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INTRODUCTION

Forms of Interest

When asked to fashion the image of a metalsmith's trade, Petrus Christus provided his client or clients with a pictorial essay in the relationship of visual experience to notions of value (Fig. 1). *A Goldsmith in His Shop* depicts the interior of a fifteenth-century shop in which a young couple and a goldsmith negotiate the sale of a wedding ring. A vocational image, the painting celebrates the activities of a subgroup within the guild of Saint Eligius: gold- and silversmiths, jewelers, and other artisans with whom they were affiliated.[1] To that end, Christus arranges the attributes of those activities conspicuously about the composition. On the foreground counter are the young lovers' betrothal girdle, a set of weights, several coins, and a mirror. In these objects we find allusions to guild members' trades including money-changing, the assaying of precious metals, mirror-making, and the sale of jewelry. Other objects lining the wall on the right recall the particular activities associated with the work of gold- and silversmiths. These include finished products (pewter vessels or *presentkannen*, a buckle, brooches, a monstrance, and several rings) as well as raw materials (sharks' teeth, a heap of pearls, a stalk of coral, and blocks of crystal and porphyry) (see Fig. 3).[2] In addition, there are objects of an intermediate sort: various cut and polished stones, a goblet made from a coconut shell, and a string of translucent beads. All of this is consonant with the nature and function of vocational imagery. More remarkable is Christus's choice of sight as a means for articulating desire and, by association, value. The richly attired young woman on the left looks

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downward as she extends her arm, her sleeve rolled up to facilitate sampling the wares on offer. Her dapper companion holds her close, grasps his ornate sword, and thoughtfully eyes the costly merchandise before him. The goldsmith glances up at the young woman as he weighs the ring in which she seems most interested. Each gaze signals attention: The couple attends to their tastes and the expense these will incur, while the goldsmith attends to the couple. Thus, looking corresponds to a set of mental operations that encompass not only the optical but also the aesthetic, economic, material, and financial.

We know nothing about either the commissioning or the original use of this painting. In addition, recent research has ruled out the traditional identification of the central figure as Saint Eligius, patron saint of jewelers and metalsmiths.[3] One factor in the so-called defrocking of the saint is the removal, in 1993, of a nineteenth-century halo around the head of the goldsmith.[4] In addition, Christus's treatment of the goldsmith's face suggests the possibility of a portrait.[5] But while its historical purpose remains unclear, the painting offers us something relatively rare among scenes of patrons visiting their hired help: a survey of bourgeois aesthetic and financial interests.[6] This is due to the prominent display of items such as weights and coins and to the behavior of the protagonists. The young woman seems almost a study in acquisitiveness, from that telling gesture with her arm to her brocade dress. By contrast, her partner balances evident romantic attachment against what seems to be a degree of reluctance with respect to expense. Meanwhile, the goldsmith bides his time, arriving at a set of conclusions entirely different from those of his clients. Thus, the painting emphatically directs our attention toward the economic and social as well as material and technical ramifications of a metalworker's trade.

Christus's painting is significant both for the way it articulates desire and for the way it links that desire specifically to the vocational functions of the picture. The presence of objects in various states of completion refers to the particular skills associated with Saint Eligius' avocation broadly conceived.[7] Reflections in the *presentkannen* advertise the technique as well as the indefatigable patience that achieve such an impeccable finish, while the filigree and lettering that grace the bases, neck, and lids of those vessels speak to the steadiness and delicacy of the goldsmith's touch. Depicted raw materials function

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1. Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in His Shop*, 1449. 99.1 × 85.1 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.110).

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similarly: The rich red of the coral, the deep luster of precious stones, and the uniformity of the pearls all provide evidence of the discerning eye that chose them. Other objects represent the synthesis of these capabilities: the masterful interweave of materials in the brooches or the exquisite workmanship of the monstrance. This display does more than account for the results of a trade; it celebrates the refinement of that trade – the particular skills with which its practitioner selects his materials and produces his wares.[8]

