modern world. As the fourteenth century came to an end, the medieval agrarian economy was giving way to an economy based on manufacturing and trade, activities that took place in urban centers. A social shift accompanied this economic change. Many city dwellers belonged to the middle classes, whose upper ranks enjoyed literacy, leisure, and disposable income. With these advantages, the middle classes gained greater social and cultural influence than they had wielded in the Middle Ages, when the clergy and aristocracy had dominated. This transformation had a profound effect on European culture, including the development of the visual arts.

Cities such as Paris, London, Prague, Bruges, Barcelona, and Basel were home to artisans, dayworkers, and merchants as well as aristocrats. Urban economies based more on money and wages than landed wealth required bankers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs. Investors seeking new products and markets encouraged technological innovations, such as the printing press, an invention with sweeping consequences. Some cities specialized in manufacturing specific goods, such as tapestries, or working in specific materials, such as metalworking (map 14.1). The raw materials for such products came from mines or farms from all over Europe, as well as Asia and Africa, following organized trade routes. Trade put more liquid wealth into the hands of merchants and artisans, who were emboldened to seek more autonomy from the traditional aristocracy, who sought to maintain the feudal status quo.

Two of the most far-reaching changes concerned increased literacy and changes in religious expression. In the fourteenth century, the pope left Rome for Avignon, France, where his successors resided until 1378. On the papacy’s return to Rome, however, a faction remained in France and elected their own pope. This created a schism in the Church that only ended in 1417. But the damage to the integrity of the papacy had already been done. Such scandals undermined confidence in the institutional Church, leading many laypeople to turn to religious movements that encouraged them to read sacred texts on their own, to meditate on Scripture, and to seek a personal relationship with God. One such movement was called the Modern Devotion, but mendicant friars and other clerics also encouraged this new lay piety. Although the Church was not wholly comfortable with this phenomenon, the persuasiveness of the preachers supporting it spread the new outlook. These religious impulses and increasing literacy fueled a demand for books in vernacular (local) languages, including translations of Scripture. The printing press made books more available, further stimulating the development and spread of knowledge.

Books and the ideas within them spread easily in an era when political changes brought significant changes to northern Europe whose boundaries now began to resemble those of present-day European nations. The Hundred Years’ War between France and
England finally ended in 1453. This allowed the French monarchy to recover, but civil war kept England politically unstable until late in the fifteenth century. French kings, however, had to contend with their Burgundian cousins, who controlled the trading hub of northern Europe: the rich lands of Flanders in the southern Netherlands (present-day Belgium) and the northern Netherlands (present-day Holland). Indeed, Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy (r. 1419–1467) was one of the most powerful men of the century.

Duke Philip’s son, Charles, wanted to create his own kingdom out of the regions he inherited, a matter on which he unsuccessfully petitioned the Holy Roman emperor. The emperor had nominal control of much of Central Europe, but local rulers within this region often flouted his authority. On the Iberian peninsula, the marriage between Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon created a unified Spanish kingdom that became increasingly powerful. Competition among the regions of Europe for trade routes led to the voyages of Christopher Columbus, which would enrich the Spanish crown and bring European culture to another hemisphere.

A new style of visual art that stressed naturalism accompanied these political and social changes. As in the medieval era, aristocrats and churchmen continued to commission works, but the new ranks of society—bureaucrats and merchants—also became art patrons. For the merchants and middle-class patrons in urban centers, painters made images in a new medium with a new character. Using oil paints, artists in the Netherlands made paintings that still astonish viewers today by their close approximation to optical reality. By midcentury, this strongly naturalistic style became the dominant visual language of northern Europe, attracting patrons from all classes and many countries.

This transition was gradual and by no means universal. Faced with a growing middle class, the traditional aristocracy attempted to maintain their privileges and status. Among the aristocratic
courts of France, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and the Burgundian Netherlands, many of which were linked by treaty or marriage, a preference emerged for a highly refined form of Gothic art, which has been termed International Gothic. Yet within these courtly images were the seeds of the heightened naturalism that would blossom in the fifteenth century.

COURTLY ART: THE INTERNATIONAL GOTHIC

As the fourteenth century came to an end, aristocratic patrons throughout Europe indulged a taste for objects made of sumptuous materials with elegant forms, based on the Gothic style. The latter had been born in France and was linked with the powerful French monarchy, so its latest manifestation owed a great deal to the forms and traditions of France. Cosmopolitan courts such as Avignon and Paris attracted artists from many regions and allowed them to exchange ideas. These circumstances produced the style historians call the International Gothic. The artists of the International Gothic also adapted some elements from fourteenth-century Italy, including devices to imply spatial settings borrowed from Duccio and Pietro Lorenzetti, and certain themes and compositions, such as aristocrats enjoying the countryside (see figs. 13.30 and 13.31). The chronological limits of this style are somewhat fluid, as some objects ascribed to the International Gothic date from the mid-fourteenth century, whereas others may date as late as the mid-fifteenth.

International Gothic artists came from Italy, France, Flanders, Germany, Spain, Bohemia, Austria, England, and elsewhere. They produced works of exquisite craftsmanship, with sometimes very complex iconographies, out of expensive materials for elite patrons. In making these objects, artists followed Gothic principles, which used geometric patterns to impose order on natural forms to idealize them (as we saw for example in fig. 12.19, in the work of Villard de Honnecourt), but they added details directly observed from nature, too. Many scholars see the detailed naturalism that appears in the International Gothic as a key stimulus for the more thoroughgoing naturalism of the early Flemish painters and their followers in the fifteenth century.

Sculpture for the French Royal Family

The French royal family was among the most active patrons of the International Gothic. King Charles V had three brothers, all of whom were active patrons of the arts. The youngest of them, Philip the Bold, became duke of Burgundy in 1363; then he added the title of count of Flanders through his marriage to Margaret of Mâle. Through these territorial acquisitions, the dukes of Burgundy became powerbrokers in the military and economic struggles of the fifteenth century. Works of art helped further Philip’s status, providing an important example for his successors.

In his domain of Burgundy, Duke Philip the Bold established a Carthusian monastery, the Chartreuse de Champmol, outside Dijon. Although the monastery was almost completely destroyed in the late eighteenth century during the anti-aristocratic riots of the French Revolution, some parts of the building survive. For the construction of this monastery, which Philip intended to serve as his family mausoleum, he assembled a team of artists, many of them from the Netherlands. Chief among them was the sculptor Claus Sluter (ca. 1360–1406) who came from Brussels. Remnants of Sluter’s work at the Chartreuse de Champmol include tombs, portal sculptures and other sculptural projects.

THE WELL OF MOSES AT THE CHARTREUSE DE CHAMPMOL

The most emblematic among those of the International Gothic style is The Well of Moses (fig. 14.1). At one time, this hexagonal well, surrounded by statues of Hebrew Bible prophets, was topped by a life-size Calvary scene with Christ on the Cross flanked by his mother and saints. This served as a visual expression of the fulfillment by the New Testament of the Hebrew Bible. With the loss of most of the Calvary scene, however, it is the six figures of Hebrew Bible prophets on the base who must represent Sluter’s achievement for us. Supported on a narrow console and framed by slim colonnettes. The majestic Moses wears a long flowing beard and drapery that envelops his body like an ample shell. The swelling forms of the prophets seem to reach out
into the surrounding space to interact directly with a viewer. Each prophet carries a scroll with texts that predict the death of Christ, and each bears an attribute that identifies him. To Moses’ right stands King David, wearing the crown and robe of monarchy. The intense, staring Moses bears a pair of horns to identify him; this detail arose from a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for “ray” during the early Christian period. The horns describe Moses, holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments, after his encounter with God on Sinai. The lifelike feeling created by Moses’ size and naturalistic rendering must have been greatly enhanced by the colors added to the stone by the painter Jean Malouel; these have now largely disappeared. Sluter gave one of the prophets a pair of bronze spectacles to further the connection to the real world. This attachment to the specific distinguishes Sluter’s naturalistic style from that of the earlier period and is one of the hallmarks of the International Gothic.

