'Curious Pictures' and the art of description

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The descriptive style
This paper is a comment on the meaning of trim contours, clean and copious detail, and glossy finish in northern painting of the seventeenth century. This manner of painting was often used to render objects like flowers, fruits, animals, and insects, although in principle it could represent any object. Such painting is sometimes called 'descriptive' because it appears unusually faithful to natural models.

One interesting set of contemporary comments on the descriptive manner surrounded the works of the so-called fijnschilders, or 'fine painters.' The paint surfaces of the Leiden masters Gerrit Dou and Frans van Mieris were characterized as nette or gladde ('neat' or 'smooth'), against the losse or rauw ('loose' or 'rough') manner of the Venetian school and of Dou's teacher Rembrandt. These masters produced little wonders of oil technique. Anyone would have reported the local historian Jan Orlers in 1641, 'at the neatness and curiosity' (netteyt ende curiennesheyt) of these paintings. The Leiden school was equally praised for its fidelity to the natural model. The Italian buyer Giovacchino Guasconi, for example, reported in 1675 that when asked to paint exotic flora and fauna around a figure of St Francis Xavier, Mieris refused because he had never seen such things with his own eyes. Orlers stressed that Dou worked naer het leven, from the life. Joachim von Sandart, the German art historical chronicle of the next generation, and Roger de Piles, the French critic and theorist, said the same about Dou. The painter Philips Angel saw Dou's netteyt vanquishing beholders with schijn eygentijcksche kracht, or the 'power of the appearance of the real.'

The smooth or finished manner was associated with descriptive tasks, for example flower or animal painting, well before the successes of the Leiden school, and in many parts of Europe. But the Dutch had made a specialty of it. Karel van Mander of Haarlem, the painter, theorist, and historian, linked the modern smooth manner to the legendary mysteries of Jan van Eyck's technique. Even van Eyck's underpainting was 'cleaner and sharper [steviger en scherper] than the finish work of other painters.' The art of painting 'still required this noble invention' of oil glazes before it could 'approach the look of nature more closely, or become more lifelike.'

Was the smooth manner better suited to the task of description than the loose? It would be hard to argue that fine-grained, sharp-edged facture makes a strictly truer representation of reality. The smooth manner renders well some attributes of physical reality, the loose manner renders others. To say that one manner corresponds more closely to reality than the other is really only to say that the means of representation employed corresponds more closely to a standard or expected means of representation. Resemblance is generated by representational conventions. At any rate, the probability of actually deceiving

1 – Eric J. Sluijter, 'Schilders van “cleyne, subtille ende curieuse dingen”': Leidse "fijnschilders" in contemporaine bronnen', in Leidse Fijnschilders, exh. cat. (Leiden, 1988); Peter Hecht, De Hollandse Fijnschilders (Amsterdam, 1989). Both authors point out that the term fijnschilder used to mean painter of oil paintings, as opposed to signboards or houses, and did not take on its modern specialized meaning until the nineteenth century.


3 – Quoted in Sluijter, 'Schilders van "cleyne, subtille ende curieuse dingen",' p. 21.


a beholder is close to zero. All that ‘descriptive’ painting provides is an effect of the real.7

This effect has several factors. First, tight handling of the brush hides any broad and obvious traces of the work’s manual fabrication. Van Eyck’s works, in the phrase of an old eulogist quoted by van Mander, were ‘mirrors, not panels.’8 Of course, the artifice of the brush is still visible at very close range. Indeed, the masking of technique usually brings about just the opposite effect. namely, it calls attention to technique and therefore to the distinction between the representation and reality. The true art, in the classical tag, is to conceal art: *ars est celare artem.*9

Second, an elaborately worked and compartmentalized paint surface can give the impression that the representation lacks design. The artist appears not to have selected among the multiplicity of real data, but merely to have copied what he saw, unthinkingly. Idealist art criticism used to condemn much northern painting for this intellectual deficit, even while ceding its superiority in naturalism. For an apparent chaos of detail bolsters the beholder’s confidence in the artist’s good faith toward reality.

Finally, a representation built out of tiny units appears more reliably linked to physical reality than broader, more generalized depictions. This puts descriptive painting in favorable analogy to writing, which also represents by means of atomic particles (letters or words). This notional atomism is the justification for calling pictures ‘descriptions’ in the first place. Actually, the distinction between description and depiction on the basis of internal structure is fallacious, for each unit of a description is still a description and therefore no less conventional than the whole.10 But there is a successful illusion of accuracy, since small depictions are less disturbingly conventional than large ones. Tiny depictions seem to approach the status of true and natural one-to-one representations.11 The illusion of accuracy results from a kind of calculus, or repeated subdividing, of the visible data. (In another terminology, description is digital while depiction is analog.)

The hypothesis of this paper is that in the seventeenth century, and earlier, the descriptive manner was understood to be a highly wrought, stylish, and rhetorically figured mode of painting. One clue to this state of affairs is the association of the term ‘curious’ with the Leiden painters. Jan Orlers, whom we heard earlier praising Dou’s ‘neatness and curiosity,’ along with his fidelity to nature, also called Dou a painter of ‘small, subtle, and curious things.’ Guscon characterized Miers’ works as ‘curiosamente fatto e con gran nettezza.’12 Sandrart saluted the ‘incomparably curious’ Dou.13 And van Mander had described the drawings of van Eyck himself as ‘very curiously and cleanly *[curieuslijk en syverlijck]* executed.’14 This is interesting because the words *curiosus* and *curiositas*, and their cognates in the modern languages, were traditionally associated with ingenious, elaborately worked, or richly ornamented works. The Authorized Version of the Bible, for example, often described artefacts as ‘curious.’ Bezael, craftsman of the tabernacle, was filled with the spirit of God, ‘in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship,’ in order ‘to devise curious works’ (Exodus 35:30–32).15 The iconophobe St Bernard, on the other hand, deplored ‘curious depictions’ that would distract worshippers.16 Natural phenomena were designated as ‘curiosities’ precisely when they resembled extravagantly
worked human artefacts. It was the uncanny illusion that they had been fashioned by a willful and even perverse intelligence that gave these monstrous rarities their gloomy charisma. A curious literary work, meanwhile, was an allegorical or otherwise rhetorically figured work. The curious work adumbrated through its difficulty and riddling involutions the gravest meanings. In sum, it is not immediately apparent how a curious painting manner, a highly figurative, overdetermined, and self-reflexive manner, could serve simultaneously as a medium of reliable description.

Most of these usages stem from a long Christian habit of condemnation of curiosity. Curiosity was the impulse to improper inquiry, in particular the search for explanations of phenomena beyond the straightforward recourse to divine causation. Curiosity was also what drove craftsmen into vain and pointless embellishment of their work; it was excessive attention to form and craft. And the overwrought artefact was then in turn described as curious. Many of the surviving medieval usages of the word are monastic, and consequently disapproving. Theologians feared the power of the curious artefact or image to distract. Curiosity came to name any excess in an artefact beyond its proper function. Ornament, luxury, superfluity were all chastised as curious. So too was any advertisement of the figured status of a verbal or visual language. Curiosity was the conspicuously human contribution to the work, the mark left on passive matter either by the fabricating hand or by the figuring imagination.

