Introduction: The Self-Conscious Pragmatic Artist

This book describes the art produced in a wide and varied geographical area — from the flat fields, surrounded by canals, stretching unimpeded toward the horizon in the northern Netherlands to the mountain peaks of Switzerland. In between these extremes are the fertile, rolling hills of Belgium and France, crisscrossed by rivers running to the sea, and the picturesque lakes and dense forests of southern Germany. All this, and much more, can be glimpsed in the paintings of the Northern Renaissance. It is a rich and teeming landscape, and similarly the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were extremely varied and changing periods in this area of Europe. It is a challenge to condense such a complex time and place into a short survey. One of the watchwords in this overview must be discovery, a sense of exploration of the world both large and small. The art of the Northern Renaissance is, to a great extent, based on that simple point—discovery of the world and of the self.

A broad chronological and historical framework is essential for an understanding of any period of art history, and certainly it is a prerequisite for an examination of the chief characteristics of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century north European art, to which the label "Renaissance" can be applied. Some modern historians have expressed hesitation about labelling north European art at this time a renaissance, for one of the chief reasons for the term's application in Italy is that it signals the rebirth (renascence) of an interest in classical Greek and Roman culture, and that does not readily apply to much that was taking place north of the Alps. Still, the term "Late Gothic" is not a very useful substitute for "Renaissance" in the North. There was enough new birth or sense of discovery throughout northern Europe at that time to justify using the term Renaissance.

Church and State

Some definition of that term "the North" also seems necessary, including its basic physical geography. Going northwards from the Alps, Switzerland was the only republic. On its western frontier it was bounded by the kingdom of France, stretching from the Mediterranean north to the English Channel. On its north and east, Switzerland was the neighbour of the Holy Roman Empire, comprising German-speaking people in dukedoms, counties and lesser powers united by loyalty to an elected emperor. Between France and the German lands lay the duchy of Burgundy, known geographically as "the Low Countries," the Netherlands, nominally a French fief until, in 1482, part of it went by marriage to Austria. Burgundy had sufficient size and wealth to gain virtually independent status. Beyond the sea, the kingdoms of England and Scotland jealously guarded their independence.

This definition of "the North" deliberately ignores Scandinavia, Russia, Poland, Bohemia, and the Balkans. The affairs of state that drew their western neighbours sometimes into conflict, sometimes cohesion, left the "outer" states of Europe marginalised, intent on their own problems unless one of the "inner" European states turned a land-hungry eye on them. They were also "outsiders" in the history of European art at the time of the Renaissance, having their own traditions and remaining virtually aloof from the rest of European art until late in the sixteenth century. Only their ties with the Church bound them to the western states, and even then Russia and the Balkans were excluded, being Orthodox Christian, not Roman Catholic.

The term "Catholic," meaning universal, is misleading. Not since 1054 had the Christian Church been united. In that year east and western Christendom had split, the east claiming to be "Orthodox," true to its origins, the west being "Roman," in its obedience to the pope, who was also bishop of Rome. Nevertheless, "Roman" and "Catholic" were not terms that any western Christian would have applied to the Church in the Middle Ages. The central point of his or her life, it was "the Church," without qualification. Only when the sixteenth-century Reformation split western Christendom did the term "Roman" or "Roman Catholic" take on new meaning, in the mouths of the dissidents whom the Church called "Protestants."
Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church was the single most powerful institution in Europe, and, at least on the surface, the vast production of religious art mirrored the Church's central social, political, and economic, as well as religious, position. More than half of the art included in this book is religious; to be strictly representative of the period c. 1400-1600, a greater percentage of Christian imagery should probably have been included. By the year 1400 Christian art had had a long and venerable history, and its role in support of the faith--and the institution--was accepted by most of the devout. At various times, however, during the Middle Ages questions arose about the use and abuse of religious imagery. The worship of images themselves, rather than the ideas for which they stood, was a recurrent problem. The painting by Roger van der Weyden (c. 1399/1400-64) showing St. Luke Portraying the Virgin (Fig. 1) explains why many opted in favour of the instructional power of art. The evangelist St. Luke is here represented as the first Christian artist, recording in a drawing, as he did in his Gospel, the Virgin and Child. His traditional artistry caused him to be chosen as the patron of artists' guilds throughout Europe. In fact, Roger van der Weyden probably painted his panel for a guild of St. Luke, to hang above an altar maintained by artists in a local church. Painters thus honoured their profession, proclaiming its holy status and lineage. Roger van der Weyden probably also honoured himself since, from other contemporary portrayals of the artist, it appears that he included his own face as the saint's, claiming the role of a new St. Luke. Painters, as well as the religious institutions for which they often worked, wanted to promote this image of continuity and tradition, which was a major factor in favour of maintaining popular allegiance to the Church and a prominent role for art within it.

