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Symbol and meaning in northern European art of the late middle ages and the early Renaissance*

James H. Marrow

Because "symbol and meaning" tend to be rooted in the branch of our discipline conventionally termed iconography, my initial thoughts in preparing this paper were focused on the connotations of that term, and in particular on what it has come to mean in studies of northern European art of the late middle ages and the early Renaissance. In traditional iconographic studies, the meaning of a work of art is deciphered primarily from the represented "things"—what those in semiotics like to call the "signs" or "signifiers"—which make up the image; in practice, the central problem faced by the iconographer is, by deciphering these things, to recover the forgotten contents of past works of art. In reporting these observations—ones supplied, I hasten to add, by one of my students—I of course mean to refer to the historiographical thrust which has dominated the study of early Netherlandish painting at least since Panofsky.¹ But this seems to me a dangerously limited and limiting approach to the study of art, and for a host of reasons. For one thing, it tends to treat the artist as a mere con-

duit for generally extra-artistic information which he is deemed to have encoded: in the case of the material I study, usually information derived from the domain of theology, though occasionally also from philosophy or from some other body of thought. Not surprisingly, this has led to an onslaught of books and articles frequently overburdened with citations from the writings of various obscure and not-so-obscure medieval authors, which are held to supply the meaning that the artist has duly translated into visual forms. Not to speak of the alarming number of instances in which the effort to justify the identification of so-called disguised or submerged symbols in art has resulted in fishing expeditions in the volumes of the *Patrologia Latina*, and in the kind of extravagant interpretations of the subject matter of fifteenth-century art works which one of my former teachers, Julius Held, aptly termed "trigger-happy iconology."² I want instead to question the fundamental relevance and adequacy of this approach in regard to the period and the material with which we are concerned.

* In accepting the organizers' kind invitation to speak in the session devoted to this topic, I propose to address my comments to issues that seem to hold promise for future research, rather than treat or even seem to arbitrate past considerations of symbolic meaning in northern art. In so doing, I introduce some of the ideas that will figure in my next book (as yet untitled), in which I will attempt to define some of the processes of artistic innovation which came to the fore in northern Europe during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Keenly aware of the difficulties of such a project, I am even more mindful of the risk of appearing to oversimplify complex problems by treating them within the compass of a one-hour lecture—no less by its publication. I would therefore remind readers that the ideas discussed here represent only part of a broader program designed to attempt certain redefinitions of artistic change in this period; that my comments about particular works of art are not intended as global readings of their purpose or character; that all of the themes touched upon herein can and will be elaborated by reference to additional works of art and to different kinds of evidence (artistic and documentary). For having conceived this session and overcome my initial reluctance to participate, I am

grateful to Carol Purtle and Laurinda Dixon. In both his research and our conversations, Joseph Koerner contributed materially to sharpening my presentation of this material. Koerner, Svetlana Alpers, Suzanne Brenner and Loren Partridge were kind enough to lend a critical ear to a first version of this lecture. For help in acquiring photographs for the publication I thank Robert Baldwin, Walter Gibson, Craig Harbison, Alan Shestack and James Snyder. Finally, on 26 October 1985, a version of this lecture was also delivered at a symposium at Columbia University to honor Professor Howard McP. Davis on the occasion of his retirement. His teaching introduced me to Netherlandish art of this period and to its most challenging and enduring problems. This set of acknowledgments is not complete without reference to him, for this study and these words are in a very real sense a product of his inspiration.

1 Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, vol. 1, Cambridge (Mass.) 1953, esp. pp. 131-48.

2 Julius S. Held, "Review of Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*," *Art Bulletin* 37 (1955), p. 212.

Now I take as axiomatic: first, that a central task for artists during the high and late middle ages was to provide works of art that functioned in or in association with diverse aspects of the cult, and that were to convey information from the teachings of the church; and second, that to these ends artists employed accepted conventions for describing or characterizing sacred subjects, prominent among them, of course, the use of metaphorical or symbolic imagery. In brief, then, I hardly propose that we disregard the responsibility artists had to give visual form to concepts and teachings whose definitions and associations had been determined previously and by others. But surely this is among the least compelling aspects of artistic production during the late middle ages. For by this period—and I speak especially of the fifteenth century—we find few if any significant departures from traditional Christian subject matter in art; on the contrary, artistic production continued to be dominated by works for use in conjunction with the cult or liturgy, or with other traditional devotional practices, and for the communication of age-old Christian truths. In this sense, I am impressed not so much by what is apparently “new” in Christian iconography, but by its extreme conservatism. Such themes as the liturgical connotations of important events in the Christian scheme of Redemption, for example, the Annunciation, do not appear *ex nihilo* in the art of Flemish panel painters, nor in the generation of book illuminators who preceded them, but go back in western art to the eleventh century, if not earlier.³ And surely I need not list examples for an audience of this sophistication to make the point that most of the other major themes of so-called disguised symbolism—whether based upon parallels between the Old Law and the New, or the characterization of Christian mysteries according to sacred metaphors—derive from equally venerable traditions. The breadth and depth of these traditions give the lie to the notion that symbolism or metaphor might be disguised or hidden at all. On the contrary, symbolic and metaphorical expression were the established vehicles of

sacred discourse and artistic expression, recognized, indeed expected, in treatments of sacred subjects by authors and artists, readers, listeners and viewers.

We all know that twentieth-century scholars have recovered forgotten elements of meaning from selected works of fifteenth-century northern art. But as I hardly need insist, that circumstance does not justify the assumption that the meanings or symbols thus recovered must therefore have been concealed or hidden by the artists who represented them; rather, they were accommodated to the prevalent stylistic idiom. In stating what I take to be a generally well-known point, at least nowadays, my intention is not to beat a dead horse. Our problem, as I see it, is not so much the semantic inadequacies of Panofsky's concept of concealed symbolism, with its anachronistic foundation, not even so much the impression I have of a mounting sterility in the studies of symbolic meaning in many works of fifteenth-century northern art. Rather, it is the unquestioning presumption that the use of symbols or the conveyance of symbolic meaning lies at or even close to the core of the most noteworthy achievements of fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth-century northern artists. Thus, while we have all benefited from many of the studies which have elucidated one or another aspect of symbolic or metaphorical content in northern art of this period, I find that we have so overemphasized the study of this particular aspect of artistic production as to neglect issues which correspond much more closely to the concerns and achievements of many leading artists of the period.

My perspective on this topic derives in part from comments made to me almost twenty years ago by Ernst Gombrich. In 1966, while still, like many of my generation, under the stimulating influence of Panofskian habits of thought, Gombrich drew me into conversation about the famous fifth chapter of *Early Netherlandish painting*, on “Reality and symbol.” I well recall my surprise when Gombrich discounted the thinking of the chapter, referring to it as fundamentally flawed by *a posteriori* and anachronistic logic. In retrospect I doubt

3 To illustrate this point I called attention to the ecclesiastical and sacramental features of Jan van Eyck's *Mellon Annunciation* (e.g., the location of the scene in a church interior and Gabriel's liturgical vestments), and for analogous representations in the previous generation of book illumination I showed one of the several similar works discussed and reproduced by Carol J. Purtle, *The Marian paintings of Jan van Eyck*, Princeton 1982, pp. 11–12, 40–58, figs. 3–7. The eleventh-century work I adduced was the miniature of the *Annunciation* from

the *Vyšehrad Coronation Gospels* (Prague, University Library, ms. XIV.A.13), where Gabriel—again apparently in liturgical vestments—is separated from Mary by an altar complete with altar candles and crosses and a pyxis: see Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art*, trans. Janet Seligman, vol. 1, Greenwich 1971, fig. 91, and Lotte Brand Philip, *The Ghent altarpiece and the art of Jan van Eyck*, Princeton 1971, p. 92, fig. 100.

that I fully appreciated his objection at the time, but I did register and respond to his next comment. He asked if I had ever read any fifteenth-century text on art or theology which was compatible with the assumptions of Panofsky's formulation. I had not, and thanks in part to that question, I began reading biblical, liturgical and theological texts with new purpose, and commenced collecting, as systematically as possible, all late medieval texts in which works of art were mentioned or, still better, discussed. Now, some twenty years later, and with a dossier of several hundred texts concerning fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth-century northern European art and its uses, I can still reply to Gombrich's question in the negative. All the more reason then, why I am uneasy about the generation of Panofsky's followers who write and speak so easily and confidently about concealed or disguised symbolism that one would assume—if one didn't remind oneself otherwise—that it had the status of a historical verity. Indeed, the Panofskian convention is by now so well established in our scholarship that different Netherlandish artists can be routinely characterized or differentiated from one another according to estimations of how each one formulates or employs disguised symbols.