Early science shared many of these excessive and unruly qualities. The pursuit of knowledge was mistrusted because the inquirer snubbed written authority and ventured to meddle with nature itself. The patristic and scholastic tradition feared a poetic and generative moment in empirical research. Properly disciplined theoretical inquiry was a coming home, and an uncovering of what was already known. Free-wandering inquiry, by contrast, would lead to the unheimlich, the uncanny. In the New Testament, ‘curious arts’ meant black magic (Acts 19:19).7 The sixteenth-century explorer André Thevet, who otherwise lauded the inquiring impulse, condemned ‘natural’ and demonic magic with one stroke:

Vray est que l’une est plus vitieuse que l’autre, mais toutés deux pleines de curiosité. Et qu’est-il de beseing, quand nous avons les choses qui nous sont nécessaires, et en entendons autant qu’il plaist a Dieu nous faire capables, trop curieusement rechercher les secrets de nature, et autres choses, desquelles nostre Seigneur s’est reservé a luy seul la cognaisance? Telles curiosités démontrent un jugement imparfait, une ignorance et faute de foy et bonne religion.18

It was not easy to distinguish between scientific and aesthetic fascination. In the Renaissance Kunst- und Wunderkammer, artificial and natural curiosities were ranged side by side: exotic specimens, unheard-of aberrations, ‘sports’ of nature, fantastic artefacts and machines. Scientific investigation yielded disinterested pleasure. The sixteenth-century French naturalist Pierre Belon scorned those who ‘en leur monstrent quelque singularité de l’ouvrage memorable de nature, demandent soudain à quoy telles observations singulieres peuvent profiter’; or those who ‘demandent aux Geometriens et Astrologiens, que leur sert d’estre si curieux d’observer le cours des astres, et le mouvement des cieux … ne quel profit a receu Aristote de sçavoir que l’oyseau nommé en Grec Aegocephalus, et en Latin Capriceps,

17 – The Vulgate read ‘multi autem ex his qui fuerant curiosa sectati’; curiosa translated la perierga.

qu’interprétons un oyseau de nuict, est sans rate, et qu’il a le fief attaché partie à l’estomach, partie au foye.’ Belon even recognized the adventure involved in the most routine descriptive tasks: he did not believe that ‘peindre ou décrire un oyseau ou animal cognue de chacun [fût] ouvrage ou il n’y a erudition.’ The late medieval and early modern curiosus is a refiguration of the modern aesthetic: endowed with a surplus of imagination, but solitary, sterile, eccentric in habits, unaccountable.20

Scientific inquiry and artistic poiesis were the common targets of the theological critique of curiosity, both severed from authentic knowledge of the divine. This affiliation of inquiry and imagination looks thoroughly unmodern. To see this one only needs to jump a little farther ahead, to Kant’s Third Critique, where Kant draws a sharp boundary between the scientific and the aesthetic appreciations of a flower. ‘What kind of a thing a flower is,’ Kant says, ‘hardly anyone knows other than the botanist. And even the botanist, who recognizes the sexual organs of the plant, takes no account of this natural end when he judges it according to taste.’ But when the naturalist is exercising his curiosity, he respects no frame – real or virtual – that would truncate or uproot the flower, sever it from its roots or pluck it from the cycles of nourishment and sexual generation. The point of the scientist’s descriptive discipline is to level the exotic, to convert the unfamiliar into the explicable. The artist who paints the same rare specimen, by contrast, establishes a seal around his description in order to keep it suspended in a state of exoticism.

This model provided the ground for the modern evaluation of the Netherlandish achievement in painting. Since Kant’s time, more or less, Netherlandish artists have been perversely celebrated for all the ways they fail to resemble artists – for wielding their brushes and training their sight more in a spirit of neutral investigation than fantasy. This tradition of interpretation emphasizes the attentiveness of Dutch art to mundane detail and its relative insouciance toward Mediterranean standards of decorum or beauty. The attractive and profoundly paradoxical notion of Dutch art as a descriptive anti-aesthetic was precisely made possible by Kant’s clean cut between the scientist’s interested inquiry and the artist’s imagination – his decision to consign curiosity solely to the scientist.

Such an interpretation properly recognizes the revolutionary potential of pictorial description. But it takes too seriously description’s own rhetoric of neutrality and objectivity. Although the anti-aesthetic reading ironically inverts the Italianate and classical critique of northern art, in doing so it effectively accepts the terms of that critique.

Description, it turns out, is a highly abstract and formalized procedure. Description disfigures its object. The scholastic critics of early modern inquiry appreciated this. Hegel recognized it too, and stressed the tendency of the descriptive method to dismember and distort the natural object. His aim was not to discredit description, but to justify it:

This superficial raising up from particularity, and equally superficial form of universality which the sense data are merely taken up into, without ever themselves becoming universal – this description of things – is not yet a process motivated by the object. Rather, the motivation is provided by the description itself. The object, as it is described, thus loses all its interest; once the object is described, another must be taken up, and still another sought, in order that the description never cease.
Description commences after the object has been selected and framed. ‘That by which things are known is more important to description than the remaining range of sense properties, which are indispensable to the thing itself, but which consciousness does without.’22 The practice of description is predicated on a clean split between subject and object, and thus presumes that the attributes of the resulting representation derive exclusively from the object and not the describing subject. Description deals best with superficial and static qualities of the object rather than its life or history; and yet in the representation those qualities are deceptively presented as simple and permanent. Finally, the descriptive process is not ‘interested’ in its own results. When the object is described, the subject moves on to the next object. In other words, the meaning of the description is determined from another point of view altogether. In this way unruly description earned its status as the fundamental discipline of the modern natural sciences.

Descriptive painting certainly had plenty in common with descriptive scientific practice. Both were stylish. An apparently neutral, descriptive medium like the Dutch ‘fine’ painting seems as far removed as possible from the wild fancies that riled the monastic theologians. Yet the very fact that contemporary beholders called this manner ‘curious’ suggests that they were seeing not only the labor concealed behind the surface, but also certain excessive, dynamic, and ornamental qualities that may not any longer be so easy to see. There was plenty of art in the art of description. The persistence of the term ‘curious’ also suggests that the older ethical critiques of artifice still provided a living framework for some of the most sophisticated and stylish seventeenth-century painting. Indeed, this paper will argue that smooth facture and fastidious detail in northern painting are intelligible only within the critical context established by the tradition of Christian imagery, with its permanent nostalgia for a neutral and natural pictorial order.

**Medieval mistrust of curiosity**

The Latin word *curiousus* meant ‘inquiring,’ and from the beginning it had a pejorative shade. The *curiousus* was a prying, inquisitive meddler, even an actual spy. The word was formed out of the substantive *cura*, meaning ‘care.’ It became *curiousus* rather than *curatus* apparently on the model of the older word-pair *studium*–*studioseus*. *Curiosus* is attested in Plautus, Terence, and Catullus, but especially in Cicero, who coined the substantive *curiositas*. The Stoics in particular despised intellectual self-indulgence. Seneca frequently sketched the perils of vain and unbridled inquiry, or the ‘Greek illness.’ Oversubtle philosophers had sacrificed *reto verba*. Even Socrates was accused of an idle and excessive desire for knowledge.23

The outlook for curiosity under Christianity was bleaker still. ‘Les Chrestiens,’ Montaigne observed in the ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond,’ ‘ont une particuliere cognoissance combien la curiosite est un mal naturel et original en l’homme. Le soing de s’augmenter en sagesse et en science, ce fut la premiere ruine du genre humain: c’est la voye par oul il s’est precipite à la damnation eternelle.’24 Curiosity conspicuously resembled a sensual appetite. Tertullian and St Augustine deplored the desire for knowledge. Curiosity implied dissatisfaction with the theological version of things. Augustine contrasted the *curiosus*—who insists on seeing for himself, who wants to know

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23 André Laibhardt, ‘*Curiositas*: Nôes sur l’histoire d’un mot et d’une notion’, *Museum Helveticum*, 17 (1960), pp. 206–207. 24 *Curiosus* was roughly equivalent to the Greek *prêeres*. The word was used positively as well, in the sense of an appropriate solicitousness or attention to duty.

what does not concern him—with the properly focused studiosus. In Book x of the Confessions he defined curiosity, following 1 John 2:16, as concupiscientia oculorum, ‘lust of the eyes.’