THE ALTARPIECE AT THE CHARTREUSE DE CHAMPMOL

In addition to sculptural projects for the Chartreuse de Champmol, Duke Philip commissioned an altarpiece for its church that was executed between 1394 and 1399. The ensemble included an elaborately carved relief for the central section by Jacques de Baerze (showing the Adoration of the Magi, the Crucifixion, and the Entombment) and wings by the Flemish painter Melchior Broederlam (ca. 1355–1410) (fig. 14.2). (Their complex shape results from the format of the central section.) Each panel of these wings depicts two scenes from the infancy of Christ: The left wing depicts the Annunciation and the Visitation (when the pregnant Virgin visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was herself expecting John the Baptist); the right, the presentation of the infant Christ to the rabbi Simeon in the Temple and the flight of the holy family from Bethlehem into Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod. The painter uses landscape and architectural elements to define the narratives and to fill in available spaces. Broederlam arranges the architecture so a viewer can see inside, as if into a doll’s house; the spatial arrangements, however, derive from Duccio and the Lorenzetti (see figs. 13.23 and 13.26). Details of the landscape are out of scale with the figures, yet the panels convey a strong feeling of depth thanks to the subtlety of the modeling. The softly rounded shapes and the dark, velvety

14.2 Melchior Broederlam, Infancy of Christ panels, wings of the altarpiece of the Chartreuse de Champmol. 1394–99. Tempera on panel, each $65 \times 49\frac{3}{4}'' (167 \times 125$ cm). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France
shadows create the illusion of weight, as do the ample, loosely draped garments, reminiscent of the sculpture of Sluter.

Broederlam’s panels display another feature of the International Gothic style: the realistic depiction of small details. Observing nature in detail was certainly not new; similar realism may be seen in some Gothic sculpture (see fig. 12.28) and among some drôleries (small designs, often of fables or scenes from everyday life) in the margins of manuscripts such as the Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux (fig. 12.39). In Broederlam’s Annunciation panel, such realism is evident in the carefully rendered foliage and flowers of the enclosed garden behind Gabriel at the left. In the right-hand panel, touches of naturalistic detail include the delightful donkey, the tiny fountain at its feet, and the rustic figure of St. Joseph, who looks like a simple peasant in contrast with the delicate, aristocratic beauty of the Virgin. These painstaking touches give Broederlam’s work the flavor of an enlarged miniature rather than of a large-scale painting, even though the panels are more than 5 feet tall. But they do more than merely endow the image with small flashes of realism: They contribute to its meaning. In the left-hand panel, for example, the lily signifies Mary’s virginity, as does the enclosed garden next to her, which is inspired by a metaphor from the biblical Song of Songs: “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.” Even the architecture contributes to the meaning. The contrasting Romanesque and Gothic buildings stand for the Hebrew Bible and New Testament respectively. Broederlam both enchants and instructs in this painting.

**Illuminated Manuscripts: Books of Hours**

Broederlam’s work in these painted altarpiece wings reflects the influence of manuscript illuminations, which had been an important medium in northern Europe throughout the Middle Ages. The French court prized these expensive, custom-made objects. Philip the Bold’s older brother, Jean, duke of Berry in central France, commissioned many of these sumptuous books, amassing a huge collection in his lifetime.

The luxurious book of hours known as Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry), is one of the most famous of the duke’s books and a prime example of the International Gothic style. The artists responsible for it were Pol de Limbourg and his two brothers, Herman and Jean. They were introduced to the court by their uncle, Jean Malouel, the painter who had applied the colors to Sluter’s The Well of Moses, and came to share an appointment as court painters to the duke, reflecting the high regard they enjoyed. One or more of the brothers must have visited Italy, for their work includes numerous motifs and whole compositions borrowed from the artists of Tuscany and Lombardy.

The Limbourg Brothers began the Très Riches Heures about 1413 and left it unfinished when they died in 1416, probably of the plague. As a result, some pages were completed long after their deaths. The most famous pages in the book are devoted to the calendar and depict human activities and the cycle of nature. Such image cycles, originally consisting of 12 single figures each performing an appropriate seasonal activity, were an established tradition in medieval art. In this manuscript, the calendar pages depict aristocrats and peasants in detailed and elegant images in activities appropriate to the month represented.

The page for January, for example (fig. 14.3), shows a scene of feasting, a traditional choice for the cold winter months. But the Limbourgs flatter their patron by depicting the duke himself at the table, seated before a large fireplace, whose wicker screen serves to frame him. Wearing a fur cap and embroidered blue garment, Duke Jean sits beneath a wall hanging adorned with his coat of arms and swans, his personal emblem. Before him, a feast is laid out on golden plates and sumptuous vessels. He discourses with a clergyman seated near him, while expensively dressed courtiers...
wait on the duke or warm themselves at the fire. Painted tapestries hang on the wall next to and above the mantel. Using brilliant colors, the artists reproduce the table setting, the items on the menu, the patterns in the draperies, even the texture of the floor covering. Such detailed observation records the pleasures of the winter season for the duke, who could literally see himself in the page.

The chronological elements above the interior scene on this page are unfinished, but they are complete in another page of the book for the summer season. The calendar page for July (fig. 14.4) notes the passage of time in several ways: A semicircular section at the top marks the days numerically and includes the astrological signs for the month. Below this, the labor of the month is performed, as peasants harvest wheat and shear sheep in the fields, beneath a precisely rendered castle, Jean de Berry’s Chateau du Clain (Poitiers), now destroyed but well documented. The page depicts the orderly harvesting of a fruitful earth by the peaceful peasantry for the eyes of the man who owns the castle. This idealized view of the social order of feudalism is achieved by combining the portrait of the castle and naturalistic details of the sheep or the scythes with an artificial space that rises up the picture plane rather than receding into depth. The carefully crafted composition links the three major zones into triangular elements that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. The jewel-like color and splashes of gold leaf in the calendar zone contribute to the sumptuous effect of the page. The prestige of the patron and the sheer innovation of the images, especially on the calendar pages, in the Très Riches Heures inspired many later copies.

**Bohemia and England**

Other courts and regions in Europe shared the French taste for the International Gothic. In Central Europe, the city of Prague,
the capital of Bohemia, became a major cosmopolitan center thanks to Emperor Charles IV (1316–1378). Charles was educated in Paris at the court of the French king Charles IV, whose daughter he married and in whose honor he changed his name from Wenceslaus. After returning to Prague and succeeding his father as king of Bohemia, Charles was named Holy Roman emperor by the German Electors at Aachen in 1349 and crowned as such in Rome in 1355.

Charles wanted to make Prague a center of learning, and in 1348 he established a university modeled on the one in Paris. It soon attracted many of the best minds in Europe. He also became a patron of the arts and founded a guild for artists. In addition to encouraging local talent, Charles brought artists from all over Europe to his city. In his castle of Karlstein, just outside of Prague, he built a chapel dedicated to the Holy Cross that imitated Louis IX’s Sainte Chapelle (fig. 12.32). Instead of stained glass, however, the walls of this chapel were covered in paintings done by Master Theodoric, the first head of the painters’ guild of Prague. The paintings were executed between 1357 and 1367.

*St. Matthew and the Angel* (fig. 14.5) comes from this project. As one of the authors of the Gospels, Matthew holds a book while an angel whispers in his ear. A long-standing medieval tradition assigned symbols to each of the four Evangelists, in Matthew’s case an angel. Master Theodoric makes the angel an active participant in the work of the saint. Matthew himself is rendered as a three-dimensional figure, whose blue garment falls across his body in softly modeled folds of drapery. This style probably derives from Theodoric’s study of Italian artists, either in his native Austria or Prague.

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*14.5 Master Theodoric, St. Matthew and the Angel.* ca. 1360–65. Panel, 45½ × 37" (1.15 × 0.93 m). National Gallery, Prague
In a pattern typical among late medieval dynasties, the emperor Charles IV's daughter, Anne of Bohemia, married the English king Richard II in 1382. Richard, who ruled from 1377 to 1399, is the figure depicted in a painting called (for the collector who once owned it) The Wilton Diptych (fig. 14.6). A diptych is a double panel that opens on a hinge at the center like a book. This diptych represents King Richard II kneeling before his patron saints to venerate the Virgin Mary and her Child. The gazes of the figures connect across the panels as they stare at the Virgin and Child, who playfully reaches out toward the king. Angels accompany the elegant figure of the Virgin, who appears like a queen surrounded by her palace guard, yet because the angels wear badges with emblems of Richard himself, it is his guard that surrounds her. The sumptuous colors and tall weightless figures stand in an eternal setting defined by a beautifully tooled gold background. Yet the drapery worn by the angels is modeled in the same natural light as Master Theodoric’s St. Matthew. Scholars are still debating whether the unidentified artist who achieved this combination of Gothic otherworldliness and natural observation came from France, England, Bohemia, or somewhere else.

**URBAN CENTERS AND THE NEW ART**

Many of the artists whom the patrons in the courts preferred for their projects came from the cities of the southern Netherlands: Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, and Tournai. These were centers of international commerce in whose streets many languages could be heard as merchants from all over Europe gathered to do business. They were very jealous of their status as independent entities with special privileges to govern themselves, set trade tariffs, and establish militias. Their claims for independence often clashed with the desires of aristocratic overlords to tax and control their inhabitants. Buildings like the Town Hall of Bruges (fig. 14.7), built between 1376 and 1402, were designed to provide a setting for town councils and to serve as symbols of the independence and privileges the cities claimed. The Town Hall is one of the earliest such structures in northern Europe. Set on a major town square, it looks like an ecclesiastical structure, with its high gabled roof, tracered windows, and vaulted interior. The façade emulates Gothic churches, too, with its many sculpted figures depicting not saints, but the local rulers, the counts of Flanders.
While the interior of the structure functioned as a council hall for self-rule and issuing judgments, the exterior sculpture expressed the nominal rule of the counts of Flanders.