I have not recounted Gombrich's comments in order to fault Panofsky's formulation or the modern historiographical fiction which I think it has produced. The *positive* result of twenty years of collecting texts about works of art and its uses is that there emerges from this body of material a surprisingly clear-cut set of indications concerning what was wanted and expected from works of art, especially during the early phases of my period. In my next book I will present this evidence and argue that it provides a historical basis for defining some of the initial determinants of artistic change in late medieval northern Europe. (And I stress *initial* determinants, for as I will also argue, others emerged subsequently for which there exists no adequate body of textual evidence.) In the present context I wish only to report an essential observation based on this evidence, which is that mentions and discussions of works of northern art from the late middle ages show a minimal concern with *what* the art represents; their focus, in-

stead, is overwhelmingly on how the art is to be used and experienced.

Against that deceptively simple background, I reiterate my contention that by overemphasizing certain kinds of conventional iconographic studies of northern art, particularly those centered on "what" is represented in the images, we have neglected issues which are much closer to the concerns of major artists at the time. And it is these issues, I would argue, which provide the surest index of their accomplishments. In suggesting a reorientation in some areas of our studies, I am therefore urging that we bring our methods and the subjects of our historical inquiry into closer synchronization with concerns demonstrably cultivated by artists at the time, and that we expand our sense of the meaning of works of art in ways that can yield further insights into the works themselves and into the circumstances of their creation.

To be specific after this lengthy introduction, my working assumption is that many of the principal forces which shaped and directed artistic invention and consciousness during our period, at least initially, are revealed in contemporary texts about works of art and their uses. My hypothesis is that artistic invention and consciousness were focused above all upon problems of *how art works*; that is, to borrow a happy formulation from Joseph Koerner, how it structures experience and interpretation.⁴ Texts on the uses of religious art from this period reiterate themes familiar from other genres of contemporary devotional literature: they focus on responses to the work of art (that is, what one "does" in front of it, or with it), and on the development of new states of consciousness through the use of works of art. Accordingly, I shall suggest that these two concerns, the issues of response to the work of art and of its role in stimulating new states of consciousness, are central to the meaning of many of the works of art themselves.

Diverse kinds of response to works of art were cultivated in our period, among them emotional response. For a consideration of many of the ways in which fifteenth-century artists thematized emotional response (and other kinds of responses, as well)—including a conspectus of subjects which were exploited in this manner and

⁴ From Koerner's unpublished dissertation prospectus; for analogous formulations, see Joseph Leo Koerner, "The mortification of the

image: Death as a hermeneutic in Hans Baldung Grien," *Representations* 10 (1985), pp. 52-101, esp. pp. 54, 85.



1 *The Crucifixion*, miniature from a thirteenth-century Psalter. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Oettingen-Wallerstein cod. 1.2.4° 24, fol. 13r

analyses of some of the techniques by which artists developed this aspect of exemplification in their imagery, and then went beyond it by visualizing the participation of contemporaries in their images—I can recommend a recent book by Frank Büttner.⁵ In the present context I shall consider only a facet of this kind of development, and chiefly by focusing on aspects of the ‘image of compassion’ which are not treated in Büttner’s book.

The pictorial theme to which I refer is not an invention of the fifteenth or even the fourteenth century in the north, but of the thirteenth century. German artists of this period created what might be termed a conceptualized or a symbolic image of compassion in representa-

tions of the dead Christ on the Cross, flanked by the Virgin Mary, her heart pierced by a sword, and by St Francis, who displays the wounds of the stigmata (fig. 1).⁶ The sword that pierces the Virgin’s heart derives from the prophecy of the high priest Simeon during the biblical account of the Presentation in the Temple. In Luke 2:34–35, Simeon tells Mary that her child “is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel,” and that “a sword shall pierce... thy own soul.” Referred to already in texts of the eleventh century as the *gladius compassionis*, or the sword of compassion, by the thirteenth century Simeon’s sword became a conventional artistic symbol of the Virgin’s compassion or sorrow, culminating in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in representations of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin, or the Virgin of Seven Sorrows, where Mary is depicted with from one to seven swords.⁷ In the German representations of the thirteenth century, the crucified Christ is thus accompanied by the two foremost embodiments of the contemporary ideal of compassion: the Virgin Mary, who literally witnessed her son’s Passion, and St Francis, who so identified with Christ’s suffering and death that he was miraculously vouchsafed the five wounds of the Crucifixion. Non-narrative in conception, such images were clearly designed to espouse the *idea* of compassion to the viewer.

Northern artists of the fourteenth century developed new pictorial means of addressing the issue of compassion. In addition to representing the idea of compassion in essentially conceptual or symbolic terms, they created a new type of image, known as the *Andachtsbild* or the “devotional image,” in which compassion is exemplified by holy figures isolated, as it were, from familiar narrative contexts.⁸ In representations of the so-called group of Christ and St John, excerpted from scenes of the Last Supper, and of the *Vesperbild* or Pietà, excerpted from the historical scene of the Lamentation beneath the Cross, artists focus on those figures and moments, and those narrative details, which most concisely display the

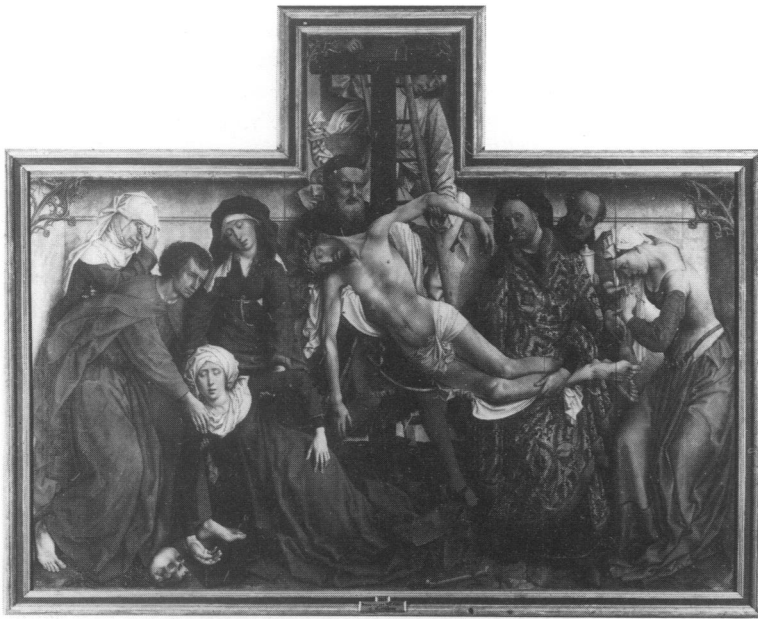
5 F.O. Büttner, *Imitatio pietatis: Motive der christlichen Ikonographie als Modelle zur Verähnlichung*, Berlin 1983.

6 From a Psalter, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Oettingen-Wallerstein cod. 1.2.4° 24, fol. 13r. See Hanns Swarzenski, *Die lateinischen illuminierten Handschriften des XIII. Jahrhunderts in den Ländern an Rhein, Main und Donau*, Berlin 1936, fig. 1029, and for other examples of the same iconography, figs. 313 and 391.

7 The fullest treatment of this theme in literature and art occurs in a doctoral dissertation nearing completion by Carol Schuler, “The

Madonna of Compassion in the late middle ages and Renaissance” (Columbia University, New York); until this study is available, see Stephan Beissel, *Geschichte der Verehrung Marias in Deutschland während des Mittelalters*, Freiburg-im-Breisgau 1909, pp. 406–15.

8 See the classic study by Erwin Panofsky, “Imago pietatis,” *Festschrift für Max J. Friedländer*, Leipzig 1927, pp. 261–308, to be supplemented by Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter*, Berlin 1981, with the bibliography on *Andachtsbilder*, pp. 301–02.