There ensued a long litany of patristic and scholastic critiques of the hubristic, illegitimate craving for knowledge. Unsupervised inquiry was anathematized as magic or heresy. Aquinas condemned curiosity as a form of acedia, or spiritual apathy. On the north façade of Chartres Cathedral curiosity was allegorized as an ape. A figure labelled Justitia runs him through with her sword—an animal passion done in by a virtue. The ape’s folly is not merely that he fails to recognize his true object and his own limits, nor that he fails to apprehend that object. The problem is that the ape enjoys his play. Research propelled by mere sensory friction is as pointless as sport. One of the dangers of sensory research into the mysteries of the universe was the pleasure taken in it. ‘What else does curiosity seek,’ asked Augustine, ‘than the joy of knowing things?’ (De rerum cognitione laetitia). The Dutch theologian of the Devotio moderna, Wessel Gansfort, explained the distinction as follows: ‘Knowledge differs from wisdom just as does the joke from the serious, play from study, curiosity [curiositas] from understanding [consilium]: for one is the action, but the other the result.’

Much has been written on the incremental subversion of this point of view in the late middle ages. The crime of the magus was redundancy: truth was already known, through revelation. But once theology lost confidence in revelation and instead imagined a hidden God, there was no choice but to attend to the world. The inventory of the world came to look less and less pointless. For Hans Blumenberg, one of the central and radically original achievements of modernity was the abandonment of an Aristotelian belief in a ‘natural’ correspondence between theory and the world, in favor of a ‘culture of measurement’ in which the incremental process of investigation itself yields the results. The proper scientific investigation is conducted without any hopes or illusions about an ultimate resting point. But even this practical legitimation of the inductive method was long accompanied by traditional-sounding warnings from the humanists. Francis Bacon himself wrote that if the wit of man ‘work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance and profit.’

Here we are looking at another, parallel tradition of usages which attracted less attention from the humanists: curiositas as the care that an artist put into a work. Monastic theologians were especially wary of the curious image. The attempts of the various orders to stem the proliferation of sacred images have long been familiar to historians of medieval art. In 1261, for example, the Carthusian Statuta antiqua demanded that monks remove all ‘pictured or curious tapestries and cushions’ (tapetia universa et quarrelli pictutari vel curiosi) from their cells, and that in general all churches and living quarters be emptied of ‘curious pictures’ (picturae curiosae). These guidelines were regularly flouted, especially far from the Grande Chartreuse. In 1367 the General Chapter wrote and disseminated new sets of statutes:

Because in many establishments of our order in the provinces panels painted with curious images [tabulae curiosis imaginibus depictae] are multiplying on altars, along with other diverse pictures with escutcheons and coats-of-arms of laymen,
and with female figures in glass windows and other places, against the holy simplicity and humility of the order and against the statutes, by which notable men are not a little scandalized; we ordain that all such painted tablets and other curious pictures [curiosae picturae] be removed, as instructed . . . .

By the mid-fifteenth century the order had to spell it out again: ‘We reprehend curious pictures and images [picturae et imagines curiosae], or anything not respectable [inhonesti] in churches and monasteries of the order, either in windows, or in panels, stones, walls, and other places, so damaging and contrary to honesty of morals and the simplicity and humility of our religion.’

It is not clear how to reconcile these strictures with the many paintings made for Carthusians, including portraits, by major fifteenth-century artists like van Eyck, Petrus Christus, Enguerrand Quarton, Hans Memling, and the Master of St Bartholomew—unless the rules were direct responses to such brazen provocations.

The monastic orders harbored their far-flung clerics for two basic reasons. First, painted or carved images were costly and could thus become sources of pride to their patrons or owners. They could also become tokens in an invidious social competition. The escutcheons mentioned in the Carthusian statutes were irritating reminders that sacred art was not easily disentangled from money and status. Still, more irritating was the notion that the taste for complicated images was a luxury of the rich. Gerard Groote, the founder of the Devotio moderna, praised poverty for its indifference to ‘the exquisite, the curious, and the difficult’.

Pieter Blommeveen censured in a treatise of 1526 those self-indulgent clerics who dwelt in edificia curiosa with many servants. One extreme and clear example of this sense that possession tainted use is the resentment that some theologians felt for the private ownership of books. There was no question of the value of the content of a book. But there was a sense that if one actually owned the volume one would be more likely to attend to such accidental attributes as the binding, the script, or the illustrations. In other words, sensually appealing sacred artefacts were suspicious even if they fulfilled their didactic or signifying function. This vein of criticism does not raise the issue of the relationship between form and meaning.

The second reason the monks mistrusted images is possibly more interesting. In this case the curious or beautiful image is unwelcome because it fails to bring across its message. This charge implies that the form of the image is divisible into those elements that reliably convey a given meaning, and those elements that interfere with that meaning.

The line between the functional components and the excess is clear enough in many kinds of objects. High and late medieval reformers—and not only the monastic watchdogs—were good at isolating the luxurious superfluity of design in clothing, interior decorating, ecclesiastical apparatus, even the presentation of food. That excess was often called ‘curious.’ In 1235, for instance, the Cistercians ordered the removal of a pavimentum curiosum, and the punishment of the abbot who installed it, at the monastery church of Le Gard in the diocese of Amiens. The twelfth-century French cleric Peter Cantor denounced ‘superfluity and curiosity in clothing, meals, and buildings.’

One bishop specified in his testament of 1390 that he was to be covered by a simple, not a curious tomb. Johannes Capistranus preached against...
‘superfluity with respect to preciousness, with respect to an excess of pleasingness, with respect to curiosity. 30

Similar admonishments were aired continually by the Dutch reformers. 31 One report on the reform of a monastery from around 1500 lamented that ‘all diligence and study was first to dispose the chambers with various enticements… and it glittered to exceed the others in curiosity and sumptuousness.’ 32 A manual on confession condemned ‘large ornaments… and curious draperies wrapped about the body,’ as well as ‘women who curiously make up their heads.’ 33 Municipal sumptuary laws took aim at ‘ostentation, curiosity [füryüzklay], and superfluous splendor.’ 34 It should be pointed out that curiosity in an artefact, however, even an ecclesiastical accessory, was very often a term of wonder and praise. There are several biblical examples, mentioned earlier. A further example is found in an English chronicle from the mid-fifteenth century, which described a bishop’s staff ‘as precious, / and in making full curiouse.’ 35

But what was the equivalent in painting or sculpture to the vain excesses of dress or the carvings on a crozier? It is not so easy to distinguish the materiality of the image from its function. This is a problem whenever the main function of an object is to signify, since every part of the image, even the curious parts, will signify something. There is no easy way to splinter the image into its useful and useless components.

Language poses the same difficulty, indeed even more so than images. Yet even here one finds a basis of superfluity. Curiosity in language, in this period, was the unusually difficult, ornate, subtle, or recherché verbal manner. Chaucer apologized for the absence of ‘curious enditing [i.e. writing or composition] & hard sentence’ in his Treatise on the Astrolabe, a book written for a child. 36 Thomas à Kempis recommended abandoning ‘curious arguments of words, which hinder profitable devotion,’ and ‘curious words’ which distract. 37 Calvin, near the beginning of the Institutes, declined to resort to ‘longue [et] curiouse demonstration, pour mettre en avant les tesmoignages, qui servent à esclaircir et approuver la majesté de Dieu.’ 38 It was always somebody else’s style that was curious, as if one could only arrive at a natural or straightforward style through a negative example. The simple mode was thought to lack style altogether and was thus taken as a truer or more natural mode. This is a fallacy. Simplicity is a style in its own right; the very absence of conventional ‘ornamental’ words is significant. And contrariwise, those superfluous words that convert straightforward communication into misleading style are by no means meaningless. The partitioning of style into bare words and ornament really amounts to a partitioning of content into important and trivial meanings. It is a doctrinal or political distinction masquerading as an epistemological distinction.

Curious language is language whose effect has traditionally been characterized with visual metaphors, such as ‘figure’ or ‘image.’ Such metaphors attempt to isolate operations of language that somehow betray language, for example by not being reducible to propositions. Curiosity is after all the improper attempt to gain knowledge through vision. Thus the interest of the application of the concept to images. Curiosity in an image is apparently what is essentially visual about the image, what is proper to the image. Curiosity is what distinguishes the image’s way of meaning from the text’s way. The critique of pictorial curiosity, although iconophobic, actually articulates
a psychology of creation and reception with more color than most other premodern discourses of the image. Most iconophobic texts address more comfortably issues of subject matter, location, exhibition, and function of the image.

