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Meditation and Imagination

And we ought thus to learn to transcend with our minds from these visible things to the invisible, from the corporeal to the spiritual. For this is the purpose of the image.

Jean Gerson, *Opera omnia*, II, c.1400

18

The view of the extremely influential and well-connected theologian Jean Gerson (1363–1429), quoted above, justified images as a necessary starting point in devotional meditation, and was widely held by other theologians and writers of this period like the German Heinrich Suso (c.1295–1366) and the Netherlandish founder of the Brethren of the Common Life, Geert de Groote (1340–84). The process they advocated saw images as a first step, which would then enable the viewer to move (preferably quickly) to a mental image evoked by the physical one, and ultimately to the abstract, imageless contemplation of the divinity. This three-step ideal had been developed many years before by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) in respect to mystical contemplation, which advocated the move from meditation to speculation and then to contemplation, but without reference to the use of actual images to achieve it; Bernard in turn had based his stages ultimately on St Augustine's three stages of vision, which began with corporeal vision (the sight of our eyes), moving to spiritual vision (imagination and recollection), and then achieving intellectual vision (the contemplation of abstract entities).¹

The process of moving from meditation on a physical image to the visualization of a mental one is implicit in many images of the period, in different ways. It is made explicit, however, in two miniatures from a book of hours probably made in Ghent in c.1502–3 for James IV of Scotland (1473–1513) and his wife Margaret Tudor [197, 198].² The first miniature (and it comes, perhaps significantly, very early in the book on the verso of folio 24) of James shows him in prayer before a man-made image of the Salvator Mundi set upon an altar. That his devotions are at an early stage is indicated by the prayer book, which, although its clasps are undone, is not yet open. That James is meditating, not yet speculating, is made clearer by the contrast with the image of Margaret in prayer (which appears much later in the book on the verso of folio 243). She has opened her book and no longer sees the corporeal image on her altar (a sculpted image of the Annunciation), but instead views a non-corporeal, mental image of the Virgin and Child, its nature made clear by the aura around it. This is not Margaret receiving an actual vision of the Virgin—she was not known as a visionary and indeed was not even particularly devout, if her contemporary reputation is true: she famously requested, on her sickbed, to contemplate a parade of her best dresses instead of the crucifix. Although Margaret and James are represented in similar settings with matching accoutrements of prayer, in Margaret's image there are subtle

Detail of 200

197 Master of James IV of Scotland

James IV of Scotland presented by St James, in Prayer to an Altarpiece of the Salvator Mundi, from the Hours of James IV of Scotland, parchment, c.1502–3.

James IV of Scotland kneels, like Philip the Good in **191**, in well-appointed surroundings on a rich cushion at a fabric-covered prie-dieu and with a prayer tent set behind him. The chapel here, however, is set within a public space, but marked out as his by the coat of arms embroidered on the frontal and the imagery of the altarpiece, which includes St Andrew, the patron of Scotland.



shifts to indicate the different nature of the moment. Her figure, the altar, the prie-dieu, and the prayer tent have been moved into closer proximity to the viewer; the carpet now continues to the edge of the image and the tent now forms a framing device through which we see the event, while the choir or chapel screen through which people crowd to watch is pushed much further back, and the watching crowds, though still present, are much less clearly defined. The move from corporeal meditation to imaginative speculation, from something public and removed to something more intimate and intense, is thus cleverly expressed in the wider elements of the visual language of the two depictions.

198 Master of James IV of Scotland (?)

Margaret Tudor in Prayer to an Image of the Virgin and Child, from the Hours of James IV of Scotland, parchment, c.1502–3.

Although attributed to a different hand than **197**, the softer, more delicate technique of this miniature might be explained by the need to represent a different devotional moment to that experienced by her husband James IV. Margaret gave this book at some point to her sister Mary Tudor, inscribing it on folio 188v: 'Madame I pray your grace/Remember on me when ye loke upon thys boke/Your lofing sister/ Margaret'. Like **209**, this book of hours was thus seen as serving a wider, commemorative function.