2 Roger van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*. Madrid, Prado

compassionate love of the Virgin or Christ.⁹ Created in the wake of the growing practice of private meditative devotion, and of the rising use of images for this purpose, such representations were intended to stimulate emotional or compassionate responses by playing upon the viewer's empathy. Although they retain a link with the historical narratives from which they were excerpted, these images tend to inspire what Panofsky termed a state of "contemplative immersion" because of their relative dislocation from a familiar narrative or historical context.¹⁰ That very dislocation, Panofsky argued, encouraged viewers to meditate on the themes of Christ's love and death, and of the Virgin's compassionate sorrow, in a framework not limited to one historical moment. The potential of such images to summarize a compassionate theme suitable for extended meditative devotion is perhaps best illustrated by representations of the Man of Sorrows accompanied by the instruments of the Passion, a subject that invites the viewer to reflect upon the totality of Christ's sufferings during the Passion.¹¹

Andachtsbilder served a real need of the pious during

the late middle ages for images capable of inspiring emotional identification with Christ and the Virgin. Although these images and techniques of meditation continued well into the sixteenth century, insufficient attention has been paid, in my judgment, to an important change of emphasis, or focus, in devotional practice and literature during this period. Just as devotional texts and images were intended, when all is said and done, to provoke appropriate pious responses from readers and viewers, so we find an increasing and quite self-conscious concern with these very responses. In its extreme forms, the cultivation of emotionalized religious identification and response led to a proliferation of incidents of stigmatization, to the formation and growth of such groups as the Flagellants and the lesser-known Dancers, and in the exceptional case of Henry Suso, the German devotional teacher of the fourteenth century, to episodes in which he carved Christ's initials into his own breast and had a cross nailed to his back. In the more general case, the increasingly insistent and self-conscious attention paid to the need to respond during devotion in real

⁹ See the entries "Christus-Johannes-Gruppe" and "Vesperbild," *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum, vol. 1, Rome & Vienna 1968, cols. 454-56, and vol. 4, Rome & Vienna 1972, cols. 450-56.

¹⁰ Panofsky, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 264.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, figs. 20-21, 23-25, etc.



3 Hugo van der Goes, *Death of the Virgin*. Bruges, Groeningemuseum

and physical terms, had a widespread if not a universal impact in the fashion for fainting and tears reported in numerous accounts of pious meditation during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the exhortations to such manifestations found even in devotional handbooks and narrative accounts of Christ's life and Passion.¹² So it is, that an author such as Ludolph of Saxony, to cite only a well-known one, can instruct his readers that meditation on the Passion of Christ should move them to tearful compassion; that they should excite themselves to devotion not only by inward contemplation, but also by bodily exertions, stretching of their hands, raising their eyes to the crucifix, striking their breasts, making devout genuflections, and if necessary even scourging

¹² I have summarized much of this tradition elsewhere; see James H. Marrow, *Passion iconography in northern European art of the late middle ages and early Renaissance*, Courtrai 1979, pp. 10–28.

¹³ *Vita Christi*, pars 11, cap. 58 (ed. A.-C. Bolard, *et al.*, Paris & Rome 1865, p. 601): “Memoria passionis Christi debet fieri non perfunctorie... sed cum matura et morosa ac praecordiali rememorazione, et flebili quadam compassione... Percute bis silicem, videlicet: interiori recordatione, et corporali nihilominus labore, te exercens ad pietatem, per extensionem manuum, seu oculorum ad crucifixum sublevationem; vel pectoris tusionem aut genuflexiones devotas, seu

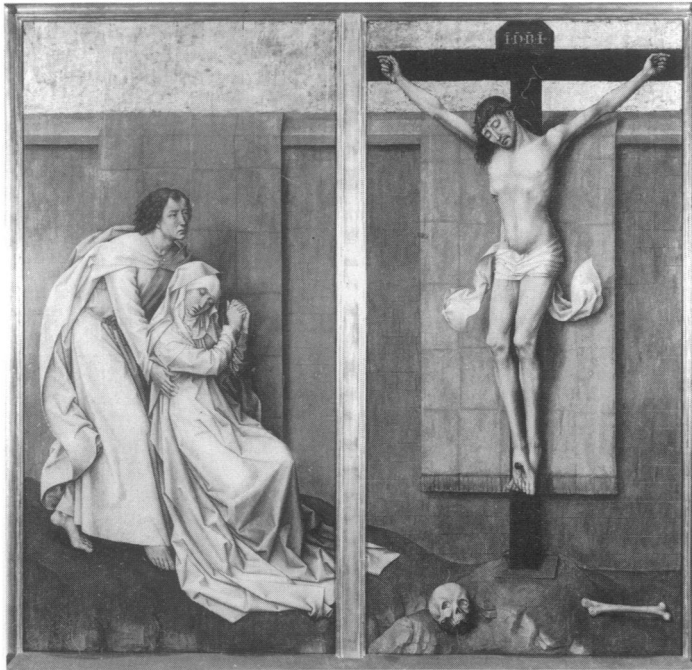
themselves; and that they should persist in these or similar exercises until they produce a plenteous stream of tears.”¹³ And such urgings are not limited to Ludolph's general considerations of meditation, but are interjected time and again into his descriptive accounts of Christ's Passion. In the midst of his narrative of the Mocking of Christ, for example, Ludolph stops to address the reader, asking: “What would you *do* if you saw this? Would you not cast yourself upon our Lord, saying ‘Do not harm him so; behold, here am I, strike *me* instead?’... Compassionate our Lord, for he is bearing all this torment for you; shed abundant tears and wash reverently away with them the spittle with which those profane wretches have besmeared his face. For who, hearing or considering this in his mind... could refrain himself from tears?”¹⁴

The distinct shift of emphasis of which I spoke is away from the traditional *subject matter* of devotion, in this case incidents from the life and death of Christ, to its audience, the reader or viewer. Authors thus interrupt the flow of the narrative they are recounting to exhort their readers to forms of emotional display which are, moreover, detailed for them. And it is in keeping with this development that I see a significant change in emphasis from the symbolic images of compassion of the thirteenth century, and the *Andachtsbilder* of the fourteenth, to certain of the best-known works of fifteenth-century Flemish painting. The *Andachtsbilder*, again, are images whose subjects were fashioned to stimulate appropriate emotional responses in viewers. But do we not see a range of those responses detailed for us in such works as Roger van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* in the Prado (fig. 2)?

In calling special attention to this aspect of Roger's panel, I do not mean to discount the liturgical content of the work, represented by the conspicuous display of the elevated body of Christ, which is intended to recall and echo the elevation of the *Corpus Domini*, or host, in the

disciplinas et flagellationes, vel cetera similia pietatis officia continuando, donec egrediantur aquae lacrymarum largissimae.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pars 11, cap. 60 (p. 623): “Quid ergo tu faceres si haec videres? Numquid non te projiceres super ipsum Dominum, dicens: Nolite jam, nolite facere tantum malum Domino meo; ecce me, facite mihi, ecce percutite me... et compatere sibi, quia pro te omnia sustinet, jugiterque lacrymas fundens, speciosissimam faciem ejus, quam illi impudenter suis illiniunt sputis, tu reverenter tuis lava lacrymis. Quis enim audiens, vel mente pertractans... poterit se continere a lacrymis?”