It is in the cities of Flanders that the beginnings of an artistic revolution may be seen. Working either for courts or for citizens, artists began to make images in oil paint that represent sacred figures as if they existed in the natural world, giving tangible form to spiritual concepts.

**Robert Campin in Tournai**

An early pioneer of this naturalistic revolution is Robert Campin (1378–1444), the foremost painter in Tournai, an important trade center in southwestern Belgium. Campin ran a busy workshop, from which several other successful painters emerged, including Rogier van der Weyden.

**THE MÉRODE TRIPTYCH** The most famous work attributed to Campin is the *Mérode Triptych* (fig. 14.8), dated on the basis of style to around 1425. The name derives from an early owner of the painting, but the subject of the central panel is the Annunciation, frequently depicted in earlier Christian art. Typically, those earlier representations of the Annunciation set the event in an ecclesiastical building (see fig. 14.2) or other sacred space (see fig. 13.25), but Campin places the Virgin and the angel Gabriel in what appears to be the main room of a bourgeois house, complete with open shutters, well-used fireplace, and cushioned bench. Despite the supernatural events, a viewer has the sense of actually looking through the surface of the panel into a world that mimics reality. Campin uses several devices to create this effect. He fits the objects and figures into boxes of space aligned with the parts of the triptych. Sometimes the fit isn’t comfortable, but he renders details in such a way as to make every object as concrete as possible in its shape, size, color, and texture. He also paints two kinds of light. One is of a diffused kind that creates soft shadows and delicate gradations of brightness; the other is more direct and enters through the two round windows, casting shadows on the wall. Campin’s color scheme, with its muted tonality, unifies all three panels; his bright colors have richness and depth, and he achieves smooth transitions from lights into darks. These effects were made possible by the use of oil. (See *Materials and Techniques*, page 479.) Although medieval artists
had knowledge of oil paint, Campin and his contemporaries expanded its possibilities for painting on panels. Its use allowed him to create a much more thorough illusion of reality than the flashes of natural detail seen in the work of court artists.

Campin was no court painter but a townsman who catered to the tastes of fellow citizens, such as the two donors shown here piously kneeling outside the Virgin's chamber. A coat of arms painted in the window of the central panel points to a family of merchants who had settled in Tournai by 1427. Obviously they were wealthy enough to commission this triptych, probably for their own dwelling, as it is too small for installation in a public church. Perhaps it was this function that inspired the artist to break with tradition in the picture. This Annunciation takes place in a fully equipped domestic interior with figures that are rendered as real people, with mass and weight. The drapery of their garments falls in deep folds, anchoring the figures to the floor, as in the sculpture of Claus Sluter (see fig. 14.1). Gabriel adopts a not-quite-kneeling, not-quite-standing position as he raises his right hand to speak. Mary's red dress draws attention to her as she sits on the floor, book in hand. Between them, a table supports another book, a vase of lilies, and a candle. Above and behind Gabriel, the tiny figure of a baby holding a cross, who must be Christ, floats downward toward Mary. In the left wing panel, the donors kneel in a garden, as though looking through the open door to witness this event. The whole effect is of time frozen: Something important is about to happen. Where Simone Martini had rendered Gabriel and the Virgin as slim, weightless figures set against an eternal gold ground (see fig. 13.25), Campin depicts their substantial bodies in a recognizably earthly setting for the eyes of the donor couple. They see the event taking place in their world, not in Heaven.

The right wing panel depicts Joseph, the carpenter, at work, though just what he is making is debatable. Scholars have identified the mysterious boxlike object on the window ledge as a mousetrap, an object that the Christian theologian St. Augustine used metaphorically to explain God's plan for salvation when he said, "The Cross of the Lord was the devil's mousetrap." The mousetrap could be a visual cue to the reason for Christ's incarnation, which is about to occur in the central panel. Equally puzzling is the object in Joseph's hand, identified by some as a fire screen (like the one in the central panel) and by others as part of a press through which grapes are forced to make wine (which would refer to the wine used in the sacrament of the Eucharist).

Such carefully chosen details have persuaded many scholars that Campin used these forms as symbols to convey spiritual messages. We have seen some of these symbols before: The flowers, for example, are associated with the Virgin as emblems of her purity and other virtues; they appeared in Simone Martini's Annunciation (see fig. 13.25). Interpreting other details, such as the smoking candle next to the vase of lilies, has been more difficult. Its glowing wick and the curl of smoke indicate that it has just been extinguished. To explain why a candle had been lit...
Panel Painting in Tempera and Oil

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, painters worked with liquid pigments on wooden panels. The type of wood used varied from region to region, though oak panels were preferred in northern Europe because they could be sawn into thin planks to serve as supports for the paint. Pine, fruitwoods, and poplar were also used. Once the panels had been formed, and often inserted into a frame by a carpenter, the flat surface would be covered with a film of gesso (a type of fine plaster) to create a smooth surface for the image. Often an underdrawing would be laid onto the gesso as a guide for the painter or his assistants.

For pigments, artists used oxides, plants, minerals, or semiprecious stones. They ground these materials into powders that had to be mixed with some sort of liquid medium to bind them to the panel. The basic medium of medieval panel painting had been tempera, in which the finely ground pigments were mixed ("tempered") with diluted egg yolk. This produced a thin, tough, quick-drying coat that was well suited to the medieval taste for high-keyed flat color surfaces. However, in tempera the different tones on the panel could not be blended smoothly, and the progression of values necessary for three-dimensional effects was difficult to achieve.

While medieval artists had used oil-based paints for special purposes, such as coating stone surfaces or painting on metal, artists like Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin in Flanders exploited it for panel paintings. Oil, a viscous, slow-drying medium, can produce a variety of effects, from thin, translucent films (called glazes) to a thick layer of creamy, heavy-bodied paint (called impasto). The tones can also yield a continuous scale of hues, including rich, velvety dark shades. Oil painting offers another advantage over egg tempera, encaustic, and fresco: It allows artists to change their minds and rework their paintings. As the use of oil paints spread across Europe, some artists adopted a mixed technique, using tempera for the base layers and covering these with oil glazes. Although pigments continued to be mixed with tempera for some time, oil has been the painter’s basic medium until very recently.

Figures and sacred dramas enlivened religious life at the end of the Middle Ages. Believers were encouraged in sermons, Passion plays, and written texts to visualize the sacred in terms they could understand and to meditate on events from Christ’s life in order to increase their empathy and devotion. Although monks and nuns had long practiced such contemplation, the religious movement called the Modern Devotion helped to spread these ideas among the laity. New texts, such as the Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis, provided guidance for laypeople wishing to emulate Christ. Artists like Campin may have been responding to the call to see the physical world as a mirror of divine truths and to create moving and pious images of sacred events occurring in everyday environments.

Jan van Eyck in Bruges

The visual revolution achieved in paintings such as the Mérode Triptych was recognized and admired not only by patrons in Flanders but also by patrons in Italy. Italian observers provide the earliest external assessments of the Flemish innovators. They recognized that the technical achievement of oil painting contributed to the striking naturalism and evocation of religious feeling in Flemish painting, and they credited the “invention” of oil painting
to Jan van Eyck (1390–1441). (See www.myartslab.com.) As a result, his is one of the more famous names of fifteenth-century art, and he is a figure about whom we know a good deal.

Jan worked first for the count of Holland and then for the reigning duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, from 1425 until his death in Bruges in 1441. Both a townsman and a court painter, Jan was highly esteemed by Philip the Good, who occasionally sent him on diplomatic errands. Unusual for his time, he signed and dated several surviving pictures, which has allowed historians to identify his artistic output and to assign unsigned works to him based on the signed ones.

**THE GHENT ALTARPIECE** The *Ghent Altarpiece* is one of the most famous of early Flemish paintings. From the moment it was installed in a chapel of the cathedral of St. John in Ghent (see fig. 14.12), it began to draw a crowd. Albrecht Dürer visited it in 1520, and much later artists like the nineteenth-century French painter Ingres drew inspiration from it. An inscription on the now-lost frame identified Jan van Eyck as the artist who finished this multpaneled altarpiece in May 1432 and alluded to the collaboration of his older brother, Hubert, who died in 1426. The basic form of this complex altarpiece is a triptych (consisting of three hinged panels), but here each of the three units consists of four panels. Since the wings are also painted on both sides, the altarpiece contains a total of 20 images of various shapes and sizes. Discontinuities among the many panels suggest alterations took place as the work progressed. It appears that Jan took over a number of panels left unfinished by Hubert, completed them, added some of his own, and assembled the whole at the request of the wealthy donor, Jodicus Vijd. Vijd’s portrait with that of his wife, Elizabeth Borluut, appears on the outer panels of the altar when the triptych is closed (fig. 14.9).