As an institution, the Church had always had its critics, though it generally managed to silence them by campaigns against dissent, as it did against theological heresy. However, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the higher clergy came into such disrepute that popular allegiance to the Church was at a low ebb. During most of the fourteenth century (1309-77), the pope resided in Avignon, under the control of the king of France, and from 1378 until 1417, rival popes, sometimes as many as three at once, claimed the throne of St. Peter. This period of political turmoil was known as the Great Schism. Subsequently, during the second quarter of the fifteenth century, the College of Cardinals tried repeatedly to limit the absolute power of the papacy. In order to form advantageous political alliances throughout the fifteenth and into the sixteenth century, the pope had to cede important rights to various European rulers, especially to the kings of France and Spain, who gained the right to name their own candidates for high ecclesiastical positions in their lands, thus bringing the Church under monarchical control. The more spiritually minded members of both clergy and laity condemned the Church's temporal powers but, until the sixteenth century, to no avail.

The increase of royal power over the Church in France and Spain was one facet of the general expansion of monarchical, centralised power throughout the states of western Europe; in the Holy Roman Empire it was firmly resisted, and the emperors, by now all drawn from the Austrian House of Habsburg, had to be content with strengthening their grip on their own large patrimony. One feature of the centralisation of national power was the monarchs' acquisition of formerly independent territory, adjoining their kingdoms. For example, although the Burgundian dukes in particular were able to increase their holdings and stature throughout much of the fifteenth century, after 1482 their lands were divided between French and Spanish rulers. Everywhere, the nobility looked to maintain their personal powers in the face of their monarch's incursions and the growing menace of royal bureaucrats.

**Artist and Patron**

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the courts of Europe's rulers were still the main artistic centres, employing artists for the creation of ephemeral decoration and pageantry as well as permanent memorials. But after the first quarter of the fifteenth century, noncourt production became increasingly important. Court style continued to be dominated by the extravagant display of costly materials; even images of artists themselves became part of these rich ensembles. The self-portrait (Fig. 2) of the French court artist Jean Fouquet (c. 1420-c. 1480), barely three inches (6.8cm) in diameter, was part of the
original, elaborate blue velvet and pearl-studded frame made for the Melun Diptych. However, the domination of society by a tiny noble minority, probably only one percent of the population, was definitely on the wane. Monarchs were encouraging the nobility's demise, weakening their potentially unruly nobles by the creation of a middle-class bureaucracy that centralised power, taking it out of the hands of erstwhile overlords. These new court functionaries joined the merchants and traders who had dealings with both court and city to become important patrons of art. In particular, they quickly realised the value of illusionistic panel painting: they could engage painters to fashion their images, just as they themselves manipulated their financially successful lives. The artists who worked for them matched their patrons' self-awareness. When Jan van Eyck (c. 1390-1441) painted the Italian merchant Giovanni Arnolfini at home with his wife, Giovanna Cenami, he, the artist, signed the painting on the wall above the mirror, "Jan van Eyck was here, 1434" (Figs. 3 and 4). Further, he painted himself into his patrons' world as a reflection in the mirror.