4 Roger van der Weyden, *Diptych of the Crucifixion*. Philadelphia, Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection

masses that took place before Roger's altarpiece.¹⁵ Nor do I ignore Otto von Simson's classic study of Roger's panel, in which he identified the like poses of the Virgin and Christ as illustrations of the medieval doctrine of *compassio*.¹⁶ But liturgical and doctrinal content account neither for the compelling force of Roger's *Descent* nor for the status it acquired as the single most influential work of fifteenth-century Flemish art. Rather, I would attribute both to Roger's extraordinary success in visualizing the powerful and varied responses of representative figures to a subject central not only to Church doctrine, but also to contemporary devotional concerns. And Roger is not the only major Flemish panel painter who accorded powerful emotional response such unprecedented prominence in the representation of traditional Christian subjects, and detailed it so insistently, for Hugo van der Goes's panel of the *Death of the Virgin* is similarly dominated by figures shown in various states of

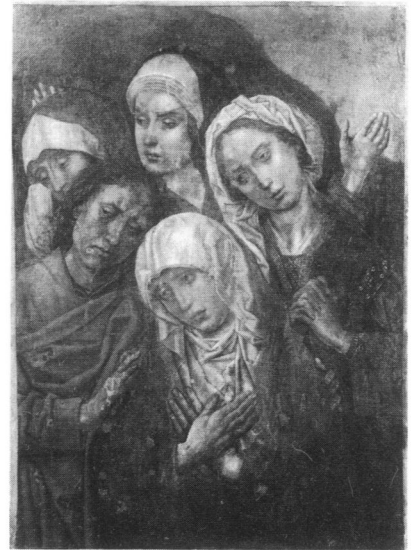
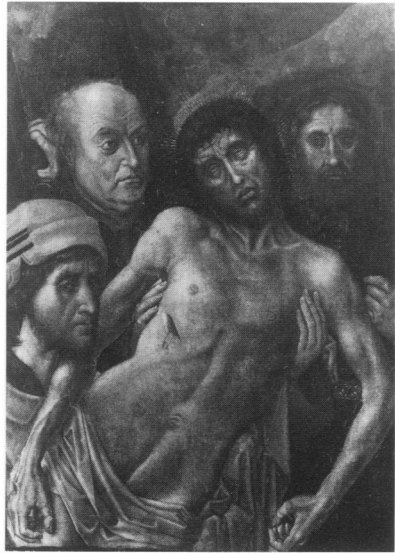
reactive grief (fig. 3). Essential to this interpretation is the observation that both artists depart from the generalized tradition, traceable through much of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, of simply augmenting the dramatic content and character of their works. For in contrast to that development, which for the most part took place in the context of a growing elaboration of the narrative and scenic complexity of works of art, in these works both artists forgo narrative detail and spatial coherence in favor of compositions dominated by figures who fill and even crowd the picture planes in conspicuous displays of reactive emotionality. Just as Ludolph of Saxony and other devotional authors of the period place new emphasis upon addressing their audience and instructing them about appropriate displays of emotion, so Roger and Hugo provide their viewers with figures who visualize the kinds of responses they should cultivate and experience.

¹⁵ See Barbara G. Lane, *The altar and the altarpiece: sacramental themes in early Netherlandish painting*, New York 1984, pp. 79–105, esp. pp. 90–92, and for fuller background, Berndt Schällicke, *Die Ikonographie der monumentalen Kreuzabnahmegruppen des Mittelalters in*

Spanien (diss.), Berlin (Freie Universität) 1975, pp. 103–42.

¹⁶ Otto G. von Simson, "Compassio and co-redemptio in Roger van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*," *Art Bulletin* 35 (1953), pp. 9–16.

5 Hugo van der Goes, *Diptych of the Descent from the Cross*. New York, Wildenstein Collection (*Descent*) and Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz (*Mourning figures*)



We may further discern the intentions of Roger and Hugo by looking at diptychs painted by each: Roger's of the *Crucifixion* in Philadelphia (fig. 4) and Hugo's of the *Deposition*, now divided between the Wildenstein Collection and Berlin (fig. 5). Once again both artists de-emphasize narrative concerns, Roger by the use of abstract objects such as the ahistorical walls and brilliant cloths which frame his figures and Hugo by the half-length, close-up format and his almost spaceless realm. More significantly, in these remarkable works the artists separate pictorial elements normally united in one composition, devoting one section to the traditional focus of the event, Christ on the Cross or the Deposition, and giving equal pictorial weight to representations only of reacting figures. In both diptychs, in other words, reactive emotional experience is given parity with its historical stimulus.

The achievement of such works—in which I include

17 In his comments on my paper Craig Harbison points to other works by Roger van der Weyden where donors are represented passively praying, and raises appropriate questions concerning differences between lay and clerical (or monastic) patronage and their probable relationship to the function of images to provoke emotional responses. Certainly Roger and Hugo do not seek to evoke such responses in all their works, many of which differ profoundly in their appearance and presumed function. As to differences between lay and monastic expectations, it is difficult to be categorical about this subject in a period when the boundaries between the two spheres were increasingly blurred (I have commented on this elsewhere; see Marrow, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 26–27), and when artists worked in or for both milieus.

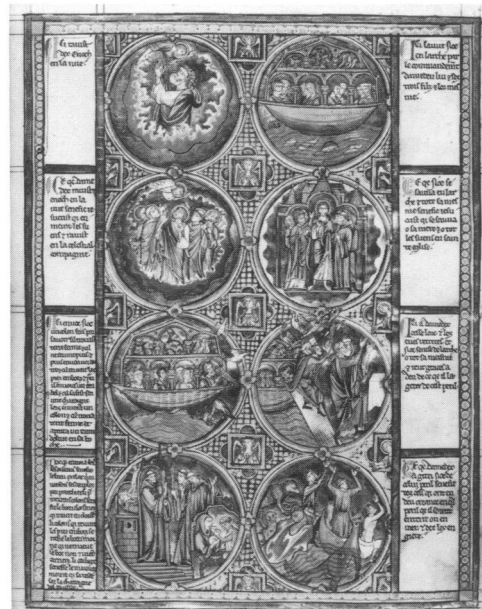
not only the diptychs but also Roger's *Descent* and Hugo's *Death of the Virgin*—is to have surpassed the symbolic images of compassion of the thirteenth century, and the *Andachtsbilder* of the fourteenth, both of which espoused compassion only conceptually or by inference, by visualizing and thus explicitly extolling diverse forms of emotional response to traditional Christian subjects. No less than the exhortations of contemporary devotional authors, these images were designed to provoke and guide viewers to the desired aims of the contemplation of sacred subject matter: that is, to emotional experience not only felt but also displayed. The images, in other words, insist upon articulating both the cause and the desired effects of the viewers' responses.¹⁷

In addition to making new claims for the role of the art work in stimulating and directing viewers' emotional responses, northern artists of the late middle ages trans-

As is well known, Hugo entered a monastery himself, and one of his works I have discussed, the *Death of the Virgin*, has a known monastic provenance (see Susan Koslow, "The impact of Hugo van der Goes' mental illness and late-medieval religious attitudes on the *Death of the Virgin*," *Healing and history: essays for George Rosen*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg, New York 1979, pp. 27–50). Similarly, Roger's *Crucifixion diptych* in Philadelphia and the related *Crucifixion* in the Escorial (which has a known monastic provenance), have been convincingly related to monastic precedents and purposes by Penny Howell Jolly, "Rogier van der Weyden's Escorial and Philadelphia *Crucifixions* and their relation to Fra Angelico at San Marco," *Oud Holland* 95 (1981), pp. 113–26.

formed fundamentally the capacity of their works to implicate the beholder in the fictive world of their images in quite different ways. All too frequently forgotten—or at any rate underestimated—is the seemingly obvious fact that when artists began to endow their images with the pretense of representing figures and events in terms compatible in new ways with the inhabited world, among other things, by lavishing attention upon the materiality of people and objects and depicting both in light-filled, spatially coherent contexts, they implicitly made new claims for the relation of their works to the visual experiences of their beholders. And what other transformation, after all, is more noteworthy in our period than the replacement of a fundamentally medieval conception of understanding and representing the world—that is, one based on conceptually determined, schematic conventions of representation (fig. 6)—by a pictorial or illusionistic mode of representation, which corresponds to our notion of a modern or at least a post-medieval representation of the world?