The curious part of the image is what is left after the part translatable into a linguistic proposition has been subtracted. Sometimes a writer attempting to characterize this remainder will resort to the old topos of indescribability. The modern *locus classicus* of this manoeuvre is Petrarch’s sonnet 215:

Amor s’è in lei con onestat’ aggiunto,
con beltà naturale, abito adorno
et un atto che parla con silenzio,
et non so che nelli occhi …

Here is Chaucer in his dream-poem *The House of Fame*, about a generation later:

That hit astonyeth vit my thought,
And maketh al my wit to swynke,
On this castel to bethynke,
So that the grete craft, beate,
The cast, the curiosite
Ne kan I not to yow devye;
My wit ne may me not suffice. (iii, 83ff.)

And in Caxton’s *Golden Legend* of 1483: ‘to wryte the curiosyte and werke of the temple … passeth my connyng to expresse.’ 49 This linguistic abdication became a commonplace in Italian Renaissance writing on art.

It is no wonder that all the old references to curious sacred images are deprecatory. The conspicuously wrought sacred image distracted beholders from its own subject matter. Profane images were free to indulge in curiosity and play. Chaucer’s narrator in *The House of Fame* found himself

Within a temple ymade of glas,
In which there were mo images
Of gold, standing in sundry stages,
And mo curious portraiture,
And quent int manner of figures
Of gold worke than I saw ever. (i, 120ff.)

These were figures of Venus, Cupid, and Vulcan ‘in portreiture,’ and a series of Aenacan scenes. 50 Certainly the sculptures on a fountain imagined by Spenser in the *Faerie Queene* were profane:

Most goodly it with curious imagere
Was over-wrought, and shapes of naked boyes,
Of which some seemed with lively jollitee,
To fly about, playing their wanton toyes
Whilst others did themselves embaye in liquid joyes. (iii, xii, 60) 51

But sacred images were another matter. Any conspicuous principle of design in the work, any surplus of workmanship, any luxurious and appealing material, any self-serving artisanal self-display was curious and dangerous. The surplus notoriously provoked emotional and somatic responses. St Bernard regretted that the eyes of the monks encounter curiosities that delight them, and not sad things that would sustain them; *delectare* literally meant
54 ‘Curiosas depiciones ... quae dum orantium in se retorquent aspectum, impedientur et affectum.’ Quoted in de Bruyne, Études d’Esthétique Médicale, ii, bk 3, ch. 4.


‘draw away’, that is, from serious business. He denounced ‘curious depictions that twist the gaze during prayer and entangle the mind.’ Vision operates here like an extension or prosthesis of the sense of touch and is thus highly vulnerable to temptation. Attentiveness to form becomes a kind of carnal knowledge. Thomas à Kempis pointed out balefully that ‘he who is dead in the flesh, does not see the curious and the beautiful’—meaning that not until death is one liberated from this appetite. The ‘wrought’ aspects of a work are moreover direct traces of the artist’s hand. This indexical reference is automatically more compelling than any merely iconic resemblance of the work to its proper object, the sacred personality or story.

This line of thinking was followed by later iconophobes as well. Sixteenth-century German clerics made uneasy by the cult of images, Protestants and conservative Catholics alike, condemned any excess of kunst in the religious image. Kunst meant either ornament, that is forms that did not contribute to the expository content of the picture, or artistry, that is any distracting display of skill. These critics of the modern image pined for the art of a simpler, purer past. Already in the late twelfth century Peter Cantor observed how labor ‘is turned toward faultiness, and things fall into vice, if it is lacking in art. This is seen in the superfluity, curiosity, and sumptuousness of our buildings.’ Behold, he lamented, ‘how far we have retreated from the simplicity of the ancients in the construction of buildings!’

One of the few iconographic principles found in the monastic texts was the hostility to female forms. For the male beholder—particularly the clerics addressed by St Bernard or the Carthusian General Chapter—the figure of the woman was the unknown and the uncanny. It was presumably not the living woman who posed a threat to cell-bound monks, but the representation of woman—the pornographe. The beautiful image was also metaphorically a woman. Like the image, the woman supposedly lured admirers by her supplements: her cosmetic excesses, her hair, her garments, her superfluous curves. And just as erotic fantasy dangerously supplements a properly chaste love, the private poesis that creates and savors idols is a supplement to worship.

Any style can become the object of a nostalgia for purity, and any other can become a dangerous harlot. But there was nevertheless some objectivity to the iconophobic critiques. One criterion of pictorial curiosity was a surplus of information, for example through gratuitous description. Another related structural criterion was a proliferation of marginal details and episodes. The Dominican St Antonino, Archbishop of Florence in the mid-fifteenth century, warned that to paint ‘curiositatis [curiosa] in stories of the saints or in churches, which have no value in stimulating devotion, but laughter and vanity, such as monkeys, or dogs chasing hares, or the like, or vain adornments of clothing, appears superfluous and vain.’ Antonino chose examples that could stand for all marginalia. Monkeys suggested foolish play and thus symbolized art-making. But the ape was also the symbol of the work of art, which grotesquely parodied its natural object, just as the ape was nature’s parody of man. The characteristic response to ape and art was idle amusement.

In the phrase of the twelfth-century grammarian Alexander Neckam: ‘The ape caters to vain curiosity [vanus servat curiositatem], making the bystanders laugh with his ridiculous antics. Antonino’s cavorting dog, meanwhile, recalls Augustine’s repudiation of curiosity in the Confessions, where he confessed [among other things] that a dog chasing a hare might easily hold
my attention and distract me from whatever serious thoughts occupied my mind … Unless you made me realize my weakness and quickly reminded me, either to turn my eyes from the sight and raise my thoughts to you in contemplation, or to despise it utterly and continue on my way, I should simply stop and gloat.39 In Antonino’s warning, the dog chasing the hare actually repeats the desultory, meaningless wanderings of the beholder’s eye about the picture. Petrarch, in his dialogue De remediis utrisque fortunae, had also identified curiosa dispersio as a key to pleasure: ‘Thou conceivest delight in the pencill and colours, wherein the price, and cunning, and variety, and curious dispersing, doth please thine eye.’40

Centrifugal motion was the structural principle of such a picture. Antonino was not necessarily thinking of specific monkeys and dogs in paintings, but merely using them as stock devices to denote the sort of painting he deplored, which must have generally been the loosely structured, various, paratactic mode characteristic of Pisanello and other northerners, and acknowledged by contemporary humanists in brimming ekphrases.41 Curiosity as a cognitive habit was generally understood as the impulse to pointless motion. St Bernard scorned the ‘restless curiosity [inaequita curiositate] to build, to tear down, to turn squares into circles.42 Aquinas defined curiosity as one of the species of zagatic mentis circa illicita, or ‘straying of the mind toward illicit things.’43 Curiosity propelled the faithful into endless pilgrimages and image-cults.44 The same motor would propel the modern tourist: Rabelais had one of the characters in Pantagruel recount how on his travels he had ‘curiously contemplated the site and the beauty of Florence, the structure of the Duomo, the sumptuousness of the temples and magnificent palaces.45 And it was very often the curiosity of the wrought object, or the monument, that initiated the pilgrim’s or the traveller’s trajectory (here we switch back to the other semantic tradition). John Wycliffe, for example, around 1380, lamented that ‘they draw the people in the holiday by coryprute of gay windows.46

What is notable in these texts is the assumption that both seeing and making are active, even enterprising, processes. Seeing is clearly much more than a merely passive reception of impressions; the eye pursues the world. And on the other side of the image, the artist does not merely replicate the world, but makes a world. It must be stressed how much this adventurous aspect of making was taken for granted in this period, even by the likes of Jean Gerson, who conceded the artist’s licence to invent by quoting Horace’s famous tag, ‘pictoribus atque poetis quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas,’ or ‘painters and poets always had equal authority to venture anything they liked.’47 This is exactly what the iconophobes feared: the forward movement of the eye and the hand, the initiative, the unpredictability, the leap into the unheimlich and the unfamiliar. The picture’s curiosity contributed to the representation of the unseen. Fantasy fabricated images of the beyond, the transcendental, the unearthly, the unnamed. Ornament and excess augmented the image’s range of reference; they supposedly initiated a swerve out of the routine of normal representation in hopes of capturing the unrepresentable.