Roger van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck were founding members of a powerful and influential tradition of early Netherlandish (largely Burgundian) painting, their genius given full rein by the commercial expertise of their locale. The Netherlands' growing production of commercial goods, paintings included, was based in cities and, in particular, in the various carefully distinguished and regulated guilds, in which craftsmen who produced the same kinds of goods from the same kinds of materials joined together to protect their livelihoods. The guilds' officers supervised everything from training to pricing and quality. In this way, the production of art became increasingly city-based and carefully controlled for commercial purposes.

Mercantile cities, linked by good roads and waterways, were the powerbase of Netherlandish prosperity. Local pride and identity were reflected in the increasing number of fifteenth-century paintings that featured actual city views. For example, the Burgundian (now Belgian) city of Bruges, an important art centre, features in the background of several late fifteenth-century panels executed there (Fig. 5). To that city's patrons at the time, these city views--ideally including one recognisable sacred edifice, the Church of Notre Dame, and one secular, the town belfry--acted in part as trademarks, certifying the origin and quality of the work of art.

The contemporary carved self-portrait by the south German sculptor Adam Kraft (c. 1460-1508/9) of Nuremberg reinforces the idea of the commercial regulation of art from a slightly different angle (Fig. 6). Although Nuremberg itself was free of complex rules governing the various crafts, the patron for Kraft's work, the wealthy citizen Hans Imhoff IV, made detailed stipulations about the completion date, quality of materials, and involvement of the master craftsman in this elaborate project, a Holy Sacrament House, or large free-standing shrine for storing communion wafers, in the church of St. Lawrence in Nuremberg. Such stipulations, laid down in a contract, were common. However, Kraft obviously felt sufficiently free to include a personal statement, portraying himself, hammer and chisel in his hands, quite prominently. The commission was treated like any other commercial proposition in the growing urban centres of Europe, only in this case the creator's representational skills allowed him to insert his own stern countenance into the finished product.

At the beginning of the period covered in this book, c. 1400, works of art were usually produced on individual commission. Especially when the production of art was funded by wealthy noble and ecclesiastical patrons, specific requests led to specific works of art. However, as cities and guilds grew in size and number, so did the need for greater production and for the stockpiling of goods to be sold at urban fairs and markets, full of craftspeople hawking their wares for sale, such as those depicted in the busy Flemish streets, shown in mid-fifteenth-century manuscripts (Fig. 7) and panel paintings (see Fig. 1). In the sixteenth century, works of art were increasingly made speculatively for sale on the open market. Artists were thus freed from the precise, often petty demands of potential patrons. Now an image was less often tailored to the specific details of a wealthy individual's existence than designed to catch the eye of the "man-in-the-street," searching for a smattering of culture. It did not take long for artists to satirise their new situation, as a drawing by Pieter Bruegel (1527/28[?]-69) shows (Fig. 8). The patron in
Bruegel's drawing may have money, but does he have taste? Can he even see through those thick lenses perched on his simple, cut-out face? Times may change, Bruegel reminds us, but the artist's job does not.

**Chapter One: Realism**

In northern Europe during the Middle Ages, architecture was the dominant art form: it gave Romanesque and Gothic art their formal vocabularies, their aesthetic and spiritual orientation. This is true in the sense that stained glass painting and monumental sculpture were often made to fit into architectural forms (windows, columns, and doorways), and in the sense that simple architectural frames continued to surround small-scale paintings and sculpture throughout the fourteenth century. During the fifteenth century in northern Europe, painting on a two-dimensional surface became the dominant artistic medium. To an extent, this is due to a lack of change or innovation in architecture. For instance, the basilica of Our Lady at Tongeren in Burgundy (now eastern Belgium) was begun in the mid-thirteenth century but was not completed until 300 years later; and the western tower and eastern bays of the nave were built in the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in a style basically homogeneous with that of the rest of the church.