Two extraordinary miniatures in a book of hours made around 1475 probably for Mary, Duchess of Burgundy (1457–82) explicate the processes of meditation and imagination further, and can give us some sense of how images and texts such as that used by Philip in **191** might be used and viewed.³ The first, appearing right at the beginning of the book on the verso of folio 14, straight after the calendar and facing the prologue to a prayer of the Seven Joys of the Virgin, shows the owner of the book, Mary of Burgundy, reading from a prayer book similar to that in which this image appears [**199**]. Behind her, through an open window, we see the choir of a large church: in front of the high altar is the



199 Vienna Master of Mary of Burgundy

Mary of Burgundy (?) in Prayer at a Window, from the Vienna Hours of Mary of Burgundy, parchment, c.1475.

Virgin with the naked Christ Child on her lap, approached by a group of figures who kneel in devotion; despite her different apparel, the foremost of these is presumably the same woman as sits in the foreground: Mary of Burgundy.⁴ What we see here is Mary's meditation on a prayer to the Virgin, indicated by the letter 'O' in the depicted book of hours she holds (and presumably standing for the Marian prayers *O intemerata* or *Obsecro te*, standard elements in any book of hours), through which the Virgin is then revealed to her.

This is not, however, a private revelation: the kneeling Mary is accompanied by three ladies of the court, while a male figure on the right swings a censer, and two others watch on from behind the high altar; moreover, beyond the choir, crowds of further figures can be seen pressing against the screen to glimpse this event. What is depicted here then should not be taken for a vision—it is rather a visualization, or even a visitation of Mary of Burgundy to the Virgin, not the Virgin to her, in the same way that the duchess frequently visited the powerful cult images of the Virgin at Boulogne or Halle. This is after all the choir of a large cathedral or collegiate church with a tall vaulted ambulatory; it is not a private chapel, and while it is a restricted 'audience' with the Virgin it is not a private revelation, as the watching crowds make clear.

Here, then, what we see is more likely a division between public and private devotional activity: the private practice as shown in the foreground and the public one in the view through the window. This is a distinction we have found in relation to the recorded practices of Charles V, seen depicted in the miniature of Philip the Good, and expressed in the architectural structures used for prayer examined above. What we must also remember here is that the primary user of the image was Mary herself, who would be sitting, hold-

200 Vienna Master of Mary of Burgundy

Christ Nailed to the Cross, from the Vienna Hours of Mary of Burgundy, parchment, c.1475.

Around the image seen through the window are an open box containing various *joyaux* and a prayer book, whose black chemise binding is used to keep the page open to a folio with an image of the Crucifixion. The objects shown here may be actual ones owned by the duchess: similar prayer beads are held by the young Margaret of Austria, Mary's daughter, in a portrait of her in New York; possibly they were passed down the Burgundian line.



ing this prayer book, looking at herself holding a prayer book, and at herself in prayer in a more public context. The self-imaging aspect of these depictions is all the more important when we come to the other famous image in Mary's book, the extraordinary *Nailing to the Cross*, which comes later, on the verso of folio 43, set opposite the opening of the Hours of the Cross [200].

Here again the image is seen through a framing structure—this time a more elaborate carved stone window, on which rests a brocade cushion with a set of prayer beads and other objects used in devotional practice, which are clearly in use, although their owner is missing: Mary, looking at her prayer book, would see on this page a depiction of the accoutrements of prayer she might also be currently using in reality, set around the real prayer book in which they are depicted. Through the window, what unfolds, then, is the result of Mary's practice of prayer, her visualization of part of the Passion narrative, the nailing of Christ to the cross, which she sees set in a vast panorama with a cast of thousands created by the illuminator's skill at suggesting depth, recession, scale, and the fading of forms into the distance. Mary's visualization, called up though the process of contemplating a simpler, iconic image of the Crucifixion, was an ideal of contemporary devotional practice, set out in texts like the thirteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ* by Pseudo-Bonaventura, or the fourteenth-century *Vita Christi* by the Carthusian Ludolph of Saxony, where the devotee was encouraged to imagine that they were actually present at the various stages of the Passion, witnessing the event, and envisaging how they would feel every step of the way. A fifteenth-century 'Privy of the Passion', an English adaptation of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, explains the process and purpose of such meditations very well:

201 Southern German
c.1450

The *Crucifixion*, coloured woodcut with frame printed from separate block, c.1450.

The flexibility of prints, in both their manufacture and ongoing use, made them ideal devotional images. This one was originally (or at least early in its history) pasted into the front of a manuscript which contained texts concerning the Passion and the Eucharist. The texts around the print personalize the image, as does the added colour: Christ's blood, which drips from his arms and runs down his legs, and which is so visually dominant, was not part of the print itself but was all applied by hand in a water-based paint.



