Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism by Craig Harbison
Petrus Christus: His Place in Fifteenth-Century Flemish Painting by Joel M. Upton
The Reality of Symbols: Studies in the Iconology of Netherlandish Art 1400-1800 by Jan Baptist Bedaux
Christopher S. Wood


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Powers, that “the fortune and well-being of the living [were] contingent upon the contentment of the deceased” (p. 52). Part of Powers’s argument on Han skepticism is a rationalist view of naturalistic depiction as, above all, cognitive in purpose. Against this, I would like to suggest that a case can be made for locating Eastern Han naturalism within a much longer historical context of the relationship between naturalism and death. In this alternative view, from the radical naturalism of accompanying-in-death and human sacrifice, through the literal realism of the life-sized pottery warriors of Qin Shi Huangdi, to the artful illusionism of the Han descriptive tradition, naturalism remained, as it had always been, the means of assuring that the tomb environment intended for the po soul would function as it was supposed to. We might say that, from this angle, its purpose was less cognitive than magical; it pushed the representation to the brink of its intended reality, as it would continue to do at least through the Tang dynasty.

I am not able to do justice to the breadth of the issues raised by these two stimulating books, but one general point should not go unmentioned. In the field of Chinese art history, studies of painting and studies of archaeological material have long inhabited two very different worlds, separated not only by differences of material and method, but also by the lack of major monographs and synthetic studies of Han pictorial art, potentially a bridge between the two. By building such a bridge, Martin Powers and Wu Hung have made a new kind of dialogue possible, and in so doing have put us all in their debt.

24 The ornamental tradition lends itself to both interpretations, which may be why it is so often found in combination with the other two traditions.

25 Although the overwhelming evidence for Han pictorial naturalism takes the form of funerary art, it is sometimes assumed that it derives from the lost wall paintings of palaces and official buildings, and thus has no special connection with death. This seems to me far from certain. Much of the evidence for wall paintings and screen paintings points to the type of didactic subject matter that is associated with Powers’s classical style.

26 I do not wish to suggest a linear history for these three modes of funerary naturalism; the development is much more complex than that, and not possible to summarize here. As David Knightley has argued for the Shang, the practice of burying along with the deceased a representative selection of his retainers and possessions to accompany him in death implies that the boundary between life and death was not at all sharp at that time; instead, there was great continuity. (See his “Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How It Became Chinese,” in Paul S. Ropp, ed., Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1990, 15–54.) However, alongside the use of real people and real-life objects, one also finds, as early as the late Shang, the use of specifically funerary objects as substitutes. In the Han, the emergence of an artful illusionism (as against a literal substitution, such as we see in the Qin pottery warriors) implies a hardening of the boundary between this life and the afterlife. The passages on mingqi (“numinous artifacts” specifically made for tombs) from The Book of Rites cited by Powers (p. 60) in favor of skepticism about the reality of the afterlife, by my reading confirm this, as seen in the writers’ attempt to define the afterlife as a separate but parallel reality, analogous to and yet different from human reality: a numinous as against a tangible world. This would imply a significant secularization, but one that stops short of skepticism. It also offers a suggestion relevant to the emergence of the picture surface as the boundary between the viewer’s reality and the reality of the picture, without which pictorial illusionism would not be possible.

27 This implies that the representation was expected, in some way, to “come to life,” though the life in question was the numinous existence of the afterlife. If my suggestion is correct, the mechanism by which tomb representations were activated must have incorporated some conception of infilling (by which the corpse and the tomb representations were consigned to the inner-earth environment), consecration at the time of burial, and continuing worship thereafter.


Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait contained, for Mario Praz, “the quintessence of all the poetry of the conversation piece.” The painter’s attentiveness to the sheer look of things, he suggested, casts a spell over the ordinary. Description animates Praz’s Arnolfini are an ordinary couple forced to stand side by side, perpetually, inside a picture frame. But like a bourgeois novel, the painting manages to transcend its subjects; it transfigures the meaninglessness moment. The portrait, whose basic function was banal commemoration, is redeemed precisely by the breakdown of that function.

Congratulations to Praz for managing, in 1971, to ignore Panofsky’s mighty essay on the picture—on the principle, presumably, that one good misreading deserves another. Panofsky was equally interested in rescuing the painting from a merely reportorial function. But instead of greeting the portrait as already a work of art, he pushed it backward, away from us. Panofsky’s Arnolfini Portrait was not yet a work of art. The picture did not only represent an event—a private wedding, anything but a meaninglessness moment in the lives of the sitters—but actually participated in and completed that event. The picture, the physical panel, signed in Latin “Jan van Eyck was here” and dated 1434, was itself the testimonial to the accomplishment of the legal and social union. In effect, the picture was the marriage contract. Panofsky insinuated the Arnolfini Portrait into a tradition of performative images. Like the portraits of Roman emperors that oversaw judicial transactions, or the Christian icons that worked as talismans or palladia, this panel intervened in human affairs through the mere fact of its existence and exhibition.

Such was the élan of Panofsky’s essay, which followed the portrait itself by precisely half a millennium, that to this day it holds the entire field in its grip. Even Craig Harbison and Jan Baptist Bedaux, for all their quarrelsome acceptance, still accept the basic hypothesis of performativity; so do Linda Seidel and Angelica Dülberg in their recent and important publications. It must be confessed that the crucial link between the picture and the event has never really been established. The portrait is clearly about marital union, on doctrinal, social, and psychological levels. But it is not at all clear that the picture was connected to an actual wedding ceremony. There is no independent documentary confirmation, for example, that Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami married in the year 1434. No matter: the prestige of Panofsky’s hypothesis is still absolutely merited. His Arnolfini essay belongs alongside his essays on Dürer’s Melencolia I (1923) and Poussin’s Et in Arcadia ego (1936): splendid and vehe-

ment misreadings, each one a high point of art-historical literature in this century. Panofsky was willing to suspend his historicism, within certain limits, in favor of a more dramatic interpretive truth. In his methodological manifesto of 1932, he defended this principle with a quote from Heidegger: “Every interpretation must necessarily resort to violence [Gewalt] if it is to wrest what the words want to say out of what they say.” That hard-won truth, in this

1 M. Praz, Conversation Pieces, University Park, Pa., and London, 1971, 59.


instance, was Jan van Eyck’s intimate and unstable relationship to the central tradition of the Christian image, the holy portrait. By associating his sublimely pedantic illusionism—a self-effacing miracle of technique—with the myth of the image’s primal function as authoritative witness of the sacred, Van Eyck paradoxically initiated a momentous, irreversible break with that tradition.

In the work of Panofsky’s followers, however, historicism has often been an end in itself. Van Eyck has been contextualized, normalized, leveled. Although his paintings may look completely fresh and engaging, some modern iconographers seem to say, they are in fact the dislocated relics of a distant age of awesome piety and forgotten doctrinal conceits. By “unmasking” Van Eyck’s objective descriptions, they reduce him to a merely exemplary painter of sacred images. Craig Harbison, by contrast, admirably restores a sense of Van Eyck’s singularity and modernity.

Harbison’s highly original book has two somewhat contradictory ambitions: to evoke a copious historical and material “reality” behind the images—court politics, careerism, marriage and adultery, sincere and false devotion—and at the same time to acknowledge the persistent presence and substantiality of the images, and the inevitability of experiencing them ahistorically. Both ambitions were evidently born of an impatience with orthodox disciplinary boundaries. Harbison wants to push art history in two different directions: toward a densely detailed social history, and toward some mode of critical writing, an open-ended and truly hermeneutical art history, perhaps something like Mario Praz’s.

Harbison’s arguments unfold in a series of twenty-one brief, essayistic chapters, some built around single paintings, some around themes. Central are the Marien images. The Ghent Altar, the portraits, and the narrative paintings get short shrift. Along the way, the reader learns a little about the Burgundian court, the careers of Canon van der Paele and Chancellor Rolin, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, contemporary Marian devotional poetry, and pilgrimages. One novel and appealing hypothesis is that Van Eyck took a trip to Naples, in the company of King René, in 1438. The book does not pretend, however, to make an original contribution to our knowledge of Van Eyck or his world. There are plenty of conspiratorial nods toward ghastly antagonists and allies (“some art historians”; “some modern experts”), but no footnotes. Bibliographical essays, one for each chapter, fill in the blanks.

Harbison wants above all to break clear of academic skirmishing. His language—rough-hewn, agonized, at times rehabilitating—bends under the effort of this self-extraction. The book poses dozens and dozens of anguished questions, unanswered or unanswerable: “What would the world be like if it were the way we see it portrayed here?” (p. 18), for instance, or: “Why, at times, does [Van Eyck] hint at so much and yet tell us, with any certitude, so very little?” (p. 125). Harbison also issues many stern reproves and exhortations, usually involving a partitly self-accuratory first-person plural: “Within art history we routinely (if wrongly) talk about subject-matter as distinct from style” (p. 16); “we do not need to debunk religion, but we do require more than just the presentation of the official Church story or doctrine” (p. 18); “We must take seriously the fact that the relation between art and reality can change or grow more complex over time” (p. 46); “We view van Eyck’s realism so seriously and single-mindedly that we miss its simple magic. We simply do not allow it to float freely, to work its own surprises upon us” (p. 202). It is not obvious that this is the best rhetorical strategy for winning over nonspecialist readers.