A painting done in the thirteenth or early fourteenth century and one done in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are clearly different, not stylistically homogeneous. North European painting style underwent a dramatic transformation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Like much else in northern European culture at that time, that change was based on a closer observation of the physical world. For a number of reasons hard to pinpoint precisely but found in areas of study as diverse as philosophy, botany, and geography, people in general felt they could and should give more time and attention to the particulars of their earthly existence.

Thus, from the moment of its inception, the most admired feature of northern European fifteenth-century painting was the visual realism that became the hallmark first of Netherlandish art and which then exerted a strong influence on artists in all the northern lands. This style of painting was immediately judged as vital and new--an *ars nova*--because of its uncanny ability to mimic, on a two-dimensional surface, the myriad effects of colour and light to be seen in the visible world. Contemporary accounts give the impression that the eyes of artists and their observers had suddenly, as if by a miracle, been opened.

Many observers, from the fifteenth century to the present day, have accepted the apparent visual truth of the imagery unquestioningly. But to what extent is it justifiable to take this artistic realism literally? Was it meant to certify exactly the way something looked at a particular moment or was it, like today's photography and documentary film, essentially shaped by the artist? We will look at this remarkable development of artistic realism from several different perspectives, concentrating on the fifteenth-century Netherlandish origins of realism.

**Fact, Symbol, and Ideal**

While one of the aims of this art must clearly have been to evoke wonder in the viewer, the subtlety and sophistication of its realism must also be acknowledged and explored. It is not simply the embodiment of a modern objective view of reality, replacing the time-worn mystical and subjective bent of the Middle Ages. In the fifteenth century, reality, and its representation in art, was still viewed as magical, capable of being manipulated by both God and humankind. Thus, an art that might initially seem to be a naive record of visual experience revealed ultimately a reality that was highly conventional, simultaneously factual and emblematic. With the benefit of modern critical distance, the strands that these artists wove together so seamlessly in creating their worlds can be unravelled; and, at least in general terms, the meanings it was meant to convey may be ascertained.

Fortunately, there is at least a small amount of documentary evidence to serve as a guide. By the middle of the fifteenth century, contractual agreements made between artists and their patrons specified that, in religious scenes such as the Annunciation or the Nativity, contemporary furniture found in the homes of the "seigneurs et bourgois" was to be included. Thus, one may be reasonably sure of, for
example, the fifteenth-century authenticity of the lush red bed depicted in the *Arnolfini Double Portrait* (Fig. 3). This phenomenon can be called "a descriptive realism of particulars."

Immediately, a further possibility arises. Were not only individual still-life details but entire interior settings meant to be accurate or specific records of contemporary reality? There is no documentary evidence to support this supposition; no contemporary contract dictates to an artist that he portray accurately some particular domestic or ecclesiastical interior. What seems rather to be the case is that artists freely wove together details from different environments in order to make stereotyped wholes. This is difficult to prove absolutely in the case of domestic interiors, since so few survive intact from the period, but it is easy to demonstrate in the case of church interiors where the vast majority of models available to the artists survive—for none was copied or recorded exactly.

One initial conclusion that can be drawn from this situation involves the contradiction of a theory of realism growing incrementally over time. If realism developed in such a linear fashion, aspects or details of visible reality would, over time, be progressively assembled in order to create an ultimate or total image of truth. In fact, the episodic, puzzle-like nature of northern European realism was never abandoned. This is not to say that, over the course of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, artists did not improve their ability to portray aspects of the physical world, but images from this earlier time demonstrate that a linear developmental theory of realism is much too literal and single-minded a concept to describe the complexity of the art.