The generative powers of the creative imagination were simultaneously exploited and feared, especially in the mystical tradition. A fourteenth-century English mystical text, for instance, the Cloud of Unknowing, warned the devout not to mistake such fancies for adequate figures of the divine. The hungry mind

39 St Augustine, Confessions, X, 35.


41 Baxandall, Giusto and the Orators, esp. pp. 78–96.

42 Migne, Patrologiae Latinae, vol. 192, col. 980, cited in Zacher, Curiosity and Pilgrimage, p. 27, see also p. 52. In De diligendo Dei Bernard made punning connections between curare and curiositas.

43 Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologica, ii, ii, q. 35, art. 4.

44 Zacher, Curiosity and Pilgrimage, ch. 3, with many quotations.


46 Cited in the Oxford English Dictionary, under curiosity.

of the mystic climbs impetuously toward the sky; it imagines a God in rich clothes and set in a throne, ‘fer more curiously than euer was he depeyned in this erthe.’ Again and again the author (probably a Carthusian) abominates the ‘coriouste‘ that seeks truth ‘bi making of figures of the last and the least worthi thinges of thees beyng visible thinges, as stocks or stones, and seyen [say] that it [the First Cause] hath nothing abouen [beyond] tho wickyd & manyfolde formaciouns, maad of hemself in here fantastick ymagynatyue wittes.’ In this text, the curious wit that indulges in abstract speculation and the curious imagination that carves stocks and stones are equal targets of resentment. This is the clearest instance of the convergence of the two semantic traditions.68

Franciscus Junius on curiosity and judgment

What happened to this adventurous version of curiosity? When sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts speak of a curious manner of painting or drawing, they are usually referring to manual control. Curiosity was associated with technique, even technology. Joachim von Sandrart, writing about Peter Vischer’s bronze Tomb of St Sebaldis in Nuremberg in 1675, remarked on ‘the great industry and curiosity of the casting.’89 John Evelyn observed in a marginal note written on a copy of his own treatise on engraving (1662) that the art of mezzotint had since ‘arrived to the utmost curiosity and accurateness.’90 Karel van Mander reported that many excellent portraits by the ‘clean’ (suyver) hand of Hans Holbein were still to be seen in great houses, ‘indeed so many that one wonders how in the span of his life he managed to produce so much neat and curious work’ (net curieus werck).91 The emphasis is on skill and on the time invested in paintings.

But in other instances curiosity implied fancy and excess. Sandrart, describing an altarpiece by Hans von Kulmbach, mentioned its dependence on a preliminary drawing by Dürer that he happened to own himself, ‘sketched with the pen very ingeniously [sinnreich] and curiously.’ That pen and watercolor drawing survives and it is indeed stylish and animated, without a trace of aridity or pedantic diligence.92 Sandrart also wrote that many of the early German engravers ‘curiously completed and decorated the work of the goldsmiths.’93 Thus one supposes that when the Elizabethan poet Thomas Watson invoked the `cunning hand and ... curious pencil’ of Apelles, he had in mind something more than a merely disciplined draftsmanship.94

This slight confusion about what a curious manner was, and how to judge it, is multiply reflected in the great contemporary treatise on the classical literature of art, De pictura veterum by Franciscus Junius. Junius was a Protestant of French and Flemish birth, educated at Leiden, who served from 1621 as librarian to the Earl of Arundel. His book appeared in 1637 with a dedication to Charles 1. The next year Junius published his own revised English translation, The Painting of the Ancients. A Dutch translation followed in 1641. The book, a collage of classical citations, is organized not historically but analytically. It amounts to a treatise on aesthetics. Although Junius was basically a classicist and an idealist, he was troubled by the ways beauty and grace interfered with the clear intellectual apprehension of form and clouded the beholder’s judgment. In many ways Junius—although himself no connoisseur—was an intellectual patron of the modern discipline of connoisseurship.95 His text has been misprized as a mere antiquarian

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68 The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, Analecta Cartusiana, 3 (Salzburg, 1982), pp. 58 and 121 (from the treatise Hid Divinity); see also pp. 2, 12, 13, 66.

69 Sandrart, Teutsche Academie, p. 62.

70 This note was already published in the 1755 edition; see the modern edition, Evelyn’s Sculpture, ed. C. F. Bell (Oxford, 1966), p. 152.

71 Van Mander, Het Livren, f. 222v. He makes a similar comment about Jan van Hemessen in the section ‘Van verscheyden Schilders ...‘, f. 205r.

72 Berlin, Kupferstickkabinett, KdZ. 64, dated 1511; project for the Tucher altar now in St Sebald, Nuremberg.

73 Sandrart, Teutsche Academie, pp. 76, 80.

74 Thomas Watson, The Hekatopathia, or Passionate Centuries of Love (1582), Dedictatry Epistle, f. 3v.

75 Further Dutch editions in 1659 and 1675. A German translation did not appear until 1770.

compilation, a late product of the medieval anthologizing impulse. This poor reputation dates from Johann Winckelmann, who necessarily rejected Junius’ entire approach to classical art. In fact, Junius’ thinking on the structure of the work of art and the problem of judgment was original enough to have influenced G. P. Bellori and Roland Fréart de Chambray, the classicist art theorists and friends of Poussin. 77

Near the end of De pictura veterum, believing to have said enough to ‘serve for an introduction into a setted way of judging,’ Junius appends a comment on the topic of the pictorial supplement, or paregoron. 78 In Pliny and other ancient writers, paregora are marginal and superfluous embellishments of pictures or artefacts. Quintilian defined paregora (in Junius’ own translation) as ‘such things as are added to the worke for to adorne it.’ Philostratus called them the condimento picturae. The paregoron can also serve as a sort of personal emblem or signature. Galen reported that ‘good workemen use to make some Paregon or by-worke for a document of their Art [specimen artis], upon the bolts and shields: oftentimes also doe they make upon the sword hils and drinking pots, some little images over and above the use of the worke …’

Junius then warns that ‘artists tend to delineate these paregora most incuriously [incuriosiust, i.e. negligently] and therefore do not seem to merit care in examination equal to the workes themselves.’ 79 What does Junius mean when he says that by-works are done carelessly? Surely these supplements were important to the artists. They were appended to the work precisely to make room for non-functional, ursupervised play and for self-advertisement. The paregoron was the place where conventions could be conspicuously relaxed, and where ordinary meaning went on holiday. What the artist neglected in the paregora were the established rules of art that guarantee truthful representation. Proper care, or curiosity, thus means properly oriented workmanship.

Junius expects the beholder to examine the work with care. Evidently he is supposed to evaluate the work and not merely register its content. Junius’ suggestion that the beholder’s care in examining ought to be matched by care of execution implies that the real object of such an examination is the execution. So far, Junius’ critique of the by-work is quite compatible with an idealist theory of art. But this connection between careful judgment and careful execution opens a window on to a potential conflict with idealism.