Whoever desires to find comfort and spiritual joy in the passion and in the cross of our Lord Jesus needs to concentrate on them and to forget and set at naught all other business ... he who examines it continuously with deep thought and with all his heart shall find very many things stirring him to new compassion ... to achieve this state I speak of ... a man needs to concentrate the acuity of his mind and open wide the inner eye of his soul to behold this blessed passion; he needs to forget and cast behind him for the time all other occupations and business. He must make himself present in his thought as if he saw with his bodily eye all the things that happened around the cross regarding the glorious passion of our Lord Jesus, not briefly and fleetingly, but lovingly, fully, continually ...⁵

The image in Mary's prayer book takes the idea of imagination and identification one step further, as a closer look reveals: here the crosses for the thieves stand on two small mounds, but there is no third, larger mound for Christ's cross, which should be set between them. Where is Golgotha? We need to readjust our viewpoint: Christ will not be crucified in the centre of the view we are looking at but on the very spot where we are standing. The rocky ground directly below the window sill is in fact Golgotha, and the viewer (that is, Mary of Burgundy) is standing on the hill where the cross is to be erected. If Mary of Burgundy, in her visualization, is actually on Golgotha, is she taking part in the drama in a more direct way than has been supposed? Possibly, since one of the most important figures in the Passion drama at this point—the Magdalene—is missing from the scene depicted. Now it is clear why there is no praying figure of Mary of Burgundy at the window: she has imagined herself into the actual event, playing the role of the Magdalene, her namesake, and the beloved of Christ. Identification with this saint has a long, varied, and rich tradition, for both laymen and women, as well as those in holy orders, because of her special relationship with Christ, her role as redeemed



202 Hans Memling

Epiphany Triptych, oil on
Baltic oak.

sinner and as a contemplative (having spent thirty years in the desert) and she was particularly venerated by the Burgundian rulers.⁶

Visualizations like those represented in the prayer books of James IV and Mary of Burgundy were not an end in themselves; the act of contemplating Christ's Passion was an important route to salvation, and its contemplation and mental re-enactment was one of the central goals of the worshipper at this period. This is made explicit in a much more ordinary object than Mary of Burgundy's lavish prayer book, and one more representative of the type of devotional tools used by less wealthy members of society: a woodcut made around 1450 in southern Germany [201].⁷ Here, the Crucifixion, printed from two woodblocks—one for the image, one for the border (creating a frame not unlike that found in manuscripts)—was hand-coloured and then stuck onto a larger sheet (measuring 29.1 × 21 centimetres) so that texts could be carefully written around it. This speaks of active engagement with the image, as the texts recount the benefits of contemplating the Passion: one of them written across the top like a title reads 'every day that I think of Christ's suffering I will be saved' (a saying attributed to St Augustine); another (attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux) states that reflection on Christ's Passion protects against temptations and evil thoughts and evokes compassion. These are not prayers to be said in front of the image, but reminders of why contemplating the Passion, represented here by the print, was so efficacious and necessary.

Many images created at our period seem designed to incite empathy, or encourage contemplation and imagination. Deploying a range of visual strategies, artists could heighten the impression of witnessing or participating in an event from Christ's life, and not just His Passion. Hans Memling's paintings have settings that are so carefully and logically constructed that viewers can picture themselves in relationship to the images with some precision, and even mentally enter the scene, imagining themselves walking around or through the buildings represented. This is evident in an image like the Epiphany Triptych, now in the Prado, the original patron and location of which are unknown, but which was in Spain by 1500 where it was kept in the oratory of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, in Toledo [202].⁸ Here, the first scene on the left, the Nativity, is viewed from over a brick wall, just visible at the lower edge of the panel, while Joseph enters the stable through the archway supported by the column on the left, and the ox and ass survey the scene from



203 Hans Memling

The Passion of Christ, oil on Baltic oak, c.1470.