The case can be made that many of the northern artists who were at the forefront of defining new illusionistic capacities for their images, did so with the express intention of implicating viewers in the experience of their images in new ways. Such is the case, for example, in the work which is generally identified as the first notable departure from the medieval conception of the painted image in northern Europe, the *Book of Hours* of *Jeanne d'Evreux*, Queen of France, painted in Paris by Jean Pucelle between 1325 and 1328. As is well known, it was in the *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux* that Pucelle introduced coherent and measurable spatial settings into the painting of northern Europe, not only, for that matter, abandoning schematic indications of setting for three-dimensional ones, but also eliminating the sacral gold backgrounds of earlier religious art and replacing its richly painted and insubstantial figures with weighty ones modeled in light and dark gray washes that suggest their physical substance (fig. 7).¹⁸ I should like to propose that in departing so sharply from the existing conventions of high medieval art, Pucelle was fully aware of the new character of his art, and of its novel implications for its viewers. To appreciate this, we have only to look



6 *Scenes of Enoch and Noah with commentaries*, page from a thirteenth-century *Bible moralisée*. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2554, fol. 3r

back in time to a characteristic example of High Gothic illumination (fig. 6), in which it will be seen that the governing principle of the layout and treatment of the page is that both text and image respect or adhere to the given plane of the page; and then to look forward in time to a miniature of the early fifteenth century (fig. 11), in which it will be seen that artists now conceive of their images as fictive views beyond or behind the plane of the page, as if seen through a window. Now, where does Pucelle stand in relation to these two fundamentally different types of image, the one medieval and the other modern? Surprisingly, his images cannot be seen either as adhering to the plane of the page or as piercing it. Instead of accepting that plane as the all-determining point of reference, he denies it altogether, treating it as a void or as non-existent, and having his figures and space-defining structures simply float in space. Pucelle, in other words, invented a new mode of representation: knowing that weighty and space-defining figures and

¹⁸ For the role of Italian pictorial and sculptural models in these developments see Stanley H. Ferber, "Jean Pucelle and Giovanni Pisano," *Art Bulletin* 66 (1984), pp. 65-72.



7 Jean Pucelle, *A miracle of St Louis*. *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*. New York, Metropolitan Museum, The Cloisters, inv. nr. 54.1.2., fol. 102v

structures were incompatible with the existing conventions of manuscript painting, he created a new, internally coherent universe of floating forms. This was self-conscious, for Pucelle engages in the conceit of having figures carry or hold up his structures, as if to proclaim that what is solid, and therefore real, must be supported. Pucelle thus comments visually on the relationship of his images to the laws of the physical world. Indeed, in some of his images, the figures supporting the structures and frames are also shown in the act of looking at the religious figures and events portrayed therein (figs. 8, 9). Granted, this has not yet reached the level of illusionistic conceit that we see in an early sixteenth-century Flemish manuscript (fig. 10),¹⁹ where two bystanders in the lower framing landscape at the right are shown observing the *Visitation*, as if on the large screen of a drive-in movie; but Pucelle, no less than the later illuminator, uses marginal figures who are iconographically extrinsic to the events to make the action of viewing his religious

¹⁹ From the Da Costa Hours of ca. 1515–20, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 399, fol. 140v. See *The Pierpont Morgan Library: exhibition of illuminated manuscripts held at the New York Public Library*, New York 1933, pp. 62–63, nr. 132.



8 Jean Pucelle, *The Annunciation*. *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*. New York, Metropolitan Museum, The Cloisters, inv. nr. 54.1.2., fol. 16r



9 Jean Pucelle, *Maiestas Domini*. *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*. New York, Metropolitan Museum, The Cloisters, inv. nr. 54.1.2., fol. 182v

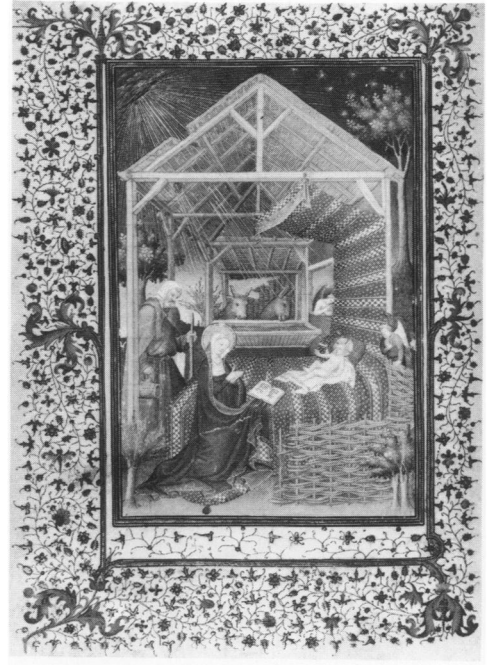


10 *The Visitation*. *Da Costa Hours*. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 399, fol. 140v

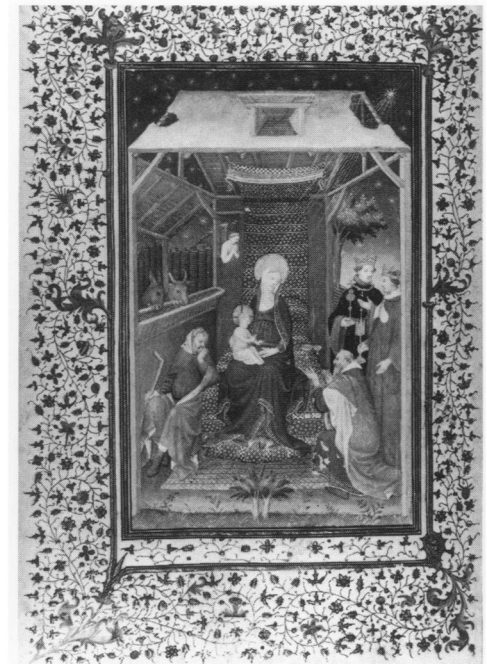
figures a part of what he represents, thereby reiterating the notion that his art is about seeing what is real, while also posing the question of the obligations of beholders to his images.

By the early fifteenth century artists such as the Boucicaut Master had moved far beyond Pucelle in the representation of sacred figures and events in settings of astonishing space and detail. This artist too, however, calls attention to the new character of his art while commenting discerningly on its implications for viewers. Often mentioned, but never, in my judgment, adequately interpreted, are the miniatures of the *Nativity* (fig. 11) and the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Boucicaut Hours (fig. 12), where the master depicts two events in the same setting, but as seen from different angles. There should be no mistaking the cause or effect of this alteration of the angle from which the shed and its occupants are seen: it is to manipulate the beholder's point of view.²⁰ Through this device the Boucicaut Master not only

²⁰ The change of viewpoint also evokes appropriate regal associations in the *Adoration of the Magi* by creating a centralized and hieratic composition.



11-12 Boucicaut Master, *The Nativity* and *The Adoration of the Magi*. *Boucicaut Hours*. Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André, ms. 2, fol. 73v, 83v



comments in a new manner upon the relation of his scenes to the laws of the physical world, but he also forces the viewer to an equally important acknowledgment of his relationship to the figures and events in terms of his own experience of time and space.

Pictorial illusionism reached its highest development in Flemish painting in the art of Jan van Eyck. So full are his explorations of pictorial illusionism, and so full also are they of self-conscious visual commentaries,²¹ that an adequate, not to say a representative, treatment of this topic could easily constitute the subject of an independent book. Contemplating the seeming veracity of what van Eyck represents, in which brushstrokes and other signs of the painter's activity are virtually imperceptible, it is difficult not to suspect that he attempted the ultimate conceit of illusionistic art: namely, to eradicate or deny the distinction between the painted image and that which it represents; to claim that what we see is not a fictive image but the real subject of the painter's brush. One need not pursue that issue very far to appreciate its implications for the viewers of van Eyck's paintings of sacred subjects, and in particular, its power to affect their consciousness. In the present context, however, I will focus my discussion on aspects of the *Arnolfini portrait* in London (fig. 13). In this work we need not speculate upon the relation of the image to the real visual world of the beholder. For van Eyck goes beyond questions of merely implying the world in front of his image, by actually representing it through a reflection in the centrally placed mirror on the rear wall of the interior (fig. 14). In miniature, he shows us the same room and figures seen from the rear, adding details not otherwise present in the image, but which must be understood as existing in front of the picture plane, namely a doorway to the room, in which two figures may be discerned. The game continues, for the elegant inscription above the mirror, *Johannes de Eyck fuit hic*—or “Jan van Eyck was here”—can be taken to mean that he was here in the mirror, that is, in front of his painting.

The importance I attach to these examples by Pucelle, the Boucicaut Master and van Eyck is twofold. I note first of all the compelling parallels between their artistic innovations and the communication of its implications. It is no coincidence that in some of the very works which define new pictorial and illusionistic possibilities for art, three of the pioneers in this development allude visually to the implications of their new art for its beholders.