Their portraits appear on the lower tier with two other figures, each in a separate niche framed by painted Gothic tracery. Next to
The donors are John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, the patrons of the cathedral, painted in grisaille (a monochrome; in this case to imitate the grayish color of statues). The upper tier has two pairs of panels of different width. The artist has made a virtue of this awkward necessity by combining all four into one interior, whose foreshortened timber ceiling crosses all four panels. In addition to the continuous space, Jan heightens the illusion by painting shadows on the floor of the Virgin’s chamber as if they were cast by the frames of the panels. Prophets and sibyls occupy an upper story, their prophecies written in Gothic script in scrolls above their heads. In such altarpieces, the wings stayed closed except on Sundays, specific feast days, and when other liturgically important moments required them to be opened.

When the wings are opened (fig. 14.10) the viewer sees a detailed rendering of a celestial assembly: Across the bottom tier, groups of figures converge on a central image of an altar, upon which stands a haloed Lamb. This assembly includes angels, apostles, popes, theologians, virgin martyrs, hermits, pilgrims, knights, and judges (including, possibly, a reference to Jan’s employer, Duke Philip the Good). A verdant landscape provides the setting for this mystic Mass, with towers of numerous churches in the skyline. Above this earthly paradise reigns an imposing Court of Heaven, with the Lord in a bright red robe at the center. Flanking him are Mary and John the Baptist. To the left and right, choirs of angels sing and play musical instruments. At the outer edges of this upper tier stand Adam and Eve, rendered as nudes in shallow niches, below grisaille images of Abel and Cain. The almost life-size nudes are portrayed with careful attention to their anatomy and caressed by a delicate play of light and shade (fig. 14.11).

The figures’ poses are comparable to those in Gothic manuscripts, but here the artist breathes life into the forms by rendering...
the textures and colors of the bodies with great accuracy. Seeing this work on the altar of the Vijd Chapel in Ghent cathedral (fig. 14.12), a viewer could not fail to be impressed by the scale and setting of the painting. The tone and majesty of this ensemble are very different from the domestic intimacy of the Mérode Triptych. The function of the altarpiece is to elucidate the liturgy performed in front of it. When open, its subject is the Mass itself, here shown in a paradisiacal setting. The number of books represented and the many erudite inscriptions celebrating Christian learning suggest that a cleric or theologian may have advised Jan in developing the program. But Jan accomplished the difficult task of bringing the disparate panels together and welding them into an imposing and memorable experience.

Jan’s work is large in scale but full of naturally observed details and glowing color. His technique of building up color in layers of glazes results in highly saturated hues, while the slow, methodical application of paint blends brushstrokes to a mirrorlike finish. Jan offers a glimpse into Heaven to stimulate devotion. If, as some scholars believe, the whole altarpiece was set into a Gothic architectural frame, one meaning of the image becomes the importance of the Church itself as an institution and as a pathway to salvation.
SECULAR IMAGES  Jan van Eyck also made purely secular paintings, fulfilling the commissions of the court and of the middle-class citizens of Flemish towns. One example is Jan’s Man in a Red Turban (fig. 14.13), signed and dated 1433, which represents a middle-aged man in a three-quarters pose whose face is framed by his dramatic headgear. Warm light bathes the distinctive face emerging from the dark background of this painting and reveals every detail of shape and texture with almost microscopic precision. The artist does not explore the sitter’s personality, yet the man gazes out of the picture to make eye contact with the viewer. This innovation, and the slight strain about the eyes which may come from gazing into a mirror, suggests that the painting may be a self-portrait. The self-consciousness that such a project demands may relate to the text painted on the frame: An inscription reads “ALS ICH KAN” (“As I can” or “As best I can”). This motto appears on other works by Jan, too, perhaps challenging other artists to do better, for he has done all he can. Though transposed into Greek letters, the phrase is Flemish; this implies that Jan saw himself in competition with the ancients as well as with his contemporaries. Whatever his reason may have been, we can read the motto as another sign of Jan’s self-consciousness about his work as an artist and his place in history.

The next example demonstrates that Jan van Eyck’s signatures complicate the task of interpreting his work. One of the most studied and yet still mysterious of his surviving images represents a man and a woman standing in a richly furnished room, equipped with a brass chandelier, a mirror, and a canopied bed (fig. 14.14). Jan signed the painting, not on the frame, as he did in many of his other paintings, but within the panel itself. Above the painted mirror in a formal script, the translated signature reads, “Jan van Eyck was here, 1434.” The features of the man, if not the lady, are specific enough to be a portrait, and the image is unusual enough that scholars have been able to use later documents to identify the subject as Giovanni Arnolfini, an Italian merchant living in Bruges. For many years, scholars believed that his companion should be identified as Giovanna Cenami, Arnolfini’s wife; recent research, however, makes this doubtful, as that marriage took place much later than 1434.

Whatever their names, the painted couple appear in the main room of a fifteenth-century house that is somewhat more
expensively furnished than the room in the Mérode Triptych. The two join hands, with the man raising his right hand as if in a solemn oath, seemingly quite alone in the room. In the mirror behind them, however, is the reflection of two men. Because the signature appears right above the mirror, many scholars believe that one of these men must be Jan van Eyck himself, perhaps the figure wearing the red headdress. The combination of the signature, with its flourishes and phrasing, and the image of the men in the mirror suggests to some that Jan is acting as a witness to whatever is occurring in the room.

Traditionally, scholars have argued that this panel represents either the wedding or the engagement of the couple shown, either of which would have required a legal and financial contract between their two families. By this reading, the painting commemorates the union of the couple. If so, the second man in the mirror may be the bride’s father, who would have made the
A prince Lionello of Este showed me in Ferrara on July 8, 1449. In it painter is a magnificently wrought picture which the illustrious established to protect the interests of their members. Aspiring art came from the guilds, professional organizations of artists. Regulations for the training of artists and the market for works of art came from the guilds, professional organizations of artists established to protect the interests of their members. Aspiring artists learned their trade as apprentices in the workshop of a certified master. After a fixed period, an apprentice became a journeyman (or dayworker) who could then hire out his services to others but not open his own shop. Journeymen often traveled to learn from artists other than their master. Becoming a master required completing a “masterpiece” that was evaluated by the leaders of the guild. Guilds not only controlled training but limited competition from artists outside their towns, investigated disputes among members, and saw to the social and economic needs of members, such as providing for burials, pensions, and the care of widows. Guilds were both economic and social institutions, assuring the quality of their products and seeing to the wellbeing of their members.

One illustrious graduate of the guild system was Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464), a painter who trained with Robert Campin in Tournai, and who certainly knew the work of Jan van Eyck. By 1435, Rogier had established a flourishing workshop in Brussels which took commissions from as far away as Italy and Spain. Perhaps his most influential work is the Descent from the Cross (fig. 14.15), which dates from about 1435. The crossbowmen’s guild of Louvain (near Brussels) commissioned it as the center of an altarpiece for a church there. In this work, Rogier depicted the moment when Christ’s followers lower his body from the Cross; the mourners crowd into a shallow box of space. Rogier modeled the forms carefully to suggest sculptural presence, and included enough detail to show every nuance of texture.

Rogier’s goal is to increase the expressive content of his pictures. He emphasizes the emotional impact of the scene on its participants. Their faces and postures express the grief of the figures. John the Evangelist on the left and Mary Magdalen on the right are bowed in pain. The Virgin’s swoon echoes the pose and expression of her son. Rogier depicts her intense pain and grief in order to inspire the same compassion in a viewer. He has staged his scene in a shallow niche or shrine, not against a landscape. This bold device focuses a viewer’s attention on the foreground and allows the artist to mold the figures into a coherent group. Furthermore, the emphasis on the body of Christ at the center of the composition refers to the celebration of the Eucharist, which takes place before the altarpiece during the Mass. Rogier could...
find precedents for these grief-stricken gestures and faces in earlier sculpture; these figures share the strong emotion of the mourners on the Naumburg choir screen (see fig. 12.57) or the Virgin in the Roettgen Pietà (see fig. 12.60). Rogier’s memorable painting inspired many copies, in both painting and sculpture.

The heightened emotion with which Rogier imbues his works was noted and admired by the Italian diplomat Cyriacus of Ancona, who saw another painting by Rogier on this theme in 1449. (See Primary Source, page 485.) This commentator singled out the naturalism in Rogier’s work, as he admired the figures who seemed to come alive in Rogier’s painting. Other Italian scholars remarked on Flemish painting’s naturalism and piety as well. Viewers in Flanders would have brought their own interest in meditating on the sacrifice of Christ to their experience of Rogier’s painting.