Tommaso Portinari and his wife are shown kneeling in prayer in the lower corners of this panoramic work; it does not seem to have been an altarpiece, but may have hung on a wall in a chapel. It was not among Portinari's possessions in Florence when he died in 1501; the first record of it is in Florence in 1550, in the collection of Cosimo I. It was known to painters in Bruges around 1510 and in Florence in the 1520s, which suggests it left the Netherlands at some point between these dates.

under an arched opening in the wall of the structure behind. In the central scene of the Adoration of the Magi Memling has depicted the same building but from a different, more distant, viewpoint, as befits the more formal nature of the scene of the three kings paying homage to the Christ Child. The viewers' standpoint when viewing the Nativity in the first panel is thus made explicit in the view of the stable in the second, the Adoration: we were behind the wall which is now at the back of the stable, peering through one of the arched openings in it (probably the one second from the left opposite the ox and ass). For the Adoration, the Virgin has come out of the inner part of the structure, and sits in front of the same column that we see obliquely, in front of Joseph, in the Nativity. Every architectural element matches exactly, and to achieve such consistency Memling must have had a mind which could envisage such things with ease.

Witnessing the events of Christ's life and Passion in the fullest way, imagining every small detail, as devotional literature encouraged the pious to do, may account for the increasing narrative richness and complexity of many images as the century progresses, seen at its most successful in a group of works by Memling, who developed a formula for mid-sized single panelled works packed with extensive simultaneous narrative, without a clear centrally dominant scene. His *Passion of Christ* in Turin [203], made for Tommaso Portinari, may have been intended for that patron's chapel in the church of St Jacob's in Bruges.⁹ Here Memling combines, in one visual field, twenty-three events from Christ's Passion starting with the Entry into Jerusalem on the far top left, winding through the various architectural structures, out through the city gates for the Agony in the Garden, back in through the city gates, and out again at the other side as the procession wends up the road to Calvary. Not only does Memling manage to make the whole narrative read fairly consist-



ently from left to right, but he places all his night scenes on the lower left, in the dark, with the picture getting progressively lighter as the sun rises over the hill on the upper right. He also locates the narratives so that on each side of the image, where the donors kneel, a scene unfolds which places Christ in close proximity to their view, as the object of their devotions. This work shows Memling's inventiveness and extraordinary narrative ability at its best.

A very different visual strategy, which limited all extraneous narrative detail, was also used increasingly in the late fifteenth century by many artists to heighten the sense of participation and aid contemplation. This can be seen expertly deployed in a small panel (39 × 30 centimetres) painted by Jean Hey (fl. 1494–1504), an artist praised by Jean Lemaire de Belges in *Le Plainte du Désiré* [204].¹⁰ Hey was probably of Netherlandish origin, but was active in France in the last decade of the fifteenth century and has been plausibly identified with the Master of Moulins.¹¹ His name is inscribed on the back of this work, which states, in beautiful, formal letters spaced to cover most of the panel (implying that the reverse was intended to be seen), that 'Master Jean Cueillette, aged 40 years, notary and secretary to King Charles VIII, caused this outstanding work to be produced by Master Jean Hey, the illustrious Teutonic painter, in 1494'.

In this panel Jean Hey has depicted a precise narrative moment in Christ's Passion, made clear by the inscription above His head: *Ecce Homo* (behold the man). These were Pilate's words to the Jews when he presented Christ to them following His having been scourged, bound at the wrists, crowned with thorns and given a reed as a mock sceptre, all of which are evident in the image. He was also, however, given a red cloak—not depicted but possibly alluded to in the parted red curtains that reveal the image of His body to us. By presenting Christ naked, without the cloak, the image may also have been intended to evoke images of the Man of Sorrows—that is, Christ after the Crucifixion, as He appeared in a vision to St Gregory the Great, and as depicted in a famous mosaic icon in Rome, which was much copied (an engraved version was issued by Israhel van Meckenem, 205) and which, by this period, had many indulgences attached to it. By showing this moment without any extraneous detail—no crowds shouting for Christ's death, no tormentors, no Pilate, and indeed no substantive setting, as well as with very limited colours (white, red, and green alone) all the attention is focused on the body of Christ: His expression, flesh and blood, and therefore His humanity. Placing Christ in front of the curtains (made evident from the reed He holds which juts over them), while the ropes seem to spill over the picture plane itself, makes His painted form even more tangible and immediate, heightening the sense of His presence. In many ways, this image follows the expected conventions of a royal portrait—in its format and in the revelatory curtains—and gains further meaning and impact by its allusion to that form; immediately prior to the moment depicted here Christ was mocked as 'King of the Jews' by His tormentors. Some of the most useful images for contemplation and imagination must have been those which, like this, depicted one moment in narrative time while alluding to events just past, and those still to happen.