Already in antiquity, artists were ambivalent about the appeal exerted by their own stylish or eccentric supplements. The best painters were the most likely to undo their own art with clever marginalia or odd subject-matter. Protogenes, in a famous anecdotè recounted in Strabo, found himself ‘much vexed, that the by-worke should be preferred before the worke it selfe.’ When beholders admired the ingenuity of the invention rather than the technique, Zeuxis complained that they ‘commend the mud of our Art.’ In Junius’ text these quotations stand generally for the ways painting oversteps its own functional boundaries, not just through literally marginal devices, but through stylishness. And likewise Junius repeatedly cautions the beholder not to permit his curiosity to slide into contemplation of the marginal or superficial, as curiosity is wont to do: ‘as it is then evident,’ he says, ‘that our curiositie may not busie it selfe too much about poore and frivolous matters, so must we on the contrary endeavour to conceive the whole shew of the represented matter with a large and freely diffused apprehension ….’ Junius wants to divert

79 Francisco Junius, De pictura veterum, bk iii, ch. vii, §12, p. 220. The Painting of the Ancients, in the recent annotated edition by Keith Alldrich, Philipp Fehl and Raina Fehl (Berkeley, 1991), bk iii, ch. vii, §13, p. 310-11. The English and Dutch editions actually end with the discussion of the paregoron; the passage follows the exhortation and is thus literally a supplement.
80 Francisco Junius, De pictura veterum, bk iii, ch. vii, §12, p. 220. ‘Solent vero artifices paregorae ut plurimum incuriosiust delinere: unde neque parern cum ipsius operibus inspiciendo curam videmus mereri.’ In Junius’ own translation, which is not quite accurate: ‘But because the Artificers goe over these workses slightly and with a light hand, so is it that we do likewise for the most part examine them more negligently’, The Painting of the Ancients, bk iii, ch. vii, §13, p. 310 (page citations from the Alldrich-Fehl edition).
curiosity toward serious things: ‘the most earnest intention of our curious mind ought chiefly to employ it selfe about the chiefest and most remarkable things,’ Junius’ invocation of an ekphrasis by Claudian of a dramatic sculptural work suggests the primacy of imitation and emotional content over mere delight: ‘He cannot abide that his curiositie should spend it selfe about matters of small importance, so doth he very seriously observe the most strange miracles of the noble Art, as they doe display themselves in such a noble argument.’

But there is a slight dishonesty imbedded within Junius’ peremptory dismissal of the incurious supplement. This is quickly exposed in the passage on the paregoron. Immediately after dismissing the by-works as careless afterthoughts, Junius quotes Plutarch as follows: ‘We suffer the accessories of the craftsmen, for many are quite neatly done; but in fact they do not always avoid the frigid and the curious’ (frigidum et curiosum, or ψυχρὸν καὶ περιεργὸν in the Greek original). This time Junius is conceding that the by-work can be worked carefully, indeed all too carefully. When the ornament is overwrought, the labor is too apparent and comes to look self-serving. The charge of ‘frigidity’ suggests that whatever representational conventions had been mobilized in the ornament now look unnatural and alien.

This permits Junius to observe, just before he delivers his ultimate warning against the attractions of the supplement, that sometimes ‘great craftsmen, though they append paregora to their work so to speak with less care, nevertheless achieve beauty and the grace of secure facility more happily in these than in the work itself.’ For an instant, the tables are turned. The absence of care becomes a virtue, while curiosity yields more correctness. This reversal is comparable to the confusion about draftsmanship in the passages quoted at the beginning of this section. In Sandart, curiosity was the key to correct drawing, and yet at the same time its absence was temptingly stylish.

This criterion of stylistic negligence lay at the core of Junius’ own ideas on grace, laid out earlier in Book Three, ‘Picture,’ he explains, ‘must follow a bold and careless way of art, or it must at least make a shew of carelesness in many things.’ Junius then calls on an ancient ekphrasis to illustrate this principle:

Philostratus propoundeth unto us a lively example of this same secure and unlaboured Facilitie, when he describeth the picture of many little Cupids wantonly hunting a hare, and carelessly tumbling on heaps for the eagerness of their sportfull chase; ... the Grace of this picture was infinitely graced with the confused falls of the lascivious and pampered little ones, as they were negligibly represented in the worke by such another seeming error of a temerary and confidently careless Art.

Junius is recommending that the negligent look of the paregoron be extended to the whole work. Now the supplement is presumably executed with authentic carelessness. But the work itself cannot simply be dashed off thoughtlessly. Any negligence will have to be feigned, Junius calls this maneuver a ‘seeming error’: the artist needs to break the rules in order to cleave to a higher rule.

Ars est celare artem: this paradox was pointedly cultivated in the north, where thoughtful artists were apt to be defensive about the place of draftsmanship in their work. The principle was derived from rhetoric and particularly from Quintilian. Junius observed that ‘artificers therefore must take great care, least their care be perceived.’ Beauty when it is set forth too carefully, is no beautie. Wee are therefore above all things to take good heed that there do
not appeare in our works a laborious gaynesse and an over-curious affectation of grace.\textsuperscript{85} ‘The artist’s natural tendency was to become absorbed in his own craft. Junius quoted Seneca to this effect: ‘It is more delightfull to an Artificer to paint, then to have done painting: our sollicitude, as long as shee busieth her selfe about the worke, taketh a singular great pleasure in the occupation it selfe.’\textsuperscript{86}

It was exactly this self-indulgent solicitude that the monastic and scholastic sentinels mistrusted. The Renaissance solved the problem by dropping the theological objection and instead recasting the concealment of labor as a matter of manners and good taste. The critique of curiosity came to resemble the gentleman’s disdain for pedantic or overcorrect behaviour. Think of Castiglione; or Montaigne, who observed that ‘personne n’est exempt de dire des fadaises [foolish remarks]; le malheur est de les dire curieusement [i.e. insistently or tediously].\textsuperscript{87} An early seventeenth-century French–English dictionary offered ‘doubtful,’ ‘scrupulous,’ and ‘heedfull’ among the translations of curieux.\textsuperscript{88} Curiosity suggested ignoble pedantry and timorousness. Artists warned against excessive curiosity were doubtless flattered by the expectation that they meet these gentle standards.

This sort of carelessness is obviously anything but random. Carelessness is the product of care and diligence, just as the gentleman’s simplicity is a symptom of the greatest refinement and cultivation. The studied avoidance of curiosity is merely a special case of curiosity. And once curiosity is safely masked, it can flood the entire work, collapsing the distinction between the work and the paradgon.

Striking is the congruence between the ekphrasis Junius chose to illustrate carelessness, and the illustrations of illegitimate curiosity in the medieval texts. Augustine had evoked a dog pursuing a hare to represent the vain and idle errantry of his own mind; St Antonino had lamented dogs chasing hares in the margins of sacred paintings. For Junius, the image of cupids chasing a hare represents the grace of the work, just as did Spenser’s romping fountain-cupids (p. 340). What was once the work’s failing is now the emblem of its beauty. The use of the identical image of ludic movement to illustrate both negligence and curiosity is the clearest demonstration that negligence, the absence of curiosity, has itself become a species of curiosity. Curiosity is an internal movement that appears random but is actually the product of high artifice. Only nature could license such a reversal of the rules of art and a transferring of responsibility over to the artist. Junius therefore offers nature, not as the direct object of imitation in such marginal fancies, but as a structural model for purposeless movement:

Pictures which are judged sweeter than any picture ... [have] something in them which doth not proceed from the laborious curiosistic prescribed by the rules of Art ... the free spirit of the Artificer marking how Nature sporteth her selfe in such an infinite varietie of things, undertooke to doe the same.\textsuperscript{89}

Nature was often called in to legitimate a new principle. Early writing on imagination, inspiration, or fancy, for instance, commonly invoked nature’s own whimsical inventions, the accidental figures found in tree stumps, mountain profiles, or gems.\textsuperscript{90}

The most extreme paradox is the idea that a simple style is the product of refinement and art. The conventional condescension toward the primitive

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., bk iv, ch. vi, §3, p. 289.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., bk ii, ch. vii, §1, pp. 107–9.

\textsuperscript{87} Cited in A. J. Greimas and Teresa Mary Keane, Dictionnaire du moyen français: la Renaissance (Paris, 1992), under curieux.

\textsuperscript{88} Randle Cotgrave, A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues (London, 1611). See also William Shakespeare, King Lear, i, ii, 4: ‘Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom, and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me ...?’