Rogier van der Weyden employs a similar strategy in his *Saint Luke* of ca. 1435 (Fig. 2). As James Marrow has noted, the painting deviates from earlier accounts of the subject in two main ways. First, it emphasizes Saint Luke's occupation. Second, it identifies the saint (perhaps directly, through the insertion of a self-portrait) with Van der Weyden.[9] Once more, technical ability is brought to the fore. The saint executes his image of the Virgin and Child in the unforgiving medium of silverpoint.[10] Such are his training and dexterity that even in this extraordinary circumstance he executes a flawless rendering.[11] Eye, brain, and hand cooperate to record his vision with a maximum of representational precision and a supposed minimum of cognitive intervention.[12] The accuracy of Saint Luke's rendering confirms the efficacy and immediacy of religious images in general.[13] But such efficacy and immediacy necessarily derive from the capabilities of the artist. Hence Van der Weyden's attention to those capabilities: Rotating the drawing outward, he invites assessment of the saint's handiwork. Placing it opposite the Virgin, he allows us to compare the drawing with its referent. Though appraisal occurs nowhere within the image itself, Van der Weyden has cast the viewer in the role of connoisseur.

In Christus's painting, the matter of appraisal has become an explicit subject. The woman reaches for a ring she evidently prefers. The implication of her gesture is significant: Surrounded by impeccable work, she selects this specific object rather than raw materials or another exemplar. She responds not simply to the flash of gold or the glow of a stone set in it, but to the combination of both in this particular item – in short, the results of admirable craftsmanship. As a result, her behavior corresponds to a cluster of aesthetic judgments that spark a desire for possession. Her partner's comportment speaks to a related operation. His sidelong glance suggests the circumspection of a savvy

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2. Rogier van der Weyden, *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin and Child*, ca. 1435. 137.5 × 110.8 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Lee Higginson, (93.153).

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shopper weighing the beauty of the preferred ring, along with the enthusiastic response of his betrothed, against its evidently considerable price. The couple's judgments revolve around material richness, technical skill, and the visual pleasure these provoke. In contrast, the stern expression of the goldsmith, combined with the direction of his gaze away from the counter and toward his clients, indicates a concern with matters not only of commerce but also of something more elusive. Indeed, his attention fixes directly on individuals who navigate between their materialistic and marital interests. Thus, we might treat him as one who appraises character – the degree of the young pair's attachment, the balance of purchasing power between them, perhaps even their individual motivations.[14] As the two preoccupy themselves with the purchase of an expensive ring, he gauges objects no less valuable for their intangibility.

The relationship among these forms of appraisal is significant. Despite the vocational function of *A Goldsmith in His Shop*, despite its pronounced narrative emphasis on commerce and value, and despite the bodily absence of Saint Eligius from the composition, spiritual interests nonetheless figure prominently. The monstrance on the right anticipates use in the Catholic Mass, while the rings in front of it and the betrothal girdle draped over the counter recall the sacrament of matrimony, as does the depicted transaction. Recall, too, that the credibility and authority of a guild and its members derived in part from their patron saint – in this case Saint Eligius.[15] With this in mind, the central figure in Christus's painting might be said to reenact or participate in the ethical and spiritual qualities of his guild's namesake. The goldsmith's behavior shows priorities that are markedly different from those of his clients. I would suggest, in fact, that in addition to conducting business, he weighs materialistic tendencies (to which the couple's flashy clothing and aesthetic and financial preoccupations allude) against the substance of matrimonial (and thus spiritual) commitment. While the painting does indeed celebrate the production of lavish objects possessing a discrete worldly charm, at the same time it also strikes an important distinction between a given craft (and its attendant sensory impact) and the larger purposes that craft should serve. That is, it evinces an important element of religious interest.

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In this respect, the *Goldsmith* and Van der Weyden's *Saint Luke* tend not so much to differentiate professional pride from religious obligation as to validate the former by means of its applicability to the latter. Depicting Saint Luke the painter in midprocess does indeed privilege the activity of making pictures. It does so, however, in an entirely religious context. Visual and technical skills gain their particular value in this painting by virtue of their service to the thing being observed and represented. The painter's art may be Van der Weyden's narrative focus but only insofar as that art advances the pursuit of holiness. Likewise, Christus's goldsmith may fashion enchanting worldly goods, but their true utility (the narrative suggests) is far greater. Thus, while both paintings engage matters of skill and craftsmanship, forms of visual interest in each painting are inextricably linked to and justified by larger – unmistakably, religious – goals.