It was not only Passion images that made use of these visual tools to engage the viewer and to convey a sense of immediacy and presence. An image of

204 Jean Hey (the Master of Moulins)

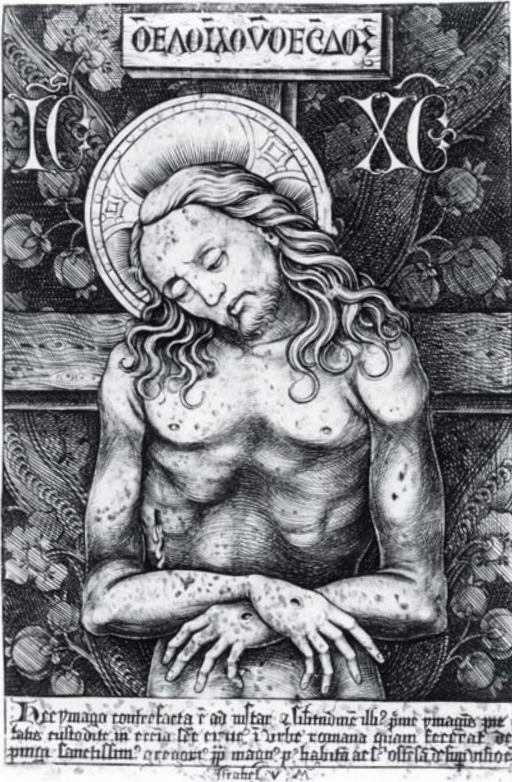
Ecce Homo, oil on wood,
dated 1494.



205 Israhel van Meckenem

Imago Pietatis, copperplate
engraving on paper,
c.1495–1500.

The inscription claims it to be a 'true copy' of the icon owned by the Carthusians of Santa Croce in Rome, an indulgenced image; the benefits of the original had been extended to copies of it by Urban IV in the mid-fourteenth century, which in part accounts for the increase in popularity of this subject (158 and 138 are versions of it). Israhel's engraving reproduces the form of the icon, as it claims, but the figure of Christ has been made more three-dimensional, and thus 'real', by what must have been his own invention: setting it against a brocade cloth. Israhel used the same device for his self-portrait [105], possibly for related reasons.



206 Follower of Simon Marmion

St Anthony Abbot, from a book of hours, possibly made for Antonine Rolin, parchment, 1490s.

Like **22**, this miniature depends in part for its effect on an absence of any border decoration. It heads a suffrage to St Anthony, one of two to this saint and the only illustrated suffrage in the manuscript; it seems probable that the book was made for someone called Antonine, possibly Antonine Rolin, son of the famous chancellor Nicolas Rolin [**207**], who was married to Marie d'Ailly (the initials A and M are found elsewhere in the manuscript).



St Anthony [**206**] from a book of hours, painted by an artist in the circle of Simon Marmion (who was instrumental in experimenting with and popularizing close-up half-length figures), shows a similar range of devices used to great effect.¹² The saint is shown as if standing behind a ledge on which he has rested his prayer book; he appears either to have been momentarily distracted from his text, or to be contemplating something he has read in it; the book itself is foreshortened so that it seems to come out into the space of the viewer—the artist uses the parapet and book here like Jean Hey used the curtains, reed and rope. As in the *Ecce Homo* image, the advantage of the half-length form in attaining a portrait-like quality, with the face and its expression the central conveyor of meaning and effect, is evident. But this put demands on an artist, who had to be very good at painting faces, indeed portraits, even if imagined; only the more talented artists adopted this visual form with success.

Verisimilitude in images designed for meditation must have been an important aid to devotional contemplation. The immediacy of works like Hey's *Ecce Homo* or the crown of thorns on the reverse of the *Small Round Pietà* [**162**] must have increased their sensual impact and potential to convey the sufferings of Christ. Devotional portrait diptychs, like the one attached to Philip the Good's fabric oratory, played particularly on this potential, not



only in the apparent reality of the sacred figures, but also in the likeness, and thus tangible presence, of the donor.