13 Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini portrait*. London, National Gallery



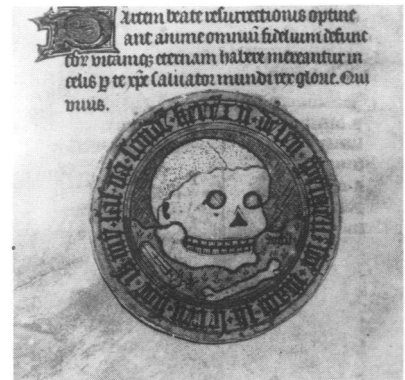
14 Detail of fig. 13

21 For example, the suggestions of reflections from the “back” of the illusionistically represented statues in the Lugano *Annunciation*, or the visual conceit of depicting a “stone” dove in flight in this work and the outer panels of the *Dresden triptych*. See Denis Coekelberghs, “Les grisailles et le trompe l’oeil dans l’oeuvre de Van Eyck et de Van der Weyden,” *Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire de l’art offerts au professeur Jacques Lavalleye*, Louvain 1970, pp. 21–34.



15 Skull reflected in a mirror ('Speculum conscientie'). Hours of Juana la Loca. London, British Library, Add. ms. 18852, fol. 15r

16 Skull reflected in a mirror, engraving pasted into a Book of Hours. Dublin, Trinity College, ms. 103, fol. 167v



17 Dead figure contemplating himself in a mirror, 1484. Miniature from a Book of Hours. Brussels, private collection, fol. 98r

Die best Practica ich mein-rufft an alle menschē gemein.



Angel^o der böß Engel: Angel^o der güet Engel
Sich diesen Spiegel frölich an. O mensch betrachte zu aller frist
du schönes roß du stolzer mā. Also würdestu als diß ding ist.
Sich wie ein du bist geschaffē. Nier ker dich an deß rüßels rot
folg thynē rot vñ nit dē pfaffē. Sin spigel bringe der felen dor
Zier dich mit cleid vñ ouch am. So du wenst am bestē sin- hin
ds dir dy welt amüerig blib- lit. Dan komr d dor vñ zuck dich
wo du fröud findest die behab. Wer diesen spiegel schouet eben
wān du alt würest so laß dā ab. Der mider sind vñ fide ds lebē
hab fröud vñ lust in diser zyt. Do würdt er got allzit schowē
Diß ds die welt dir verlob got. O mensch des maßt du dich fröwe
hab kein gebeuckē an den dot. Deschoru den gerner füllrich.
Dyß güet ding ds ist min rot. us du do sinst dē würestu glich
Noch er vñ güet soistu streben. Veracht die weltlich vspickent.
Du würest noch lange jor lebē. So würdt bin sel zu got bereit
Loß dir den dot nir bilden in. Dā mag bin herrs in fröud stē
Du köst noch wol so es müß. Vnd gib dir got deß hynēls
syn. kron.

18 The devil's and the angel's mirrors, woodcut

Equally important, in my judgment, are the two kinds of consciousness invoked by these images. On the one hand, by calling attention to the character and the implications of their images, each of these artists openly acknowledges the capacity of his works of art to embody or even proclaim dimensions of artistic self-consciousness: all three artists, to express it otherwise, seem to call attention to their ability to manipulate the experiences of their beholders. But alongside these manifestations of artistic self-consciousness—and in my opinion ultimately of much greater significance—is the corollary capacity of these images to engage the consciousness of their beholders in new ways; that is, to proclaim that the viewer must engage works of art in terms that implicate him experientially, not just conceptually, in the world of the image and its meaning.

In coming full circle to meaning, I reach the final topic I should like to consider in this context, which is the link between consciousness and artistic meaning. For just as the cultivation in the late middle ages of particular kinds of consciousness lay at the core of most contemporary programs of spiritual growth, so many northern artists came to employ techniques of invoking their viewers' consciousness as a device to convey specific spiritual meanings.

As an example of this phenomenon I can refer to a fifteenth-century pictorial type which I published just a few years ago, consisting of representations of a skull in a mirror (figs. 15, 16).²² The iconography is not entirely novel, for dead figures and skulls are frequently represented with mirrors in late medieval art. These range from corpses shown staring into mirrors, as if contemplating their deceased state (fig. 17), to scenes of the living viewing mirrors which reflect skulls. At the left side of a German woodcut of about 1500 that has been referred to as *The devil's and the angel's mirrors* (fig. 18), a demon points to a blank mirror that he holds up before two young lovers, and encourages them to behold themselves in the mirror and to enjoy the worldly pleasures of youth. At the right side of the woodcut, in contrast, an angel points to a mirror that reflects the image of a skull, and urges a group of three older figures to prepare themselves for God and for his heavenly reward. This moralizing representation illustrates the antithesis between sinful and prudent self-reflection. A variant of this iconography is the masterful *Portrait of the artist Hans*



19 Laux Furtenagel, *Portrait of the artist Hans Burgkmair and his wife Anna*, 1529. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Burgkmair and his wife Anna, dated 1529, where we see Burgkmair's wife holding a mirror that shows a reflection of two skulls (fig. 19). The mirror frame is inscribed "O Death" at the top, and "Recognize yourself" on the forward edge, but such labels are essentially redundant in this visually direct and affecting *memento mori*, in which the dispirited expressions of the couple, directed out of the image toward us, simultaneously bespeak a profound melancholy in their awareness of their own mortality and seem to beseech our response.

Our images (figs. 15, 16) depart in one important way from the entire visual tradition of representations of dead figures or skulls in mirrors, that is, in their focus. For unlike all other representations of death or skulls with mirrors, in which we invariably see *other* figures, whether dead or alive, regarding themselves, here there

22 For all the examples cited in this discussion, as well as additional related works, see James H. Marrow, "In desen speigell: a new form of *memento mori* in fifteenth-century Netherlandish art," *Essays in Northern European art presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on his sixtieth birthday*, Doornspijk 1983, pp. 154–63.



20 Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ carrying the Cross*. Madrid, Palacio Real



21 Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ crowned with thorns*. London, National Gallery

are no “other” figures: the mirrors, with their images of the skull directly face the viewer, who is made to see and imagine *himself* as dead. Indeed, in this regard these representations depart also from the entire known tradition of representations of death in medieval art, even those without mirrors. For example, in such subjects as the *Dance of death*, the *Triumph of death*, or the *Ars moriendi*, it is invariably other figures whom we see dying or claimed by death. The distinction even holds for the many other representations of skulls in the art of this period, all of which can also be understood as references to the death of others. In brief, prior to the invention of our pictorial type, death was always presented to viewers through the intermediary of other figures, others’ deaths; in ours, in contrast, the image and the experience are turned on the viewer.

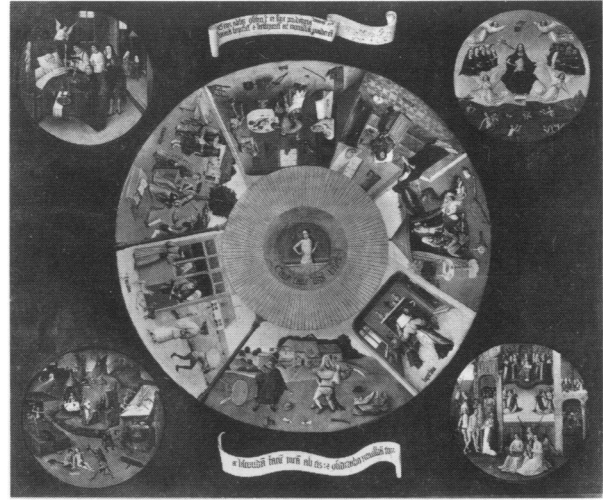
That experience, of course, is the viewer’s consciousness of his own mortality. It is evoked in much the same way that Jan van Eyck called upon the consciousness of beholders of the *Arnolfini portrait* by having the mirror in his panel reflect objects and figures that must be understood as occupying the real space in front of the image. For the artists who fashioned our representations

of a skull in a mirror, just as for van Eyck, the work of art now makes overt claims upon that which is external to it, that is on the world of the beholder, including the beholder himself. Reduced to the essentials of mirrored reflections facing the beholder, these images define themselves as vehicles of self-consciousness—a notion specified, one should not fail to remark, by the encircling title of the miniature in the *Hours of Juana la loca* (fig. 15), *Speculum consciencie*, or mirror of conscience. The meaning of these images is thus nothing more nor less than the consciousness they provoke—in this case, the awareness of one’s own mortality.