Rogier’s depiction of St. Luke Drawing the Virgin, dated between 1435 and 1440 (fig. 14.16), reveals his debt to earlier Flemish artists. The figure of Mary nursing her son in this image shows the continuing influence of Campin, while the composition is based on a work by Jan van Eyck. In contrast to the Descent from the Cross, here Rogier creates a deep landscape that moves into the distance. The figures inhabit a room that opens onto a garden protected by fortifications. A man and a woman peer over these battlements toward a busy Flemish city in the distance, where shopkeepers open for the day and citizens walk the street.

The painting represents St. Luke the Evangelist in a different role, as the portrayer of the Virgin and Christ Child. A Byzantine tradition explained that the Madonna appeared miraculously to Luke, so that he could take her portrait. This legend helped to account for numerous miraculous images of the Madonna in the later Middle Ages. Rogier depicts Luke drawing the features of the Virgin in silverpoint (a drawing technique using a stylus of silver scraped across prepared paper) as she appears before him. (Such drawings were the starting point for most paintings of the period.) Because of this story, St. Luke became the patron of painters’ guilds throughout Europe. Later documents describe a painting like this one in the chapel of the Brussels Guild of St. Luke. Since this image depicts the making of an image, Rogier’s painting may be a self-conscious statement about the dignity of painting and painters. It was copied numerous times in the fifteenth century, even by Rogier’s own workshop. In recent years, scholars have been studying such paintings with new scientific tools that examine the techniques used by the artists. (See The Art Historian’s Lens, page 488.)
LATE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ART IN THE NETHERLANDS

The paintings of Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck, and Rogier van der Weyden offered powerful examples for other artists to follow, in the Netherlands and beyond. In the later fifteenth century, court patrons continued to prefer objects made of expensive materials, particularly gold. They also commissioned illuminated manuscripts and tapestries. At the same time, patronage by the merchant class continued to grow, and painters found work in commissions from the middle classes. Nonetheless, the medium of painting gained in prestige as the century wore on, attracting interest and patronage in aristocratic circles. Despite the increasing market for paintings, large-scale sculpture continued to find a market in the fifteenth-century Netherlands, though little has survived the ravages of war, social and religious upheavals, and changes of taste. Even rarer are survivals of objects made in precious metals, as the very valuable raw material was easily recycled when money was scarce.

Aristocratic Tastes for Precious Objects, Personal Books, and Tapestries

Aristocratic patrons commissioned small-scale precious objects throughout the fifteenth century. One, whose brilliance makes us mourn the loss of others, is the *Statuette of Charles the Bold*, preserved in the treasury of the cathedral of Liège in eastern Belgium.
Investigative tools used in the contemporary scientific study of materials are providing new information about the practices of artists in the past. The very materiality of works of art makes them appropriate for the same sort of study as archaeological discoveries. Chemical analysis of paints and pigments is providing information on the recipes for making paints that artists used. This information can be used to examine workshop practices, to establish authenticity of given objects, and to suggest methods of conservation.

Modern scholars use a variety of techniques to investigate paintings. X-radiographic imaging penetrates painted surfaces and produces a photographic analysis of the use of lead in the painting process. Because lead white was used to lighten pigments, x-radiographs allow an investigator to examine how an artist modeled forms with lighter colors. X-radiographs also reveal details about an artist’s brushwork or changes made as the painting progressed. Another technique uses infrared light, which can see through painted surfaces to distinguish dark marks on the white ground of a panel. Aided by special infrared cameras (a technique called infrared reflectography), analysts can photograph the underdrawings and initial paint layers below painted surfaces; computers match these photos to produce images of the preparatory layers of the painting. This information is invaluable for studying the creative process. It has also aided in determining which of the many versions of Rogier’s St. Luke Drawing the Virgin (see fig. 14.16) was executed first.

Because many Renaissance panels are painted on wood, scholars have been able to determine the age of a particular panel from the number of tree rings in it, using a technique known as dendrochronology. The number of tree rings in a panel is then compared to a database of tree rings that have been dated to define the time when the tree was probably cut down. This can then provide additional evidence for dating the painting. Such evidence has caused some scholars to date Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights (see fig. 14.22) to around 1480. Similar techniques have revealed the composition of the limestone used in Gothic sculpture and the chemical makeup of ancient bronzes.

14.17 Gerard Loyet, Statuette of Charles the Bold. ca. 1471. 21 × 12½ × 7” (53 × 32 × 17.5 cm). Cathedral treasury, Liège

(fig. 14.17). Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy commissioned the goldsmith Gerard Loyet (before 1442–1500) to make this figure; he then gave it to the cathedral in Liège in 1471, perhaps to assert his control over that rebellious city. Made of gold and silver gilt with enamel details, the 21-inch-high statuette represents Duke Charles holding a reliquary; behind him stands St. George, Charles’s favorite patron saint, who lifts his helmet in greeting. The duke is dressed in armor, kneeling on a pillow to make his offering. The object demonstrates Loyet’s skill and the prestige of such objects in the Burgundian court. The composition derives from a painting by Jan van Eyck, and so reflects the rising status of panel painters as creative innovators.

The taste of the court also ran to expensive books. Despite the introduction of the printing press (see pages 499–502), among the traditional elites, the manuscript book—custom-made to celebrate the purchaser’s status and interests—retained its appeal. Books of hours, in which prayers were organized into cycles according to the hours of the day, appealed especially to women. A striking example of a complex and lavish illuminated book is the Hours of Mary of Burgundy, which includes the coat of arms of Mary, daughter of Charles the Bold and last duchess of Burgundy, evidence that she owned the book before her death in 1482.

Mary herself may be the woman depicted in figure 14.18. In this full-page miniature, the anonymous artist (named after this book of hours) depicts an elegantly dressed young woman reading from a book of hours similar to the Hours of Mary of Burgundy. Her costume and surroundings indicate her status: Golden brocades, transparent veils, jewelry, and flowers surround her, and a little dog rests on her lap. She sits in a private chapel, whose windows open onto a view of a light-filled Gothic church. Through the window the viewer sees the Virgin Mary with her child seated in the sanctuary, surrounded by angels. To the right
of these sacred figures kneels a group of noble women, whose access to the child and his mother may be what the woman in the foreground prays for.

The artist creates a picture within a picture here, as the glimpse into the church is completely framed by the architecture of the lady’s chapel. Earlier manuscript artists (like the Limbourg Brothers) usually put floral or other decorative motifs in the border and created a spatial context only for the main image. This artist, however, treats the border as a spatial entity in its own right that links the border and the main image. The artist takes care to record the tactile and sensuous quality of the dog’s fur, the transparency of the glass vase, and the reflective qualities of the pearls on the ledge. The manuscript page has the impact of a painted panel.

The court was also the key market for the flourishing industry in tapestries. Major workshops practiced in Brussels, Tournai, and Arras; the latter city’s name became synonymous with the art form. Woven with colored threads of wool or silk, tapestries were popular with the courtly class or their peers in the Church. The tapestry fragment of Penelope Weaving (fig. 14.19), for example, was part of a series of “Famous Women” commissioned by the bishop of Tournai around 1480. The image depicts the wife of Odysseus (or Ulysses) working at a loom. According to Homer’s Odyssey, Penelope fended off her numerous suitors with her weaving; she insisted she would not marry again until she had completed her work, which she unwove every evening. Although a figure from the classical past, Penelope is dressed in the costume...
of a fifteenth-century lady. The influence of paintings is apparent in the suggestion of space, the detailed treatment of her gems and garment, and in the figure. On the wall behind Penelope hangs a tapestry within the tapestry, in a two-dimensional pattern of repeated floral forms called *millefleurs*, one of the best-selling designs for tapestry in the fifteenth century. The court of Burgundy shared their Italian contemporaries’ interest in stories of the ancients as exemplars for the present, but they envisioned them in familiar, not historic terms. The naturalism of the Flemish painters provided a language for the tapestry weavers to satisfy courtly taste.

**Panel Paintings in the Southern Netherlands**

While the court collected precious objects, illuminated manuscripts, and tapestries, the middle-class demand for panel paintings continued to grow. International businessmen invested their money and their reputations in commissioning paintings from Flemish artists like Hugo van der Goes (ca. 1440–1482). Having served as dean of the painters’ guild of Ghent, Hugo entered a monastery near Brussels as a lay brother in 1475. He continued to paint there until his death in 1482. His best-known work is the huge altarpiece commissioned around 1474 by an agent of the
Medici bank in Bruges, who shipped it to Florence (fig. 14.20). The 10-foot-wide central panel represents the Virgin, St. Joseph, and shepherds adoring the newborn Christ Child in Bethlehem. In the wings, members of the donor family, including Tommaso Portinari, his wife, Maria Maddelena Baroncelli, and their children, kneel to face the central image. A spacious landscape unites all three wings as a continuous space, with the bare trees and December sky suggesting not the Holy Land but Flanders itself. Objects in the distance have turned the blue of the atmosphere; this use of atmospheric perspective (a technique that recognizes the loss of color in distant objects) infuses the panel with a cool tonality. Hugo filled this setting with figures and objects rendered with precise detail in deeply saturated colors.