One of the most famous images of this type, although not actually in diptych form, is the panel made for the Burgundian Chancellor Nicolas Rolin (1376–1462) by Jan van Eyck around 1435, now in the Louvre [207].¹³ This work, its painted surface measuring 65 × 62.3 centimetres, is not of the intimate, very small scale of many of van Eyck's devotional paintings. However, its imagery suggests that the primary purpose of Rolin's panel, at least during Rolin's lifetime, was as an aid for meditation. Rolin is depicted kneeling in prayer before the Virgin and Child in a defiantly unreal space which is neither necessarily Rolin's on earth nor a heavenly sphere: indeed, this ambiguity is evident in the way the image dissects horizontally down the centre line of tiles in a manner suggesting that the left half is Rolin's world, the right that of Christ and the Virgin. Set behind Rolin is a town and many vineyards, the source of his wealth, while above him in the carved arches vines allude to his earthly wealth as well as to Christ's sacrifice; on the Virgin's side we have a city that is made almost entirely of churches, and as such is clearly not a real place but a symbol of the Virgin herself. The landscape may include other references or allusions; it is clearly not an actual place.

That the practice of devotional contemplation was considered in the decisions made by patron and painter about this image is indicated by the texts inscribed around the Virgin's robe, which are excerpts from the text Rolin

most probably has in front of him: the Little Office of the Virgin, the basis of the Book of Hours. One way of reading this image is therefore that, through prayer, the Virgin has materialized to Rolin, at least in the form of a visualization. The distant landscape with mountains (see the quote from Nicolas Oresme heading this chapter) which occupies the centre of the picture could have been designed with such meditational practices in mind, helping to move Rolin from contemplating an image evoked by prayer (the Virgin and Child), to the ideal of imageless devotion, that is contemplation of the abstract qualities of the divine, embodied by nature, his creation, as advocated by Jean Gerson and others.

Because this work was recorded hanging on the wall of Rolin's funerary chapel in the church of Notre-Dame-du-Châtel at Autun in the eighteenth century, it is usually presumed that it was designed for a semi-public, non-domestic purpose. However, it is painted with fictive marbling on the back, which would be a waste of time and effort if the work were to be fixed to the wall from the start, and this alone indicates that a more flexible role for this work was envisaged. Perhaps it was intended, eventually, to have a commemorative function, set near the altar and presumably in some physical relation to his tomb. The original frame, with its inscription, is now lost, but it is tempting to speculate whether the work might have subsequently functioned as an epitaph in Rolin's burial chapel. This could explain its visual complexity and ambiguity: what was needed was an image that worked as a devotional tool, showing Rolin in the act of prayer, but which might also imply Rolin's acceptance into the presence of the Virgin and Child, and thus the heavenly realm, as would be suitable for an epitaph. Van Eyck translated both these needs into one image, which could both inspire contemplation and suitably ensure the commemoration of Rolin in the setting of his funerary chapel.



208 Hans Memling

Diptych of Maartin van Nieuwenhove, oil on Baltic oak, 1487.



In a diptych painted around fifty years later, also in Bruges, for the councillor and captain of the civic guard, Maarten van Nieuwenhove (1463–1500) [208], we are left in no doubt that the Virgin has appeared to Maarten in his own space: the room in which he is shown has his patron saint and coats of arms in the stained glass window and is a recognizable reality (if not an actual one) in terms of a fifteenth-century interior in a way that Rolin's is not.¹⁴ The apparent verisimilitude of the vision—so real in fact that both he and the Virgin are reflected in the mirror of the room—must have helped the devotee to visualize such an image. What is often overlooked when we consider these works is that in most cases the principal, or at least first, user was the person portrayed in the image, so that when Maarten opened his diptych he was looking at an image of himself looking at an image of the Virgin. What this visual strategy achieves is not absolutely clear, but perhaps patrons like Maarten could more easily imagine themselves having such a visualization of the Virgin when they can see an image of it happening in front of them, like the visualization process athletes use today, picturing themselves winning to help them achieve victory. In that case such images might help speed up the process of visualization, which would be of great benefit to a man as busy as the chancellor of Burgundy, and other secular men and women with more limited time to pray than the members of religious orders like the Carthusians whose practice of prayer was an ideal to be emulated.