The example of the skull in a mirror is no isolated case. Other instances in which the meaning of works of art are defined and communicated through evocations of the consciousness of beholders can be found in paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. Not content merely to represent the immutable verities of Christian doctrine, Bosch incorporated overt appeals to the spectator in some of his images by establishing a kind of visual dialogue between their protagonists and the beholder. Noteworthy examples include some of Bosch’s depictions of events from the Passion, in which Christ is shown ignoring the fig-



22 Hieronymus Bosch, *St Anthony triptych*, central panel. Lisbon, Museu de Arte Antiga



23 Hieronymus Bosch, *The seven deadly sins and the four last things*. Madrid, Prado

ures and actions around him to fix the viewer in his gaze (figs. 20–21).²³ Such gazes not only address the viewer but also function as a kind of admonition, demanding a suitable response. By disrupting the narrative coherence of these images in order to address the viewer from within them, Bosch, it seems to me, fashions a kind of visual analogue to the interjections to his readers that we encountered in such works as Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*. Not to push the analogy too far, one can nonetheless imagine Bosch saying, through Christ, much as Ludolph did in the passage I cited earlier: "What would you *do* if you saw this? Would you not cast yourself upon our Lord, saying 'Do not hurt him so; behold, here am I, strike *me* instead?'"²⁴ And Bosch similarly addresses the viewer in the central panel of the *St Anthony triptych* in Lisbon (fig. 22). There, in the midst of the visual pandemonium of the hermit saint's temptations, he shows Anthony gazing resolutely out of the image and simultaneously directing one's attention, in a mixed gesture of benediction and pointing, to the figures of Christ and the crucifix in a recess of the ruined building in the right middleground.

23 For the following see Walter S. Gibson, "Imitatio Christi: the Passion scenes of Hieronymus Bosch," *Simiolus* 6 (1972/73), pp. 83–93.

24 See note 14. Bosch is not unique in thus addressing the viewer. To cite only one other example, see Geertgen tot Sint Jan's affecting

To complete this group of distinctive works by Bosch, I cite the well-known panel of the *Seven deadly sins* in Madrid (fig. 23).²⁵ The address to the viewer is three-fold in this panel, conveyed by the gaze of the Man of Sorrows at its center, by the admonition inscribed below him, "Beware, beware, the Lord sees," and by the image of the central roundel of the panel, which is of an all-seeing eye confronting the beholder. Never before, to my knowledge, had the situations of the observed in art and its observer been so explicitly reversed.

Common to all of these representations are the overt claims they make upon the viewer's consciousness. In establishing a kind of visual dialogue between image and viewer, Bosch does much more than merely imply a spatial or physical connection between the two. By reversing the traditional roles of spectator and image, that is, by forcing his viewers to experience the consciousness that arises from being observed by protagonists in the images (not to mention, in the Madrid panel, by the image itself), Bosch seeks to use that consciousness not only to evoke but also to direct his viewers' responses. Far from just conveying information these images openly seek to

panel of the *Man of Sorrows* in Utrecht, Rijksmuseum het Catharijneconvent, reproduced by Panofsky, op. cit. (note 1), fig. 449.

25 See Walter S. Gibson, "Hieronymus Bosch and the mirror of man: the authorship and iconography of the *Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins*," *Oud Holland* 87 (1973), pp. 205–26.



24 Hans Baldung Grien, *The holy family with St Anne and Joachim*, woodcut. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett

change the behavior of their audience.

In as much as this conference is devoted to northern art, and not just that of the Netherlands, I will conclude these considerations by reference to a German artist, Hans Baldung Grien. Even more than Hieronymus Bosch, Baldung manipulates image-and-viewer relationships in his works as a means of evoking diverse levels of consciousness and meaning. I begin with an ostensibly conventional image, Baldung's woodcut of the *Holy Family with St Anne and Joachim* (fig. 24).²⁶ In detail upon detail, Baldung calls the beholder's attention to the inherent artifice of the situation of his representation: by having Joseph and Joachim strike formal poses; by suggesting discomfort or unease on the face of St Anne and that of her husband; and by having Joachim, Anne and the Christ Child all look outward, as if aware of the existence of the audience. Lest these messages be

missed, Baldung reiterates these ideas with the rabbits in the foreground: one at the left strikes a formal pose, holding the tablet with the artist's monogram, while another at his right shyly peeks out at the viewer while covering part of his face with his paws. The effect of all these devices is to play upon the notions of image and viewer, of observer and observed, in ways that create a state of psychological tension shared equally by the figures portrayed in the work of art and those who observe it. By calling attention to the roles of each as observer and observed, Baldung manages to evoke states of self-consciousness on both sides, as it were, of the image.

If Baldung is almost playful in exploiting image-viewer inter-relationships in his woodcut of the *Holy Family with St Anne and Joachim*, he employs this device with greater focus and bite (no pun intended) in many of his representations of the Fall of Man. In 1981, writing about Baldung's 1511 chiaroscuro woodcut of the *Fall* (fig. 25), I remarked upon the status of this print as the first overtly erotic representation of the Fall in western art, and upon some of the other ways in which Baldung redefines the action and meaning of the event.²⁷ In contradistinction to all previous representations of the Fall, which, like Albrecht Dürer's (fig. 26), are self-contained narratives, Baldung refocuses the action and meaning of this scene on the viewer. Adam, already fallen, is placed behind Eve, who looks directly out of the image, addressing her coy, seductive smile to the spectator, and presenting him with the apple. The effect, I wrote, was to make the viewer the object of Eve's seductive sensuality; to show her no longer as merely a historical figure who had seduced Adam at some remote point in time, but as an active and omnipresent carnal force that elicits our response now and forever. In an article on Baldung just published in the Spring 1985 issue of *Representations*, Joseph Koerner has reinterpreted this and other depictions of the Fall by Baldung in ways that bring out much more fully and with unprecedented insight the real thrust and meaning of his images.²⁸ Baldung, as Koerner notes, does not simply address the offer of the Fall to the beholder of his images. Rather, he already shows him as its victim by evoking his consciousness of the very

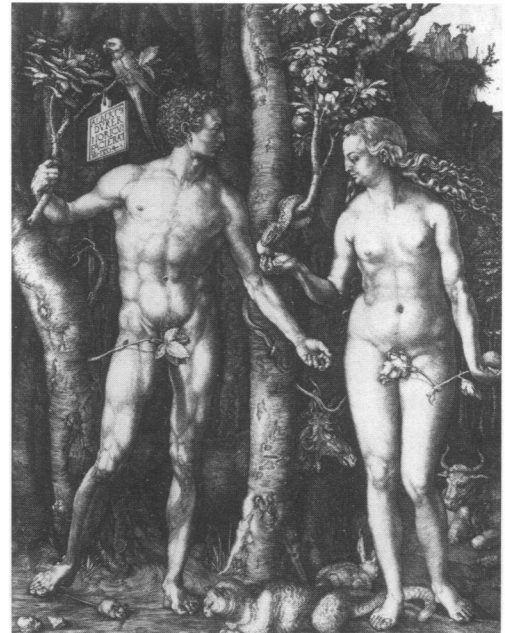
26 James H. Marrow and Alan Shestack (eds.), *Hans Baldung Grien: prints and drawings*, Washington & New Haven 1981, pp. 124-28, nr. 20.