Despite Hugo’s realistic renderings of both landscape and figures, the image contains numerous contradictions for expressive effect. Figures vary greatly in scale: The angels and kneeling members of the Portinari family are dwarfed by the other figures; the patron saints in the wings are the same size as Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and the shepherds of the Nativity in the center panel. These shifts of scale undermine the pictorial space that the artist has provided for his figures. Another contrast occurs between the raucous intrusion of the shepherds and the ritual solemnity of all the other figures. These fieldhands gaze in breathless wonder at the newborn Christ Child, who is the focus of all the figures ranged around him. Mary, however, sits at the physical center of the composition. Such deliberate contrasts between the pictorial and psychological focal points, between the scale of the historical and the contemporary figures, and between the static and kinetic postures of the figures contribute to the unsettling effect of the work.

The background is populated with narratives that support the main theme. Behind the figures in the left-hand panel, Mary and Joseph travel toward Bethlehem. Behind the saints on the right, the Magi progress toward the center. And in the center, angels flicker across the surface, lit by both natural and supernatural light. Strategically placed at the front of the picture is a beautiful still life of flowers and a sheaf of wheat. As with so many other realistic details in Flemish paintings, these have been interpreted symbolically. The wheat refers to the bread of the Eucharist and the flowers to the Virgin. Portinari brought the triptych to Florence in 1483 and installed it in the family chapel attached to the hospital of Sant’ Egidio. There it proclaimed the taste, wealth, and piety of the donor. Judging from their imitation of it, Italian painters who saw the work there especially admired its naturalism and its unidealized representation of the shepherds.

Triptychs were often intended for liturgical spaces. For more domestic spaces, patrons wanted smaller objects. For example, the young up-and-coming citizen of Bruges Martin van Nieuwenhove commissioned a diptych from Hans Memling in 1487 (fig. 14.21). Born in Germany (ca. 1435–1494), Memling worked in Bruges, where his refined style, based on Rogier and
Jan van Eyck, brought him commissions from patrons from all over Europe. Italians in Bruges especially preferred his workshop, as did local patricians like Van Nieuwenhove. An inscription on the frame of his diptych identifies the patron and gives his age, while his stylish garment and gilt-edged prayer book express his social status. Behind him a piece of stained glass represents his patron saint, Martin. The young man focuses his gaze on the left-hand panel, where an image of the Virgin and Child appears. Martin’s family coat of arms in the window behind them implies that the Virgin and Child are visiting him in his own home. The reflection in the mirror further expresses this conceit: the artist has included the reflections of both the Virgin and young man appearing in the same space. Memling has borrowed the concave mirror Jan van Eyck used in The “Arnolfini Portrait” (see fig. 14.14) to unite the two halves of the diptych.

Memling’s image demonstrates a new trend in portraiture: In addition to rendering the features, he creates a believable setting for the figure. This contrasts to the inky blackness behind the figure in Jan van Eyck’s Man in a Red Turban (see fig. 14.13). Access to the divine remains a preoccupation for otherwise worldly men; in this light-filled room, Martin kneels in permanent prayer, so that the image becomes an expression of his devotion. But this object also served as a piece of self-promotion, as the many personal references to the patron display his self-assurance and social status.

**The Northern Netherlands**

The innovations of the early fifteenth-century painters quickly spread to the northern Netherlands (present-day Holland), the origin of one of the most famous paintings from the era, Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (fig. 14.22). Bosch (ca. 1450–1516) came from a family of painters. He spent his life in the town of ’s Hertogenbosch, the seat of a ducal residence, from which his name derives. His patrons included the duke of Burgundy, whose grandson, King Philip II of Spain, owned numerous Bosch paintings in the sixteenth century; it was in Philip’s collection that Fray José de Sigüenza encountered Bosch’s painting. (See Primary Source, page 494.) Sigüenza’s account has been an important document for interpreting this complex and surprising painting, whose subject and meaning have been vigorously debated.

Divided into three panels, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* represents humans in the natural world. A continuous landscape unites the three sections; the high horizon and atmospheric perspective imply a deep vista of the earth from an omniscient vantage point. Shades of green create an undulating topography marked by thickets of trees and bodies of water. Throughout, small creatures both human and nonhuman swarm, while strange rock formations and other objects appear at intervals. As Sigüenza says, the left-hand wing appears to represent the Garden of Eden,
where the Lord introduces Adam to the newly created Eve. This airy landscape is filled with animals, including such exotic creatures as an elephant and a giraffe; it also includes strange hybrid monsters. The central panel reveals a world inhabited by tiny humans who frolic among giant fruits, birds, and other creatures. In the middle ground, men parade around a circular basin on the backs of all sorts of beasts. Many of the humans interact with huge birds, fruits, flowers, or marine animals. The right-hand wing depicts an infernal zone, which may be Hell, where strange hybrid creatures torment the tiny humans with punishments appropriate to their sins. When the triptych is closed (fig. 14.23), its outer wings depict a crystal globe with an image of the earth emerging from the waters, with God watching over the events from above. An inscription from Psalm 33 says: “For he spoke and it came to pass; he commanded it and it stood forth.” Some see this image as the third day of creation, others identify it as the flood of Noah.

Despite its triptych format, this is not a traditional altarpiece but a secular work. It belonged to Count Henry III of Nassau, in whose palace in Brussels it was reported to be in 1517, though recent research suggests Bosch could have painted it as early as 1480. Many scholars place it ca. 1500–1505 and assume that Henry of Nassau commissioned it. Scholars have studied many different aspects of Bosch’s painting in an effort to find the key to its meaning. Some have looked at the numerous visual references to verbal puns and proverbs. One theory holds that it represents the time of Noah, as shown by the image of a flood on the exterior; another that the many swarming nudes express the views of a heretical group that promoted free love; yet another that the infernal landscape in the right-hand wing demonstrates a moralizing condemnation of carnal sin.

These interpretations suggest that Bosch was a pessimist sermonizing about the depravity of humankind. This is certainly the way that José de Sigüenza described it, although his text also suggests several “allegories or metaphors” embedded in the painting. Yet the image itself is beautifully painted and as seductive as the sirens in the pool in the middle of the central panel. There is an innocence, even a poetic beauty, in this panorama of human activity that suggests something other than outright condemnation of the acts so carefully depicted. This ambivalence has fueled numerous interpretations, including a recent proposal that the image depicts an alternative view of history in which the Original Sin of Adam and Eve does not happen, and therefore humans continue to live in a state of innocence.

Another interpretation of this painting links it to the practice of alchemy as an allegory of redemption. The many strangely shaped rocks and fountains refer to the tools and vessels used in this medieval science. Bosch married an apothecary’s daughter, so his use of the visual symbols of that science has a strong historical basis. If we consider its secular function and the interests of his educated patron, however, Bosch’s painting seems to warn its audience against too much concern for sensual pleasures in the world.

CHAPTER 14  ARTISTIC INNOVATIONS IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY NORTHERN EUROPE  493
REGIONAL RESPONSES TO THE EARLY NETHERLANDISH STYLE

Artists in many regions of Europe responded to the formal and technical achievements of the generation of Robert Campin and Jan van Eyck. Local traditions and tastes influenced these regional responses, but patrons found the naturalism of the new style useful for their religious and social purposes. Many regions of Europe, among them France, Spain, and Central Europe, therefore produced their own variations on this style.

France

The geographic proximity, trade routes, linguistic links, and political relationships between the Burgundian Netherlands and France helped to spread the innovations in technique and style throughout France. Artists either traveled to Flemish cities or developed their own brand of naturalism in imitation of the effects that Rogier van der Weyden or Hugo van der Goes had achieved (see figs. 14.15 and 14.20). Still, French art has its own distinctive characteristics. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the troubles of the Hundred Years’ War limited expenditure on art. Citizens of the war-torn cities commissioned very little, but members of the Church and court continued earlier forms of patronage.