Although Nieuwenhove and Rolin may have been the primary viewers of their panels, such images were clearly intended for posterity too. Maarten's family members would presumably continue to use this work and would pray for Maarten in doing so—it would be hard for them to do otherwise with such a vivid likeness of him present. We have already seen how Rolin's was intended to function for posterity, next to the altar in his burial chapel in Autun, where he would be in perpetual devotion to the Virgin in the painting as well as, given the work's likely position, to the altar in the chapel, the images set on it, and the services held in front of it. We have other documented examples of images which combined portraits and devotional imagery beginning their life as private objects and changing their function on the owner's death, being moved physically to a new, more public setting. These works then had functions that became primarily commemorative. This is evident from the documentation concerning a lost panel, probably a diptych, owned by the famous composer Guillaume Dufay, which showed not himself but his friend and fellow canon, Simon le Breton. This he willed to the cathedral at Cambrai, where he specified it was to be brought out and placed on the altar in the chapel where he (Dufay) was to be buried, on feast days and on the anniversaries of his death and that of his friend Simon.¹⁵

That these often intimate and apparently private portraits of men and women in prayer before images of the Virgin or other saints (the term donor is not quite the right one here) were intended to be used in this way—as reminders for their families to pray for their them—is further explicated in two contemporary texts: the first is written in a book of hours made for a French nobleman, Macé de Prestesaille. It is placed on the folios directly following an image of Macé with his (deceased) wife and numerous children (some also deceased) in prayer before the Pietà [209]. The text indicates that the book was made 'for the memory and remembrance of the dead,



209 Anonymous French illuminator working in Tours

Macé de Prestesaille, his Wife Jeanne and their Children kneeling in Prayer to the Pietà, from the Hours of Macé de Prestesaille, parchment, dated 1475.

These are the opening folios in this book of hours: designed without text, they work like a devotional diptych. Their intention was also commemorative: turning the page reveals an inscription giving the patron's name and the date this book was made, along with a text requesting prayers for him, his dead wife, and their children (some of whom were also deceased). In order to fit in all six children (including one babe in swaddling), the artist expanded this miniature across the space usually reserved for the border.

and principally for the memory of Jeanne ... in her lifetime wife of Macé de Prestesaille, and also for the memory of their children, which Jeanne had had or had conceived during the time of their marriage'. The text goes on to ask that 'all lords, ladies, priests, clerics, secular and otherwise, who read or hear this text read, will pray for the soul of the deceased [Jeanne], and all the other deceased [her children] by each saying an Our Father and a Hail Mary'. Clearly it was envisaged that this apparently private book might have a wider audience than we might suppose and would act like a more public memorial eliciting prayers for the souls of the departed.¹⁶

The second example relates to versions of a more famous image, Jan van Eyck's *St Francis* panels, discussed in Part IV [130, 131]; two such images were owned in 1470 by Anselm Adornes, a Genoese merchant whose family had long been established in Bruges.¹⁷ On leaving for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Adornes made a will in which he specified that the two paintings were to be given to his two daughters, both of whom were in convents near Bruges, and that the daughters must then have 'portraits of me and my wife made on the little shutters which close off these little paintings. They have to be good likenesses so that they [his daughters] and other pious persons may remember us [in their prayers]'. That such reminders should be as vivid as possible is made clear in the specification that they have to be good likenesses. In both these instances, despite the small and private nature of the works, a larger audience of potential future viewers was envisaged, as we have also postulated for Chancellor Rolin's and Maartin van Nieuwenhove's paintings. All these examples show that portable works, in particular, could have varied

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Etienne Chevalier presented to the Virgin and Child by St Stephen (the 'Melun Diptych'), oil on panel, c. 1455–60.



and changing functions and be seen by a range of different viewers in different spaces, even within the lifetime of their owner.

Perhaps the most extraordinary and mysterious of all diptychs, indeed, of any work of our period, is that made for the treasurer to Charles VII of France, Etienne Chevalier [210], by the painter to the king, Jean Fouquet.¹⁸ This is a large work (each panel measures about 94 × 85 centimetres), and may well have been an altarpiece, as has recently been shown to be the case for several other diptychs of this size and form.¹⁹ We know it was in the collegiate church of Notre-Dame at Melun, where Chevalier and his wife were buried, in 1661 when it was described by Denys Godefroy as ‘two pictures closing one unto another’.²⁰ He also described the (lost) frame of Etienne Chevalier’s diptych, which was covered with blue velvet, decorated with love knots and the chancellor’s initials formed in pearls; it was also set with ‘medals of silver gilt’, one of which may be the gold and enamel self-portrait of the painter [211], though this is produced in a material in which the artist himself did not routinely work.

This diptych combines a conventional image of the donor at prayer, presented by St Stephen, with a remarkable image of the Virgin and Child, set on a throne and surrounded by blue and red cherubim and seraphim. The figure of the Virgin is what startles us and demands explanation: she is dressed as a highly fashionable queen of the period, with an ermine-lined cloak, plucked



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Self-portrait, once set around the frame of **210**, copper, dark blue enamel, and gold paint, 7.5 cm diameter with frame.