What is more, *A Goldsmith in His Shop* calls attention to the intertwined intellectual, religious, and social implications of craftsmanship as they pertain not only to metalwork but also to early Netherlandish painting. This might seem an odd assertion since the painting exists specifically to celebrate a different art. However, we must bear in mind that a goldsmith chose to commemorate his particular vocation by hiring the skilled practitioner of another.[16] Given this, given the narrative and conceptual prominence of craftsmanship in this painting, and therefore given that the client would have been sensitive to the depiction as well as the disposition of materials, we might well wonder how Christus defined the relationship of his trade to that of his patron. Specifically, what sort of opportunities would a pictorial celebration of metalwork afford the painter who wished to advance his own interests?[17] Questions such as this bear directly on the attachment of value to artistic skill. To respond we must get a sense of what a painting was expected to do in the first place. Why, for example, would a patron select this over other media – particularly when those media generally possessed greater social and monetary value?[18] I suspect we can rule out economic necessity. After all, most high-end early Netherlandish paintings were commissioned by wealthy patrons; it seems unlikely that purchasing a Van Eyck – or, for that matter, a Christus or a Van der Weyden – demonstrates an interest in pinching pennies.[19] Rather, I suggest in the chapters to come that pictorial

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representation enjoyed a unique value that derived from the material, technical, and even spiritual operations it was expected to serve. I am thinking of mimesis, of course, which leads me to ask what the utility of pictorial illusionism was, given its charged relationship both to optical experience and to religious doctrine.

That is why I begin with *A Goldsmith in His Shop*. The relationship between value and material richness – a central narrative issue – is treated here in strictly illusory form, which lends that issue an ironic edge. After all, by refracting desirable materials through the dematerializing lens of pictorial representation, Christus privileges vision specifically at the expense of other forms of sensation – most notably touch, which the painting both invites and depicts. Vision thus triggers desire while simultaneously serving both as a signal of and a surrogate for it. To put it another way, the painter denies us the chance to experience directly the valuables presented with such tantalizing clarity. The result is a two-fold reflexive engagement with visual experience. First, the painting advances its theme of assessment through those reciprocal depicted acts of looking. Second, it also activates assessment directly through the careful arrangement of lavish, intangible objects in the shop depicted before us. The *presentkannen*, the coins and rings, the pearls – all are positioned for us as much as for the participants in the pictorial narrative. It stands to reason, therefore, that visual pleasure is of some significance since the couple enacts it while at the same time the painting provokes and subtly undermines it. But if so, how exactly did fifteenth-century viewers conceive of such pleasure? What was its role with respect to the interpretation of pictures? And given that we are looking not at a metalsmith's wares, but rather at a pictorial description of them, we might also ask if there was any significance in this fact for Christus himself. In short, what did it mean to see things – especially well-crafted, illusory ones with a distinct moral charge – in the early modern Low Countries?

I will attempt to answer these questions by discussing early Netherlandish visuality as it pertains to the act of looking at pictures. Certainly, there is ample basis for such a discussion. Aristotle proclaimed that thought is impossible in the absence of imagery, which is another way of saying that mental activity is effectively an optical experience. Later generations did not simply take him at his word; they

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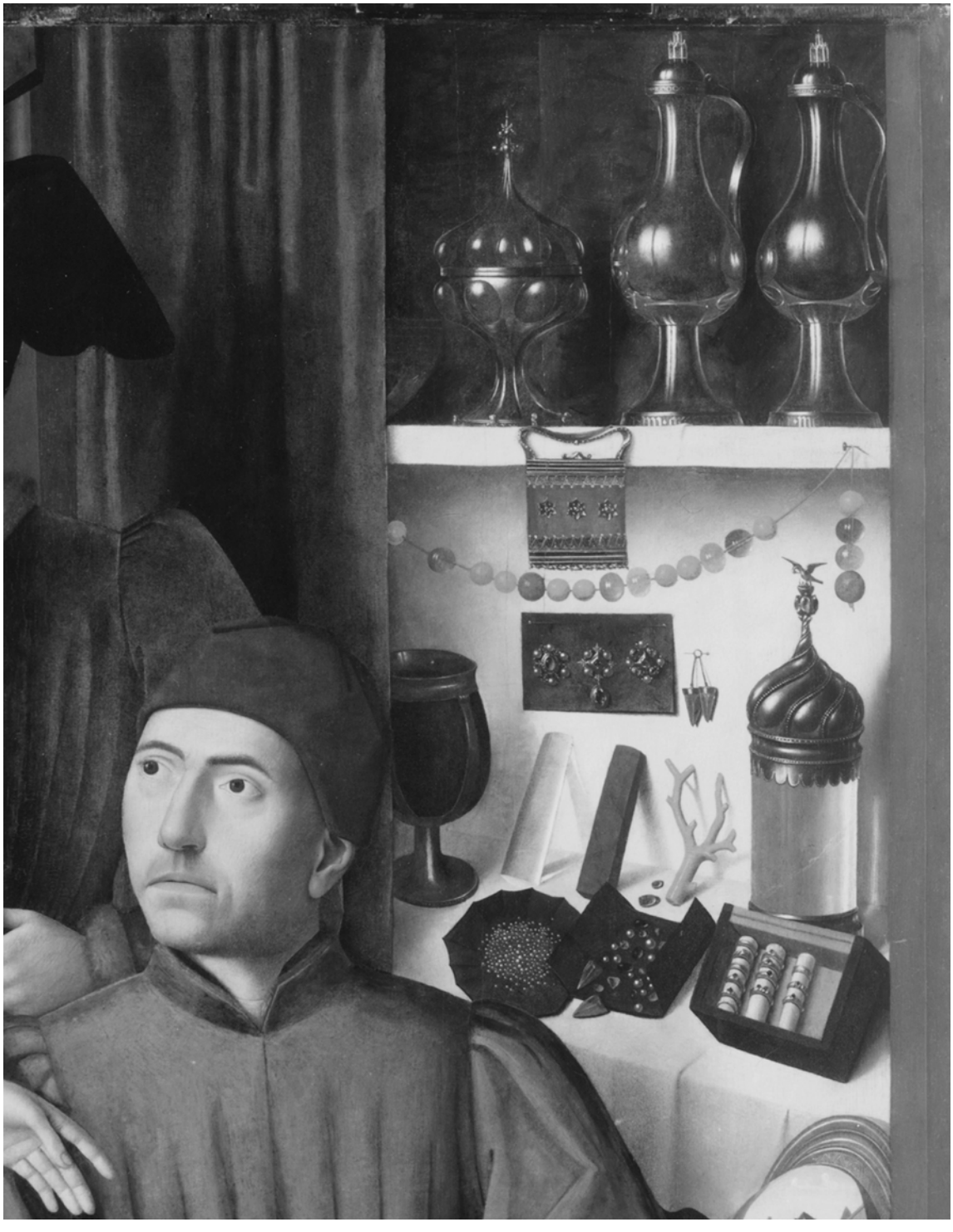

3. Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in His Shop* (detail). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.110).

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developed a vast body of writing on this basic theme. For them, seeing and knowing were closely, if at times uneasily, related. If properly harnessed, suitably trained, and carefully guided, sight could put one on the mind's road to God. It also could serve as a primary means for conveying notions of political order, regional identity, social status, and the like.[20] Consequently, the act of seeing lay at the presumed heart of every human activity, and its centrality contributed to a remarkable efflorescence of visual display. Indeed, the history of the early modern Low Countries evinces an extraordinary investment in visual stimuli: From Burgundian court ritual to civic and religious practice, as Johan Huizinga rightly noted, one finds evidence of an overwhelming feast for the eyes.[21] Amid such a profusion of things to see, one necessarily would have had to develop a measure of visual skill.

Perhaps I might put this more accurately: One would have had to develop an array of associated visual skills. It would have been one thing, for instance, to observe a triumphal entry or aspects of Burgundian court ceremony. It would have been another thing altogether to peruse even the largest work by Van Eyck. The triumphal entry, no matter what intricacies of propaganda it may present, is ultimately an ephemeral show of force designed to overwhelm and keep the viewer at a distance. Furthermore, its very temporality presumes a discrete linear experience, replete with introduction and conclusion. By contrast, the sheer density of Van Eyck's work is predicated on the value of intimate, prolonged examination, as well as on a recognition that one's experience is less linear than circumambient, moving from point to point, idea to idea, and back again. From their intricate subject matter to their wealth of metaphor, his paintings demand close looking. Thus, while both types of imagery invite visual absorption, each presents the viewer with unique perceptual, and therefore cognitive, challenges.

The role of painting in early Netherlandish visual culture has received some attention. We have tantalizing records pertaining to the intertwining of artworks and public ceremony.[22] Several excellent studies have also shed light on taste and the market for art.[23] There have been attempts as well to link images with the liturgy, with theological glosses, and with specific prayer cycles.[24] We know relatively little, however, about how contemporaneous viewers might have assessed the specifically optical weight of sophisticated panel paintings,

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