After establishing his rule at the close of the Hundred Years’ War, King Charles VII of France appointed Jean Fouquet (ca. 1420–1481) of Tours as his court painter. Both a book illuminator and a panel painter, Fouquet traveled to Italy around 1445, where he learned some of the innovations of contemporary Italian art (see Chapter 15). His work, however, owes much to the Netherlandish style in technique, color, and approach. Charles VII’s treasurer, Étienne Chevalier, commissioned Fouquet around 1450 to paint a diptych representing himself and his patron saint, Stephen, in proximity to the Virgin and Child, the so-called Melun Diptych (figs. 14.24 and 14.25). Like his Flemish contemporaries, Fouquet records the specific physiognomy of the patron in his fur-lined garment. The head of the saint, who carries a book and a stone (which refers to his martyrdom), seems as individual as that of the donor.
They stand in a room with marbled floors and marble panels on the walls, framed by antique-inspired pilasters that recede to suggest space. The two men gaze across the frame toward an image of the enthroned Virgin and Child. According to an old tradition, the Madonna is also a portrait: of Agnès Sorel, Charles VII’s mistress. If so, the panel presents an image of courtly beauty, as befits the Queen of Heaven, seen wearing a crown amid a choir of angels. Fouquet deliberately contrasts the earthly and divine realms. The deep space in the left panel differs strikingly from that on the right, organized as a rising triangle, with the cool colors of the Virgin and Child set against the vivid reds and blues of the angels. In contrast to his Flemish counterparts, Fouquet is not interested in suggesting specific textures, and he subordinates details to the overall design. He does not appeal to the emotions. His images are geometrically ordered and rational rather than expressive.

Spain
Netherlandish naturalism reverberated strongly on the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth century. Artists traveled between Flanders and Spain, and trade, diplomacy, and a dynastic marriage brought the united kingdoms of Castile and Aragon into increasingly close contact with Flanders. These contacts were echoed in the works of art imported into Spain from Flanders and in works of art produced in Spain by local artists.

A powerful example of the Spanish interpretation of Flemish naturalism is the Pietà painted in 1490 by Bartolomé Bermejo (ca. 1440–1500) for a deacon of the cathedral of Barcelona (fig. 14.26). Bermejo was born in Córdoba, but he worked in many regions of Spain, and may have been trained in Bruges. His Pietà sets the image of the Virgin grieving for her dead son in a dark and atmospheric landscape dominated by an empty cross. Instead of the historical mourners called for by the narrative, and included by Giotto in his fresco in Padua (see fig. 13.20), Mary and Christ are flanked by St. Jerome to a viewer’s left (the lion is his attribute) and a portrait of the deacon to the right. This removes the theme from a strict narrative context and makes the painting function as an image of devotion similar to the Roetgen Pietà (see fig. 12.60), though the precise detail of the figures and the landscape derive from Flemish models. In contrast to the cool rationality of Fouquet, Bermejo’s work is highly emotional and expressive.

Central Europe
Linked by trade and political ties to the Netherlands, artists and patrons in Central Europe were also receptive to the new style, especially in cities along the Rhine (see map 14.1). One such artist,
Conrad Witz (1400/10–1445/46) became a citizen of Basel, Switzerland, and a master in the city’s guild of painters at just the moment that the Church’s Council of Basel concluded. This council, or synod, had met from 1431 to 1434 to debate whether the pope alone or councils of bishops had the right to determine doctrine. These controversial issues inform the paintings Witz made in 1444 for the bishop of Geneva, which were destined for the cathedral of St. Peter.

The panels represent scenes from the life of St. Peter, The Miraculous Draught of Fishes (fig. 14.27) depicts Christ calling St. Peter to walk across the Sea of Galilee to join him. The solidly modeled figure of Christ dominates the right-hand side of the composition, in part because his red garment contrasts vividly with the green tones of the painting. St. Peter appears twice, once in the boat among other apostles, who are called to be “fishers of men,” and again sinking into the waters upon which Christ seems to float. The technique and style owe much to the Flemings, but Witz devotes his attention to the landscape. In place of the Sea of Galilee, Witz substitutes Lake Geneva, emphasizing local topography, such as the distinctive mountain above Christ’s head. He accurately depicts every reflection on the water, so that we can see the bottom of the lake in the foreground and a variety of textures.
on the water’s surface in the background. Witz places the events of the historical past in the setting of the present. Peter’s sinking into the water, suggesting his need for assistance, may be evidence of the bishop’s support for the council’s role in advising the pope.

**AN ALTARPIECE IN ITS ORIGINAL SETTING** Witz’s panels were originally the wings of an altarpiece, many of which had sculptures as their central element, or corpus. In German-speaking regions, altarpieces were usually made of wood, often large and intricately carved. Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century destroyed many sculpted religious images, so surviving examples are relatively rare. The St. Wolfgang Altarpiece (fig. 14.28) by the Tyrolean sculptor and painter Michael Pacher (ca. 1435–1498) is impressive both because of its scale and because it remains in its original setting.

The surviving contract between the abbot who commissioned it and the painter specifies both the subject matter and the quality of the materials and workmanship. (See Primary Source, page 499.) This was the normal pattern for contracts given to artists for expensive projects in the period.

Much as Jan van Eyck did in the Ghent Altarpiece, Pacher creates a vision of Heaven: The corpus depicts the coronation of the
From the Contract for the St. Wolfgang Altarpiece

It took Michael Pacher 11 years (1471–81) to complete this elaborate altarpiece for the pilgrimage church of St. Wolfgang. The altarpiece is still in its original location.

Here is recorded the pact and contract concerning the altar at St. Wolfgang, concluded between the very Reverend, Reverend Benedict, Abbot of Mondsee and of his monastery there, and Master Michael, painter of Brunec, on St. Lucy’s day of the year 1471.

ITEM, it is first to be recorded that the altar shall be made conforming to the elevation and design which the painter has brought to us at Mondsee, and to its exact measurements.

ITEM, the predella shrine shall be gilded on the inside and it shall show Mary seated with the Christ Child, Joseph, and the Three Kings with their gifts; and if these should not completely fill the predella shrine he shall make more figures or armored men, all gilt.

ITEM, the main shrine shall show the Coronation of Mary with angels and gilt drapery—the most precious and the best he can make.

Virgin as Queen of Heaven flanked by the patron saints of the monastery. Carved of soft wood that permits the sculptor to create deep folds and sharp edges, the lavishly gilt and colored forms make a dazzling spectacle as they emerge from the shadows under Flamboyant Gothic canopies. The figures and setting in the central panel seem to melt into a pattern of twisting lines that permits only the heads to stand out as separate elements.

The complexity and surface ornamentation that dominate the contrast with the paintings of scenes from the life of the Virgin on the interior of the wings. Here, the artist presents large figures, strongly modeled by clear light, and he suggests a deep space for them. He takes a viewer’s vantage point into account, so that the upper panels are represented as if seen from below. This kind of perspective must have been inspired by developments in contemporary Italian painting. Pacher almost certainly crossed the Alps and visited northern Italy, where some of his works were commissioned and where he had learned to use the Italians’ new technique for projecting space. (Compare his perspective to Mantegna’s in fig. 15.49.) This type of perspective appears only in the wings, however, where scenes from the historical past are set into spaces that look like the Austrian present. The interior of the temple where the circumcision takes place, for example, has a vault much like ones in Late Gothic churches. Pacher makes the historical scenes in the wings much more down to earth than the spectacle of Heaven in the center.

ITEM, on one side St. Wolfgang with mitre, crozier, church, and hatchet; on the other St. Benedict with cap, crozier, and a tumbler, entirely gilded and silvered where needed.

ITEM, to the sides of the altar shall stand St. Florian and St. George, fine armored men, silvered and gilded where needed.

ITEM, the inner wings of the altar shall be provided with good paintings, the panels gilded and equipped with gables and pinnacles, representing four subjects, one each....

ITEM, the outer wings—when the altar is closed—shall be done with good pigments and with gold added to the colors; the subject from the life of St. Wolfgang....

ITEM, at St. Wolfgang, while he completes and sets up the altar, we shall provide his meals and drink, and also the iron work necessary for setting up the altar, as well as help with loading wherever necessary.

ITEM, the contract is made for the sum of one thousand two hundred Hungarian guilders or ducats....

ITEM, if the altar is either not worth this sum or of higher value, and there should be some difference of opinion between us, both parties shall appoint equal numbers of experts to decide the matter.

Source: Northern Renaissance Art 1400–1600: Sources and Documents, ed. Wolfgang Stechow (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989)

PRINTING AND THE GRAPHIC ARTS

Along with the new techniques of painting, fifteenth-century Europe saw the development of a new medium: printmaking. The invention of movable type and the printed page would have enormous consequences for Western civilization. Tradition has credited Johann Gutenberg (ca. 1397–1468) with inventing movable type, but the roots of printing actually lie in the ancient Near East 5,000 years ago. The Sumerians were the earliest “printers,” for their relief impressions on clay, from stone seals, were carved with both pictures and inscriptions (fig. 2.10). From Mesopotamia the use of seals spread to India and eventually to China. The Chinese applied ink to their seals in order to impress them on wood or silk, and in the second century CE they invented paper. By the ninth century they were printing pictures and books from wooden blocks carved in relief, and 200 years later, they developed movable type. Some of the products of Chinese printing may have reached the medieval West—perhaps through Islamic intermediaries.