The portrait is built up using two different tones of gold laid directly over the dark blue enamel, applied in long thin strokes with a very fine brush; some of the gold was then scratched away with a very thin stylus to create further remarkable detail in the facial features, especially the eyes.

eyebrows and hair-line, and a high-waisted dress, which is undone to reveal her breast. The latter in itself is not unusual—this is a common way of depicting the Virgin and refers to her special (and thus powerful) relationship with Christ, who she breast-fed, unlike, indeed, mothers of high social status at the period.²¹ However, the child ignores the breast, and both He and the Virgin are unnaturally white. He points, to the treasurer or perhaps to the womb of the Virgin, which is visually emphasized by her belt and the unusual form of her dress, with the band of fabric rolled up around the waist. The image becomes even harder to ‘read’ when we realize that this Virgin is, as the visual evidence and long-standing tradition tell us, a portrait of the mistress of King Charles VII, Agnès Sorel, with whom Etienne Chevalier was in close contact at court. Agnès had died in 1450, under mysterious circumstances, apparently poisoned while pregnant with the king’s child (she had already borne him two girls), some time before this work was made: dendrochronology of the panel suggests a date after 1456. What this work shows, then, is something that never could be: Agnès as queen and Agnès as mother to a son, a future king, all in the guise of the Virgin. Etienne Chevalier’s Virgin may, however, be a repetition of a version already in existence: x-rays reveal that an identical Virgin and Child, to the same dimensions, was begun on a panel which was then painted over, in Fouquet’s workshop, with a portrait of Charles VII

himself (Paris, Louvre). That a pattern existed for this Virgin suggests the workshop was involved in reproducing versions of it—one that was abandoned and one that was completed for Chevalier—but neither of these is necessarily the primary one. Indeed, it seems plausible that the demand for this extraordinary image came initially from the king, who was desolate at the death of his mistress, and that Fouquet invented this Agnès-Virgin for him. Etienne, in adopting it for his diptych, is perhaps reiterating, besides his devotion to the Virgin, his very firm devotion to Agnès (he was one of the executors of her will), to her faction at court, and thus to the king. Although it might seem extraordinary to us today, the intense identification with holy and historical figures was not unfrequently made visually emphatic by giving them the features of contemporary people: Philip the Bold had himself depicted as Jeremiah on the *Well of Moses*; Charles the Bold frequently cast himself as Alexander the Great; Mary of Burgundy and Margaret of Austria had themselves depicted as the Magdalene, and perhaps most pertinent here, Charles VII was depicted as one of the Magi in another work made for Etienne Chevalier and painted by Jean Fouquet, his book of hours.²²

The complexity of the Melun Diptych, as memorial, devotional image, altarpiece, and portrait, is not in itself so extraordinary. As we have seen, the more sophisticated artists of the period produced images that worked on many levels, that could potentially fulfil several, sometimes changeable purposes, conveying meaning and encouraging identification and emotional engagement through a range of visual strategies and allusions. Painters, in particular, evoked other media and materials in their works, creating images which were both true to life and entirely unreal, rendering utterly believable objects in utterly unreal combinations and conjunctions [18, 33, 20, 37, 174, 207, 208]. Thus while painting may not have been the most materially valuable, or indeed the most highly coveted of media, it was perhaps, when expertly worked, the most effective in achieving an impact on both memory and emotions, and was to increasingly become the dominant mode of artistic production across Europe in the subsequent centuries. Its potential was something Dürer, the only northern artist of our period to write down his thoughts on the purpose of his art, clearly recognized, despite his own increasing focus on the making of prints rather than paintings. He should have the last word:

‘The art of painting is employed in the service of the church and by it the sufferings of Christ and many other profitable examples are set forth. It preserves also the likeness of men after their death. By aid of delineation in painting the measurements of the earth, the waters, and the stars have come to be understood, and many things will become known unto men thereby. The attainment of true, artistic and lovely painting is hard to come unto. It needs long time and a hand most free and practiced. Whosoever, therefore, is not gifted in this manner, let him not undertake it; for it comes by inspiration from above. The art of painting cannot be truly judged save by such as are themselves good painters; from others it is verily hidden even as a strange tongue.’²³