27 Ibid., pp. 120-23, nr. 19.

28 Koerner, op. cit. (note 4).



25 Hans Baldung Grien, *The fall of man*, 1511, chiaroscuro woodcut. Washington, National Gallery of Art



26 Albrecht Dürer, *The fall of man*, 1504, engraving. Washington, National Gallery of Art

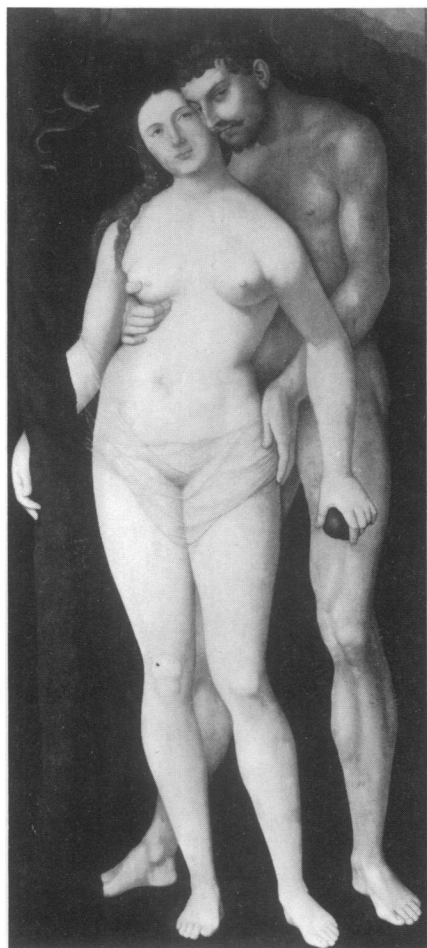
knowledge of sin which had been precipitated by Adam and Eve's transgression. By forcing the viewer to acknowledge the character of Eve's offer in this depiction, and to confront its relationship to himself, Baldung inculcates in him a personal consciousness of the fallen state which is the lot of post-lapsarian man. Baldung's panel of the *Fall* in Lugano (fig. 27) and a drawing after a lost work by the artist in Coburg (fig. 28) make the same point even more trenchantly.²⁹ For in directing the leers of a fondling, satyr-like Adam or a sexually aroused Eve out of these images at the beholder, Baldung has the viewer share in the wickedness of the event, thereby making him privy to the feelings and knowledge that betoken his own fallen state. When, therefore, Koerner characterizes these images as thematizing "fallen vision,"³⁰ he correctly calls attention not only to the manner in which Baldung refocuses the action and meaning of the Fall upon the spectator, but also on Baldung's achievement in locating both—the significant action

and the meaning—within the spectator's consciousness. The state of consciousness that Baldung elicits in the beholders of these representations of the Fall is at once the result of the event he depicts and, for Baldung, its true meaning.

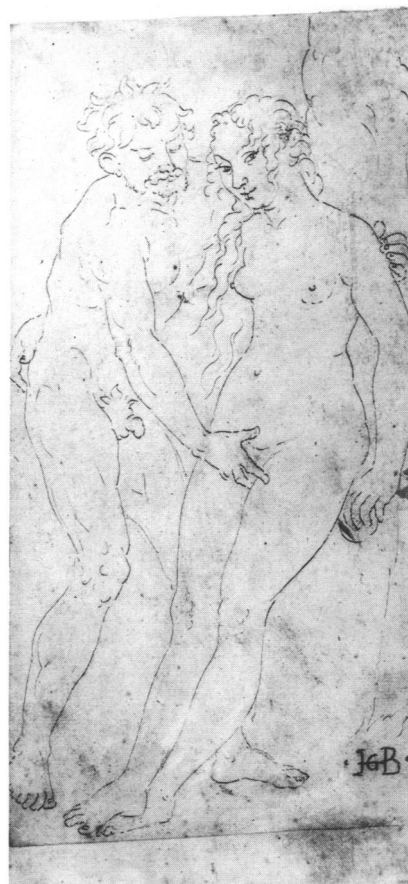
In my introductory comments, I spoke repeatedly about the concerns of northern artists of our period, and—perhaps brashly—about their "most noteworthy achievements." Central to any consideration of such issues, of course, are our assessments of the essential innovations of specific artists and of the forces which shaped and directed them. The questions embodied in such considerations are weighty ones. Can we, in fact, speak with any assurance about what it is that artists set out to accomplish or change? About the thresholds they crossed? And about the ways in which they redefined the functions of art? Questions of this magnitude obviously do not lend themselves to simple responses, far less to

²⁹ Ibid., fig. 12 (panel in Lugano), and for the copy drawing in Coburg, Carl Koch, *Die Zeichnungen Hans Baldung Griens*, Berlin 1941, p. 202, nr. A 27.

³⁰ Koerner, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 76, 82-85.



27 Hans Baldung Grien, *The fall of man*.
Castagnola-Lugano, Thyssen Collection



28 Copy after Hans Baldung Grien, *The fall of man*, drawing. Coburg, Kunstsammlungen Veste Coburg

“solutions.” In the course of confronting them, however, we can do no better than try out different responses and see where they lead.

My own estimation is that we have pretty much played out the issue of the use of symbols or the conveyance of “symbolic meaning” as central determinants of artistic innovation in northern art of our period. While we may trust that sensitive and sympathetic investigators will continue to decipher the represented “things” in the works we study, and thereby recover some more of their forgotten contents, I remain convinced that the question of the symbolic content of works of art pertains more to older, medieval concerns

than to the emerging ones that motivated significant artistic change in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In place of concerns with *what* northern art of this period means, I find, as Koerner has argued in his study of Baldung, compelling reasons to refocus our attention on *how* it means: that is, once again, how it structures experience and interpretation. Modern-sounding though they may be, I believe that these concerns are demonstrable in many of the works of art themselves—not coincidentally, in purest or most purposeful form in the works of artists who seem to have led the way in defining new possibilities for the medium.

For the purposes of this paper I have called attention

above all to the function of works of art in eliciting and structuring the responses of beholders and in stimulating new states of consciousness. These tasks, I believe, were at the forefront of artistic invention in the north during the late middle ages, and are acknowledged as such in the works themselves. If emotional response—at least that of compassion—is symbolized in thirteenth-century northern art (fig. 1), or espoused primarily by implication from the condensed subjects of fourteenth-century *Andachtsbilder*, it is elaborately visualized or detailed by some fifteenth-century Flemish painters (figs. 2, 3), who, moreover, overtly identify its new importance in some of their works by giving it parity or equal pictorial weight with its historical stimulus (figs. 4, 5).

New demands are made on the consciousness of beholders when Pucelle reveals to the spectator that his art operates under new rules (fig. 7), and is about seeing what is real (figs. 8, 9); when the Boucicaut Master forces him to acknowledge his own position in space in relation to what he sees (figs. 11, 12); and when van Eyck incorporates into his image a claim to have represented parts of the real world in front of it (figs. 13, 14). And the consciousness of the beholder becomes both subject and meaning in representations of a skull in a mirror, which faces the observer (figs. 15, 16); in addresses made to him by protagonists in Bosch's paintings (figs. 20, 22), or by the painting itself (fig. 23), all of which now seek to direct his responses and change his behavior; and in many of the works of Hans Baldung Grien, above all his representations of the *Fall of man* (figs. 25, 27, 28), which thematize the fallen vision of the spectator.

Common to all the examples I have discussed is a new sense of the meaning of a work of art, one in which artists call into play the role of the spectator in constituting art's meaning. No longer defined or definable merely by what is represented, meaning is now vested also in effects which are overtly cultivated in the beholder. And this concern—one of the major new interests to come to the fore at this time, and to be explored, albeit in different forms, by virtually all of the dominant artistic personalities in the north—has its own evolution, progressing from the relatively subtle explorations of Pucelle and the Boucicaut Master, to the more probing and elaborate

ones of van Eyck and Bosch. Paralleling and reinforcing these developments was a significant rise in artistic self-consciousness, a product both of the growing recognition by artists of their ability to manipulate the experiences of their audience and of their changing social status. By van Eyck's time we thus find artists exploring the potential of illusionism and other techniques of enhancing image-viewer inter-relationships to express meaning in ways which have, to my knowledge, no direct analogies in contemporary texts about art. The art of Hans Baldung Grien seems to me to show aspects of these concerns—particularly those based upon complex patterns of image-viewer reciprocity—in their fullest and most sophisticated development, at least before the activity of such an artist as Velasquez.

I draw two principal conclusions from the observations offered in this paper. First, it seems to me evident that the meaning of works of northern art from this period can not be adequately defined by analyses, no matter how full, of their iconographic content; for the *effects* of these works are constituent and ultimately both overt and dominant elements of their meaning. Second, we may have recourse to bodies of textual evidence to help us identify and understand some or all of the "things" represented in art of this period, or to define some of the concerns which motivated aspects of artistic change, especially during its early phases. But at just this time, artists began to structure the experience and interpretation of their works in ways for which there exists, so far as we know, no body of textual "evidence." Granted, these observations may deprive us of some of the assurance we have sometimes professed in approaching problems of artistic meaning in an almost mechanistic and quantifiable manner, for example, by indexing contents and adducing "proof-texts." But they can liberate and expand our interpretations of works of art in ways that reflect more fully the interpretive powers of artists, and amplify dramatically our concepts of the dimensions of artistic meaning.

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