The technique for manufacturing paper came to Europe from contact with Islamic regions, though it gained ground as a cheap alternative to parchment only very slowly. While printing on wood blocks was known in the late Middle Ages, it was used solely for ornamental patterns on cloth. All the more astonishing, then, is the sudden development, over the course of a mere century, of a printing technology capable of producing editions of several hundred copies of relatively inexpensive books. The new technology spread quickly across Europe, spawning the new industry of bookmaking. Printed books were far less expensive than handmade volumes, but they were useless to those who...
could not read. Literacy began to rise among the lower classes, a consequence that would have a profound effect on Western civilization. To compete with illuminated manuscripts, printed books included printed images, which were often handcolored to imitate the more expensive manuscripts. Ultimately, the printed book almost completely replaced the illuminated manuscript.

The pictorial and literary aspects of printing were closely linked from the start. The practice of inking pictorial designs carved on wooden blocks and then printing those designs on paper began in Europe late in the fourteenth century. Early surviving examples of such prints, called woodcuts, come from France, the Netherlands, and Germany. Painters or sculptors probably furnished the designs, but specialists did the actual carving of the wood blocks. (For the various techniques of printing, for pictures as well as books, see Materials and Techniques, page 501.)

An early dated example of a woodcut is the Buxheim St. Christopher (fig. 14.29), so called because it came from a monastery in that south German town. This single sheet, handcolored woodcut bears the date 1423 and a prayer to the saint; woodcuts combining image and text like this on a single block were sometimes assembled into popular picture books called block books. Simple, heavy lines define the forms in the print, including the fall of the garment around the figures and the contours of objects. Thinner lines in parallel rows—called hatching—denote shadows or textures of objects, but the composition is strictly two-dimensional, as the landscape forms rise along the picture plane to surround the figures. According to legend, Christopher, patron saint of travelers, was a giant who ferried people across a river; he was surprised one day by the weight of a child, who turned out to be Christ.

The forms in the Buxheim St. Christopher owe a great deal to Late Gothic style, but the audience for prints were not the aristocrats of the Middle Ages. Fifteenth-century woodcuts were popular art. A single wood block yielded thousands of copies, to be sold for pennies apiece, so that for the first time in history almost anyone could own pictures. A detail from a Flemish Annunciation panel of about 1435 in figure 14.30 reveals one use to which people put such prints: A print much like the Buxheim St. Christopher is pinned on a wall in a middle-class household.

Printmaking

Printmaking is a technique for making multiple copies of the same image. In the fifteenth century, most prints used dark black ink on paper (though some are printed on parchment). Printmakers used one of several techniques to make these images; the two broad categories are relief prints (in which the lines to be printed are raised from the block) and intaglio (in which the lines to be printed are cut into a plate). Designs (and text) will print as reversed images as they are transferred to the paper by the force of a press. By 1500, printing technology allowed for the reproduction of pictures by several methods, all developed at the same time as the printing of type.

Woodcut

In a woodcut, the design is cut into a wood block so that raised ridges will print. The thinner the ridges are, the more difficult they are to carve, so specialists took over this phase of the work. Early woodcuts often include inscriptions, but to carve lines of text backward in relief on a wooden block must have been risky—a single slip could ruin an entire page. It is little wonder, then, that printers soon had the idea of putting each letter on its own small block. Wooden movable type carved by hand worked well for large letters but not for small ones, and the technique proved cumbersome for printing long texts such as the Bible. By 1450, this problem had been solved through the introduction of metal type cast from molds, and the stage was set for book production as it was practiced until the late twentieth century. Because the text was carved in relief, it became apparent that accompanying pictures should be carved in relief as well, so that an entire page could be printed with one run of the press over the matrix—or form—which held all the information to be printed.

Engraving

The technique of engraving—embellishing metal surfaces with incised pictures—had developed in classical antiquity (see fig. 6.20) and continued to be practiced throughout the Middle Ages (see fig. 11.7). Goldsmiths and designers of armor, in particular, were experts in incising designs on metal surfaces. These skills allowed goldsmiths to engrave a plate that could serve as the matrix for a paper print. Because the lines themselves were incised into the plate, more linear information could be included in the design. In an engraving, lines are V-shaped grooves cut with a special tool, called a burin, into a metal plate—usually copper, which is relatively soft and easy to work with. Ink is forced into the grooves made by the burin, the plate is wiped clean of excess ink, and a damp sheet of paper is placed on top of the inked plate; the force of a press transfers the ink—and the design—to the paper.

From the start, engravings (images taken from incised plates) appealed to a smaller and more sophisticated public. The oldest surviving examples, from about 1430, already show the influence of Flemish painters. Early engravers were usually trained as goldsmiths, but their prints reflect local painting styles. Their forms are systematically modeled with fine hatched lines and are often convincingly foreshortened. Distinctive styles appear even in the earliest engravings, and engravers often included initials and dates in their prints. Consequently, many engravers of the late fifteenth century are known to us by name.

Printing Centers in Colmar and Basel

Martin Schongauer of Colmar, then in Germany (ca. 1435/50 –1491) learned the goldsmith’s craft from his father, but he became a printmaker and a painter. He studied the paintings of Rogier van der Weyden, which probably influenced the style of...
his engravings. Their complex designs, spatial depth, and rich textures make them competitors to panel paintings. Some artists found inspiration in them for large-scale pictures. They were also copied by other printmakers. The Temptation of St. Anthony (fig. 14.31) is one of Schongauer’s most famous works—known and admired in sixteenth-century Italy. The print represents the climax of St. Anthony’s resistance to the Devil. Unable to tempt him to sin, the Devil sent demons to torment him. Varying the type of mark he made on the plate, Schongauer displays a wide range of tonal values and a rhythmic quality of line, and he approximates a wide range of textures—spiky, scaly, leathery, furry—to enhance the expressive impact of the image.

Since the time of Conrad Witz, the Swiss city of Basel had embraced the new technology for printing books to become a major center for publishing. There, a group of reform-minded intellectuals and authors contributed texts for publication, which graphic artists illustrated with woodcuts. One of the best sellers of the period was a satirical text by Sebastian Brant called the Ship of Fools, published in Basel in 1494. Brant’s text poked fun at many of the ills he perceived in his society, which, as the title implies, he characterized as a boat piloted by Folly. One important theme his text addresses is contemporary dissatisfaction with the Church. This tide of anticlerical feeling was already rising when Luther’s critique of the Church was posted in 1517 in Wittenberg (see page 634). But Brant’s satirical eye also fell on his own peers, as the woodcut in figure 14.32 reveals. The image depicts a scholar in his study surrounded by books, but rather than read them, he holds a duster to clean them. The man’s costume, including a hood with bells on it, identifies him as a fool. Compared with the Buxheim St. Christopher, the unnamed artist who produced this woodcut increases the density of hatching that implies texture and volume and attempts a spatial context for the forms. The practice of coloring prints fell by the wayside as the medium developed its own aesthetic and appeal.

As a period of cultural flowering and great innovation, from the complex naturalistic imagery in the paintings of Campin and Jan van Eyck to the dynamism of the new technology of printing, we could consider the fifteenth century in northern Europe a renaissance. That term is usually linked to this century, but not to this region: Another version of naturalistic representation was developing at the same time in Italy, to which we shall turn in the next chapter.
Artistic Innovations in Fifteenth-Century Northern Europe

1360
- 1378 Pope returns from Avignon to Rome

1380
- 1384 Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy inherits Flanders

1395 Hours of Giangaleozzo Visconti

1400
- 1377–99 King Richard II rules England

1415 Battle of Agincourt

1420
- 1419–67 Philip the Good duke of Burgundy

1434 West façade of Saint-Maclou, Rouen begun

1440
- 1453 End of the Hundred Years’ War between England and France
- ca. 1455 Gutenberg prints Bible in Mainz, Germany
- 1455–87 Wars of the Roses in England

1450 Jean Fouquet’s Mélun Diptych

1460
- 1477 Marriage of Mary of Burgundy to Maximilian of Hapsburg

1480
- 1494 Charles VIII of France invades Italy

1500
- 1503 Lady Chapel of Henry VII begun at Westminster Abbey, London

1376 Bruges Town Hall begun

1395 Sluter begins The Well of Moses

1416 Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry left incomplete at death of Limbourg Brothers

1432 Ghent Altarpiece installed in cathedral of Ghent

1450 Jean Fouquet’s Mélun Diptych

1483 Portinari Altarpiece arrives in Florence

ca. 1505 Hieronymus Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights