artists whose names have not, for many reasons, come down to us. With northern art this is a high proportion of surviving production, particularly in media like metalwork and tapestry, and a more acute problem, on the whole, than for Italian works of the period (the reasons for this and their implications are explored in Chapter 2). This book also does not attempt to chart evolutions of style or follow developments in the visual exploration of space and form. Although northern painters, in particular, excelled in the creation of spatial, and other, illusions, it is only one of the many visual strategies which these sophisticated artists wielded, and the idea that this period witnessed a progressive advance towards greater naturalism or that this was the aim of any farsighted Renaissance artist is one that should not be encouraged. Rather than artists or style, this book therefore takes as its point of departure the physical evidence of the objects themselves: their scale, materials, technique, condition, and what is represented and how. Some of this evidence comes from technical methods of examination, which have been used with great success on Netherlandish paintings in particular (see Chapter 5), but it mostly comes from close, extensive, detailed looking, a procedure which can be followed by all. Our other key point of departure is

primary sources, which may be documentary evidence concerning particular works, but can be more tangential like guild regulations, legal disputes, wills, inventories, or poetry (these sources are discussed in Chapter 4). In many cases objects have been chosen for discussion because the evidence of either or both these sorts is particularly rich, allowing us to consider questions such as how they were made, used, and viewed.

Also at the heart of the approach of this book is that it concerns itself with a wide range of media, and is not limited to painting. Indeed, our modern tendency to separate out the work of painters in galleries devoted to their art alone, and to write histories of art that look only at painted works, is particularly anachronistic. The period that this book covers valued the works of goldsmiths, sculptors, embroiders, and weavers more highly, in most cases, than painting. That is not to say that painters did not play a crucial part in much of the production of the period: indeed, they were often the designers of metalwork, stained glass, sculpture, and tapestries, and as such they continue to have a starring role in this book. However, like any viewer of the period, our horizons must encompass images in many different media, from metalwork to parchment and ivory, polychromed wood to carved limestone and alabaster, sometimes combined on the same object [**155**, **156**, **163**], referred to visually from one medium to another [**174**] or seen in tandem, used together or in sequence in liturgical and devotional rituals [**6**, **168**, **191**].

This book, then, looks not just at a representative range of different types of art in different materials, but considers some of the technical, practical, social, economic, and functional relationships between these different media, the craftsmen who worked in them, and the meanings of the materials they used. This was clearly something central to the makers and consumers of the works we are concerned with here. Indeed where we have evidence of what was important to contemporary audiences, it tends to indicate that materials, their quality, and the skill of the artist in their manipulation and deployment were more current considerations when images were made, used, viewed, and valued than the more modern interest in style. This is not to say that contemporaries did not recognize artistic difference or quality in terms other than material ones: both Margaret of Austria and Catherine of Aragon could make judgements concerning the works and skill of Michel Sittow (see p. 108, 237), and a sensitivity to different hands and an appreciation of the ability to invent are threads which can be picked up through the period, but patrons' expressions of value nevertheless insistently centred in some manner around technical skill. Thus the town council of Barcelona, when commissioning their altarpiece [**27**, **28**], wanted 'the best and most able painter to be found',[6] while the mayor of Nördlingen recommended two craftsmen, the painter Friedrich Herlin (*c.*1425/30–1500, see **153**) and the carpenter Hansen Waidenlich, to another city on the basis that they had completed 'two beautiful and masterfully crafted pieces of work',[7] and Philip the Good wanted the cartoons for his tapestries of the story of Gideon painted by 'Bauduin de Bailleul or by another better painter that they may find'.[8] Even the famous encomium of this same patron concerning his court painter Jan van Eyck, which praises that artist's 'science', should be read as referring to the craft of painting, not science as we might understand it.[9] What we come back to is that the best artists were invariably those

who could work their materials in extraordinary ways, as is most startlingly evident from the way van Eyck handled oil paint (detail heading chapter 5), Claus Sluter (*c*.1360–1406) and his team constructed stone monuments [**146, 147, 148**], or Veit Stoss (*c*.1445/50–1533) carved wood [**149, 150, 152**]. This book is necessarily, then, concerned in large part with these matters of materials—and why materials mattered: the relative challenges, advantages, expense, and difficulties of working different media. In this we can start to understand artistic choices as well as patronal desires, driven, in most cases, by practical and technical considerations: cost, availability, time, durability, visibility, and decorum.

Finally some notes on terminology. Because Europe at this period was rather differently distributed to how it is today, our modern names for countries and regions cannot always be applied: Belgium, Spain, Germany, and Italy did not properly exist as distinct entities, and large parts of France were actually ruled by England for much of this period. Although Italy is used here as a term for the whole peninsula, it was in fact a group of city states and principalities, not a monolithic or even remotely homogenous whole until the nineteenth century; the same is largely true of Germany. Spain was a set of five kingdoms until the end of the fifteenth century; Belgium was both split into several territories but part of a larger whole—the Burgundian Netherlands—which stretched from Zeeland in the north to Burgundy in the south (see Map 2), a centrally administered state which was created, enlarged, and ultimately dissolved during our period. Because of this, wherever possible, precise regional terms are used: Castile, not Spain; Brabant, not Belgium; Florentine, not Italian. Flemish, strictly speaking, only refers to works made in towns in Flanders (which includes Bruges and Ghent, but not Brussels or Leuven, which are in Brabant), so Netherlandish is preferred when a wider region is implied, encompassing the area indicated on Map 2. In a book of this scope the broader geographical terms are, however, impossible to avoid and without them the text would become rather unwieldy. When the all-encompassing 'north' and northern art' are resorted to, which is necessary at times, they refer to Western Europe north of the Alps: anything not Italian.

Secondly, we have the problem of how to refer to the period in general. In the title of this book Renaissance has been used; this is intended as a shorthand, but its implications and appropriateness need to be considered. The fact that it is a French term conveys a false sense of universal validity, but it is arguably not applicable to works from northern Europe from this period, having been developed and applied primarily in relation to Italian art and culture, or to a later period of northern history, from *c*.1500 onwards.[10] As a consequence, it tends to bring with it assumptions and criteria proper to Italian art and its achievements and aims, which were demonstrably different, on the whole, from northern art. Despite the implications of the adoption of 'Renaissance' for northern art of this period, it is used here in the title of this book since it is the best available term. So long as we do not seek what was valued by Italian eyes, especially Florentine sixteenth-century eyes (this is harder than it might seem, see Chapter 3), we can use this label as a convenient one, and one which does evoke the rich boom in production, the new media and ideas, technical feats, imagery, and imagination which we see in this period in northern Europe.