**Part I—Illustrations**

Map of Northern Europe showing location of chief commercial and artistic centres in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

1. **ROGER VAN DER WEYDEN**  
*St. Luke Portraying the Virgin*, c. 1435-40. Panel, 1.4 x 1.1 m. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Virgin sits in front of, not on, the bench, thus indicating her humility (a prime Christian virtue). On the armrest of the bench is a small carving of Adam and Eve with the serpent, a reminder that the Christ Child and Virgin Mary are the New Adam and New Eve come to undo the sins of the first. At the painting's far right, is St. Luke's study with a writing desk and, reclining on the floor, an ox, one of the four Apocalyptic beasts described in the Book of Revelation (4:6-8) as surrounding the throne of God and which were used as symbols of the four Gospels.
2. JEAN FOUQUET  
Self-portrait, c. 1450. Enamel on copper, diameter 6.8 cm. Louvre, Paris. Fouquet's Self-portrait is painted in gold on a black enamel surface, a unique example from this period of a portrait in this technique. It bears some resemblance to earlier Netherlandish enamels, which were, however, painted in grey, not gold. Some similar enamelled portraits from the ancient Roman Empire were also being discovered during Fouquet's lifetime. The work is considered to have been a self-portrait, from the direct glassy stare of the sitter, typical of many self-portraits.

3. JAN VAN EYCK  
Arnolfini Double Portrait, 1434. Panel, 81.8 x 59.7 cm. National Gallery, London. Innumerable details in the image seem to shed light on this couple's relationship and the function of their portrait. The crystal prayerbeads could have been a wedding gift from husband to wife, meant to reinforce the need for the woman as temptress (Eve's successor) constantly to engage in prayer. The household dusting brush, which hangs from the bedstead, probably referred to the importance of the woman's domestic duties. Carved on the bedstead is a statue of a woman with a dragon, who could be St. Margaret (patroness of childbirth) or St. Martha (patroness of housewives). Such details in fifteenth century northern works are often indicators of the social, political or religious interests of the patrons.
4. JAN VAN EYCK
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434, detail of the mirror, signature, and hands. National Gallery, London. The carved monster on the bench at the rear of the chamber -- which seems to float over the couple's hands--perhaps denotes their belief that sin must be exorcised from their lives before they could have children. Unfortunately, they remained childless, although the woman, by pulling up her dress, clearly wants to appear pregnant (fertile).

5. MASTER OF THE ST. LUCY LEGEND
*Virgin Among Virgins in a Rose Garden*, c. 1480. Panel, 79.1 x 60 cm. The Detroit Institute of Arts. The saints in the foreground are, left to right, St. Ursula (identified by the arrows at her feet), St. Catherine (being mystically married to Christ), St. Barbara (holding a lily), and St. Cecilia (her name is written on her neckline). Many paintings done in the late fifteenth century in the Netherlands feature these female saints and scenes from their lives.

6. ADAM KRAFT
*Self-portrait*, from the base of a Holy Sacrament House, c. 1493-96. Stone sculpture, approximately life-size. Lorenzkirche, Nuremberg. Kraft is one of three life-size figures (the other two are thought to be his assistants) who help support the over 18.2 meter high Sacrament House, a stone shrine meant to hold the reserved host. It was a common practice for German carvers to include their self-portraits in works like this.

7. JEAN LE TAVERNIER
*Town Gate and Street Scene*, c. 1458-60. Manuscript illumination from David Aubert, *Les Chroniques et Conquetes de Charlemagne*, ms. 9066, fol. 11, parchment, page size 42.2 x 29.5 cm. Bibliotheque Royale Albert ter, Brussels.
8. PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER
*Artist and Patron*, c. 1565. Pen and ink drawing, 25x21.6cm. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna. One observer has suggested that Bruegel may have intended this to be a portrait of Albrecht Durer, who had been depicted in a humanist dialogue as the epitome of a crusty and assertive artist hounded by foolish buyers.

9. BOUCICAUT MASTER
*Visitation*, c. 1410. Manuscript illumination from the Book of Hours of Mare-chat Boucicaut, ms. 2, fol. 65v., 27 x 19 cm. Musee Jacquemart-Andre, Paris. The Virgin Mary is here shown as Queen of Heaven, with two attendant angels holding up her train and carrying her prayerbook. This no doubt would have reinforced the noble standing of the patrons of this work.