\textsuperscript{89} Junius, The Painting of the Ancients, bk iii, ch. vi, §6, pp. 292–93.

style was still found, for example, in Joachim du Bellay’s disdain for the ‘simplicity of our forefathers who were content to express their conceptions with bare words, without art and ornament, not imitating the curious diligence of the Greeks.’ Junius, however, treats simplicity not as the mere absence of ornament, but as a positive quality. Here again he follows Quintilian: ‘A plain and unaffected simplicitie is commendable for a certain kind of pure ornament it hath, and for a certain kind of neatnesse which seemeth to proceed out of a slender diligence, and is lovely even in women.’ (When Chaucer explained his adoption of a ‘rewde’ rather than a ‘curious’ manner in the Treatise on the Astrolabe, interestingly, he apologized for the ‘superfluity of words,’ suggesting the stylistic of Latinate economy.) Junius represents the rude simplicity of ancient Greek painting as the splendid culmination of a process of refinement: ‘these arts being anciently perfited by the study and care of many and most consummate artificers, came so low about the times of August, that they were ready to give their last gasp…’ The crime of the decadent followers was to overfill the cup, to expend further care on a perfect art: ‘when the Artificers, leaving the simplicitie of the ancients, beganne to spend themselves in garnishing of their works [ultra modum curam cultui impiendentes in his own Latin text], the art grew still worse and worse, til it was at last overthrown by a childishly frivolous affectation of gaynesse.

Like any classicist theorist, Junius by and large mistrusts the colorism, the disorderliness, and the naturalism associated with the Venetian or the northern schools. But he associates these tendencies with curiosity, which shows that even idealists appreciated that northern disorder or Venetian colorism was more than mere unselected, raw nature. Junius recognizes the labor involved. At one point, displaying a certain sympathy for the rough pleasures of northern landscape painting, Junius concedes that ‘the most curious spectators finde themselves singularly delighted with such a disorderly order of a counterfeited rudenesse.’ Elsewhere he echoes a remark of Plutarch’s: ‘There is a wonderfull great difference between pure neatnesse and curious affectation.’ Simplicity is an ornamentation beyond ornament. Even in the texts of the idealists, purity of form sometimes looks less like a metaphysical achievement, and more like a formal refinement.

Junius has a good deal to say, towards the end of his text, about judgment. With the ekphrasis from Claudian, cited above, he suggests that the true purpose of the work is to convey meaning, and that that meaning should furnish the structure of the work. The work’s success in conveying sense should in turn be the principal evaluative criterion. The mind is constantly in danger of slipping away from the important work towards the frivolous parergon. Junius envisons a competition between the intellectual structure of the work and the materiality of the curious supplement. He associates curiosity with pleasure, quoting Cicero: ‘Witty things teach us; curious things [arguta] delight us; grave things move us.’ There is room for delight in the blend. But the senses are not a sound basis for judgment: ‘For our sense doth seldom at the first judg [sic] right of these curiosities, it is an unwary Arbitrator, and mistaketh many things: all the soundnesse and truth of our judgement must proceed onely from reason.’ Excessive care and study may produce dazzling ‘gay-seeming’ effects, but these are as grass choking off the nourishing corn.

And yet when Junius comes to discuss the capacity to draw the finest distinctions among works—‘to tell original from copy, ancient from modern,
good from bad—he falls back on the senses. This time, the basis of judgment is not the intellect, but the scrupulous exercise of curiosity. Attentiveness to the minutiae of form—the same attentiveness that propelled the early modern, proto-scientific practices of discovery and classification—paradoxically authorizes the evaluation of aesthetic quality. Thus Junius esteems ‘the daily practice of a curious eye to be the chiefest means whereby we do attain to such a facilitie of judging …’ The beholder takes as his model the intense and single-minded concentration of the artist himself: ‘How many things doe Painter see in the shadows and eminences, the which wee cannot see?’ Careful execution should be met by careful scrutiny. Here Junius quotes Plutarch, in turn quoting a painter:

[R]ude spectators … are like those that salute a great multitude at once; but neat spectators, and such as are studious of good Arts, may be compared with them that salute one by one: the first namely doe not exactly looke into the workes of the Artificers, but conceive onely a grosse and unshapen image of the workes; where the others going judiciously over every part of the worke, looke upon all and observe all what is done well or ill.”

One is reminded more of the passage where Junius praises the ‘disorderly order’ of the northern landscape, than of Claudian’s ekphrasis of statues. The curious mind scans the surface of the painting, but without a plan. It errs, circles, jumps.

Junius has transformed judgment into an intimate and experiential encounter with the paint surface. Judgment shares its ludic structure with cupids and the dogs. This curiosity operates independently of any interpretation or reading of the picture. And the scrutiny of the curiosities in a painting is properly an affair of leisure and disinterest. Many gentlemen recreate themselves in the contemplation of the divine workes of excellent Artificers, not onely weighing and examining by a secret estimation what treasures of delight and contentment there are hidden in them, but sometimes also viewing and examining therein every little moment of Art [parsula quoque momenta artis] with such infahtigable [sic] though scrupulous care that it is easy to be perceived they do not adknowldg [sic] any greater pleasure.”

Junius here is closer to modern connoisseurship than to classicism.

In fact the affiliation between curiosity and connoisseurship is older than this. The figure of the curiosus, the antiquarian, was already in the sixteenth century credited with subtlety, or the infinite capacity to discriminate and to discern resemblances. In one of the Discours philosophiques of Pontus de Tyard (1557), a character called the ‘Solitaire,’ ascetic and single-minded, engages in debate with the ‘Curieux,’ eloquent and diversely erudite: the hedgehog and the fox, as it were. The Solitaire admires the other’s range and ingenuity, but doubts that the chain of reasoning will lead anywhere: ‘Vous estes assez heurcusement discret pour savoir descouvrir vos conceptions mais j’ay l’appréhension tant dure que si subtils discours n’y peuvent aucunement entrer.’ Curiosity was precisely the tendency to overlook the main point in favor of marginalia or superficialities. This is how the connoisseur sees through content to style and quality. The Roman chronicler and theoretician Giulio Mancini, for example, suggested around 1620 that a great master’s true hand would be found especially in those passages not dependent on literal imitation, such as hair or drapery.

By the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the connoisseur was confident enough to begin distancing himself from his roots in base curiosity. The modern *curiosus* was always shadowed by the image of a bizarre, magus-like figure sequestered in his cabinet. When Galileo, in a letter of 1612, preferred the grand design of Ariosto’s epic to the tortuous ingenuities of the modern Tasso, he compared the latter’s verse to the cluttered cabinet of a droll, middle-headed antiquarian, ‘uno studietto de qualche ometto curioso.’¹⁰⁶ The *curioso* reacts capriciously and subjectively to the works of man and nature; he is incapable of interpretation; he is fascinated by novelty for its own sake. And his obsessions were tainted by the suspicion of possessiveness. A sixteenth-century Latin–French dictionary defined *antiquarius* as one ‘curieux d’avoir ou scévoir choses antiques.’¹⁰⁷ La Bruyère scornfully pronounced: ‘Curiosity is not a taste for what is good or beautiful, but for the rare, the unique, for that which one has and others do not have. It is not an attachment to perfection, but to the popular and the fashionable. It is not an amusement but a passion, and often so violent that it yields to love and ambition only in the pettiness of its object.’¹⁰⁸ For the Comte de Caylus in the next century, the immoderate predilections of the *curieux* rendered him inferior to the true connoisseur.¹⁰⁹

**Description in northern painting**

The Kunst- und Wanderkammer housed both natural curiosities and their glib, painted doubles. Paintings of lobsters or seashells were twice curious. Their technique—descended from the legendary oil technique of van Eyck—appears to report neutrally on the exotic specimen. And yet just as in van Eyck’s paintings, the glazed surface itself was as marvellous as any object. They were reports in a descriptive language that seized precisely the most curious features—aberrations of structure legible in irregular contours, unexpected colors, unearthly textures. The paintings were opaque and highly present objects in their own right, the products of an active imagination rather than merely passive, mimetic reflexes. Their inscrutable surfaces become poetic figures as difficult and seductive as any overtly wrought ornament.

The device of masking stylistness under iconic stillness was introduced to northern painting by van Eyck, whose pictures look almost like direct responses to the complaints of the theologians of the *Deo vivorum*—and in general of late scholasticism—about the sensuality and opacity of curious pictures. Van Eyck concealed, with false modesty, his imperfect presence behind a smooth surface. His images did not rely falsely on ornament or on visible figures. These were the ancient ambitions of the icon: a styleless style that corrals and refocuses the wandering attentions of artist and beholder alike. Such a style initiates a properly centripetal attentiveness, leading toward subject-matter and not away from it. The Eyckian image, in theory, trimmed off the figural supplement to subject matter.

One way of seeing through van Eyck’s self-deprecating illusionism is suggested by Walter Benjamin’s exegesis of the Baroque allegory. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin showed how the simple display of lifeless objects, uncouthly laden with emblematic signification, could stand for the transfiguration of the empirical enacted by any work of art. Here he quoted a proposition of another literary historian, Petersen: ‘Science cannot lead to the naive enjoyment of art, any more than geologists or botanists can awaken
a feeling for the beauty of landscape." Benjamin then crisply denied both terms of the analogy:

The geologist and the botanist can indeed do just this. Without at least an intuitive grasp of the life of the detail in the structure, all love of beauty is no more than empty dreaming. In the last analysis detail and structure are always historically charged. The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is as follows: to make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth. This transformation of material content into truth content makes the decrease in effectiveness, whereby the attraction of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, into the basis for a rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands as a ruin.110

The work's interpretation of the material world begins with description. The recalcitrance of the detail prefigures its own ending as a ruin.

This analysis makes it easier to see how description of the world differs from the world, even in van Eyck. The descriptive detail is automatically allegorical: it points away from its obvious referent towards some absent significance. An art that merely doubles the real might appear redundant. In fact, description makes strange; representations even of familiar things take on an unreal charisma. A simple reduction in scale works an effect. Contemporaries never failed to exclaim over the scale of Dou's paintings.111 Objects treated to the intense descriptive mode are isolated from any surrounding narrative. Description flattens reality, spreads it out for viewing, like a poetical figure. The most banal object is invested with a corona of significance simply by being singled out of the chaos of experience and treated to attention. Benjamin called that the 'religious dialectic' of allegory:

Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of not great importance. But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued.112

Van Eyck did not shun curiosity—he actually created a more curious picture. It was his historical (and probably intellectual) detachment from the pious ambitions of iconicity that permitted him to ironize the tradition of the styleless icon, and to call attention to himself through it.

The seventeenth-century northern painter overcame nature by imitating it. Van Mander admitted blithely that description delights: nettecheyt, the technical key to painterly description, 'gives sweet nourishment to the eyes' and thus 'makes them linger.' 'Such things confound, and through the insatiable eyes, make the heart stick fast with constant desire.'113 Van Mander was no closer to solving the puzzle of description's charm than Aristotle, who wondered, in Book Four of the Poetics, why it is that we enjoy looking at accurate imitations of repulsive or banal things. Aristotle could think of no very convincing answer.

Since the ingenious description of surface can make any object charismatic, one is impressed mainly by the arbitrariness of the relationship between


111—Sluiter, 'Schilders van "cleyne, sobi tete ende curieuse dingen"', p. 23.

112—Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, p. 173.

surface and meaning. Descriptive painting often fixed on objects that would have been overlooked or even avoided if encountered in life—insects, the remains of breakfast, shabby rustic buildings. Close description transfigured them into objects of delection, an ironic maneuver. Sometimes the fragrant or succulent accessory to routine existence was described, the flower or fruit. In such a case, the gap between the animation and durability of the description, and the ephemerality of the object in real life—the knowledge that the actual model for the painting has long since disintegrated—is the emblem of mortality. Description offers up dead and empty fragments for the sort of melancholic contemplation cultivated in the magician’s workshop, the gentleman’s _Kunstkammer_, and eventually the bourgeois salon. The connection between curious technique and still-life painting is thus deep and organic. Descriptive painting did not emerge to fulfill the requirements of the _vanitas_ topos, the theme of ironic reflection on the ephemerality of worldly experience that authorized all still-life painting. Rather, the topos followed from the technique.

Benjamin revealed the process of allegorization as a morbid oscillation between fascination and boredom, and made what is by now a familiar analogy:

> The overbearing ostentation, with which the banal object seems to arise from the depths of allégory is soon replaced by its disconsolate everyday countenance; it is true that the profound fascination of the sick man for the isolated and insignificant is succeeded by that disappointed abandonment of the exhausted emblem, the rhythm of which a speculatively inclined observer could find expressively repeated in the behaviour of apes. But the amorphous details which can only be understood allegorically keep coming up.  

This same fascination with the unlikely and starkly isolated detail is characteristic of the Baroque drama that interested Benjamin, or of the Metaphysical poets. Curious poetic language was difficult, strained, even painfully emblematic. For the scholastics, the difficulty of scriptural figures was the criterion of its grandeur. The labor of exegesis is simultaneously the price of the Fall, and a pleasurable reward. We have seen already that Galileo disapproved of Tasso’s curiosity. What Empson called the ‘curious attitude’ condoned the most tormented disfigurings of normal usage, and the most repulsive images, in the lurid verse of the Metaphysicals.

This rhythm of attention and boredom, and this propensity to push the indecorous detail to the fore, is unexpectedly shared by scientific method. Once the natural representation of the world claimed by scholastic natural philosophy was no longer credible—according to Blumenberg’s analysis cited previously—the only recourse was mindless inventory, leading to an abstract but useful image of the world. And, according to Hegel, scientific description chronically loses interest in the object at hand, and is thus forever grasping after the next. Hegel’s account of this mechanism is really the last echo of the old Augustinian analysis of curiosity, except that now it is cleverly turned to the service of science. The result of natural science’s massive co-option of the pointless, repetitive, descriptive method, oddly enough, is that modern science has made more room for curiosity than modern art has. Science is more truly anti-theological and anti-theoretical. Art, as long as it remains uneasy about craft, ingenuity, and highly wrought structures of meaning, fails to sever itself from the traditional Christian mistrust of curiosity.
From this point of view, the often-remarked coexistence of extreme stylishness and extreme naturalism in Netherlandish art of around 1600, even within the oeuvre of the same artist, is less puzzling. One clue to the natural affiliation of the two modes is that both were anathema to later seventeenth-century classicists. (Classicism, which in the north had a flavor of Christian-idealist revanchism, even managed to absorb and tame the Dutch ‘neat’ manner. Philips Angel himself, by recommending that nettichet be combined with losscythe in order to avoid a ‘stiff’ and tidy unpleasantness,’ contributed to its detachment from the Eyckian, ‘curious’ tradition. ‘Neat’ eventually came to mean mostly ‘smooth,’ as in van Dyck, or worse, Adriaen van der Werff.) The versatility of the turn-of-the-century painters has been explained as an adaptation to contemporary notions of literary decorum.\(^{118}\) The stylish, mythologically saturated manner is supposedly equivalent to the high literary mode, appropriate to lofty subjects, and the descriptive manner to the humble mode, suited to low subjects. No doubt this is just what a literary person of the epoch would have said. But northern painting had its own internal traditions and codes, incommensurable with those of rhetorical culture. In painting, the descriptive manner was historically linked to the work of van Eyck, above all the Ghent Altarpiece, which was hardly an exercise in the humble mode. The stylish supplement so conspicuous in the mannerist work was not simply jettisoned to create a naturalistic work. Rather, that supplement was absorbed into the weave of description. It became invisible to all but the initiate.


\(^{119}\) Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, The School of Prague: Painting at the Court of Rudolf II (Chicago, 1988), pp. 91–96. Kaufmann is primarily concerned with Rudolfine painting, but here extends the discussion to the Haarlem masters and to Jacopo Ligouzi at the Medici Court.