One basic premise of this study is that Van Eyck’s paintings are not about abstract ideas, but rather about the “immediate material concerns” of individuals. Van Eyck’s art, we are told, is ambivalent, shifting, experimental, ironic, ludic, self-divided; at once materialistic and spiritual, pretentious and skeptical, audacious and anxious. So were 15th-century people. (So is Harbison’s book, for that matter.) One would certainly not wish to doubt that Van Eyck’s world was “diverse and complex” (p. 10). What is odd is Harbison’s apparent belief that Van Eyck’s “realistic” pictures, more than other kinds of pictures, actually illustrate their own proper interpretative context. Harbison argues that the historiographical tactics of anec-

dote, narrative, and prosopography are somehow peculiarly appropriate to Van Eyck’s realism. Van Eyck’s “incise realism,” he says, “invariably suggests something personal or actual” (p. 9). It is as if he thinks Van Eyck’s manner of painting is unusually faithful to life in general, and not only to our optical impressions of the surfaces of things.

Perhaps one ought to eschew the term “realism” altogether in discussions of Van Eyck. It comes as no surprise that the social reality Harbison unearthed behind Van Eyck’s realism is hard-bitten, motley, and untrustworthy: George van der Paele was a wily papal bureaucrat; Nicolas Rolin was an unscrupulous power broker, manipulative and self-involved, but in the end “very human”; Arnolfini was “a social-climbing Italian immigrant.” For the Arnolfini, “life must have been about enjoying the world, about copeing with its demands while furthering one’s ambitions and taking what steps seemed necessary to ensure personal salvation.” Their “complex” response was “determined by a whole mesh of aims and ambitions,” sexual, social, and religious; Van Eyck’s “image weaves their drives and desires into an extricable whole.” Giovanni Arnolfini, without any evidence at all, is accused of adultery, opportunism, hypocrisy. Harbison’s account is nearly as gitty as the sinister and frankly fictional fable that Linda Seidel, in her own recent article, grafts on to the Arnolfini portrait.4 One is reminded of Lionel Trilling’s exasperated observation, in The Liberal Imagination, that “in the American metaphysic, reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unimpenetrable, and unpleasant.”5

Now and then Harbison will flash a cold, metallic term like “negotiating device,” “exchange,” “repression,” “instrument of social control,” or “propaganda.” But his heart is not really in it. Harbison is wary of theory, as if it would drain his social history of its lifeblood, or disrupt the intimacy of his critical conversation. His historical and sociological judgments have a slack and homemade quality. The demeanor of the Arnolfini is “somewhat courtly in its formal rigidity” (p. 37). Van Eyck had a “well-developed ability to project a courtly ethos” (p. 40). Nevertheless, Harbison insists, we need to explain “the fact that van Eyck’s extant works do not record directly his life at Court.” Harbison’s bewildering answer is that the nobility were not interested in Van Eyck’s Holbeinesque facsimiles of tapestries, brocades, metalwork, glass, and jewels because they could afford to own the genuine articles. Nor did the nobles immediately “appreciate or require the more complex story-telling held out by painted panels” (p. 23). The “rising middle class” of court bureaucrats and functionaries, on the other hand, embraced panel painting as an art of their own. Van Eyck’s pictures, Harbison continues, “allowed the functionaries to maintain the illusion of having precious objects and textiles ‘as part of and central to their own lives’” (p. 122). At the same time, the intrusion of humberl domestic artifacts—wooden furniture, brass pitchers—into religious images “might well be taken as a sign of the social forces in motion at the time, of the desire of the rising middle class to appropriate realism for its own purposes” (p. 96).

One of the principal theses of the book is the correlation between Van Eyck’s painting and increasingly private and affective forms of devotion. Harbison constantly contrasts the interests and needs of the laity—alternately “popular” and “middle-class”—to the rigid and codified demands of a conservative ecclesiastical authority. This is the leading edge of his polemic against the iconographers. Modern art historians, according to Harbison, assume that early Netherlandish paintings “uniformly support the views of the Catholic leadership.” But “is it not more likely that lay people would have been drawn more to the readily accessible meaning an image held, and to its aesthetic aspects?” (p. 10). Through the lustrous surfaces of Van Eyck’s panels Harbison glimpses “a core of popular piety” (p. 145). At the bottom of this, it must be admitted, is a powerful distaste on Harbison’s part for organized religion and for dogma.

4 Seidel (as n. 2).
The criterion of the senses, he believes, will inevitably open the gates to a healthy skepticism. Harbison prizes Van Eyck’s “irony” and “detachment.” His pictures are not reports on miracles, but mere half-hearted recollections, for painter and patrons alike were beginning to doubt the reality of such supernatural forces (p. 191). “How many lay people in the fifteenth century, Harbison wonders, “continued to agree that the lives of virgins, martyrs and schoolmen—all traditional Church heroes—were best, and should be conscientiously emulated in whatever way possible?” (p. 194). Worldliness is posited as the steady state of being; otherworldliness is a state of striving, a pretense. The Arnolfin, for example, “may well have sought to be pious. No doubt they were concerned about resisting temptation and evil. Yet, the image van Eyck crafted for them clearly presents them as prosperous and adroit individuals” (p. 42).

It is probably not a good idea for the historian to cast doubt on the authenticity of other people’s beliefs. Nor should one fill the heads of patrons with too many specific hopes and fears. Harbison’s remarks on patronage are usually circular. His belief that Van Eyck possessed an “uncanny ability to see, and then to embody, the needs of his patrons” is not really a deductive conclusion, but a premise. Harbison produces an entire series of astonishing inferences about these patrons. On the Arnolfini, for example: “I doubt that at the time van Eyck was painting his portrait of this couple, that either of them intended to be unfaithful to the other” (p. 45). “Whether or not these two people had already encountered problems in conceiving children by the time van Eyck painted their portrait,” Harbison concedes, “is unknown” (p. 44). The Madonna of Cano van der Paele “evidences” the patron’s “search for private epiphany and personal justification” (p. 69). “Did he actually wear spectacles? Perhaps he did have a problem with his eyes . . .” (p. 73). Fortunately, Harbison reassures us, Van der Paele’s religion “may ultimately have made more bearable whatever aches and pains his body had been subject to” (p. 76). Chancellor Rolin owned some of the best vineyards in Burgundy. A glimpse of those slopes in the background of Van Eyck’s painting for him, together with a historiated capital representing the drunkenness of Noah, “does not mean that Rolin himself is confessing to drunkenness; perhaps he simply feels penitent about producing the wine that causes inebriation in other men” (p. 114).

Harbison finally extends this macabre process of animation to Van Eyck himself. “The painter, we learn, was acquisitive, inful, indulgent, and insecure. But in his work he also ‘reveals his longings’; ‘Van Eyck wants his religious mysteries and metaphors taken seriously’” (p. 128).

Perhaps the best approach to all this is to take it in the spirit of belletristic criticism: Harbison as a kind of higher journalist, drifting imperiously from one Salon entry to another, never excessively pious toward his pictorial pretexts, wrapping a fundamentally ethical discourse in the forms of worldly conversation. Indeed, Harbison announces in his first sentences that he is “very interested in the moral values expressed through people’s lives”; that he is seeking “to define the peculiar kind of human quandary, or stories, embedded in these paintings” (p. 7). Once readers realize this, they can relax their natural resistance to Harbison’s ahistoricism, and instead accept his invitation to share his “wonder before the play of realism” and before the “surprising” images. Harbison submits to the grip of the image because visual experience is ultimately trustworthy. At the same time, he has a moral stake in that experience. Harbison overcomes the ideology of the aesthetic—which is complicit with ideological research—by traveling backward into a pre-Kantian “interested” contemplation. Van Eyck and his contemporaries, in all their sensuality, ambivalence, and pragmatism, turn out to be compatriots of the modern critic.

Harbison’s preference for the free play of images over the constraints of any theoretical theory takes him to some deep waters. Although “precise and universally applicable meaning may appear to be a present-day critical ideal,” he ventures, Van Eyck himself favored “a type of imagery that was flexible, one that was capable of multiple meanings for a shifting, varied audience” (p. 199). It is possible to countenance the intentional fallacy, once again, as a critical mannerism, although it is rather discouraging that it survives here unscathed by several generations of literary-critical practice and critical theory, not to mention the lucid strictures of Riegl and Panofsky within our own discipline. Less creditable is Harbison’s tendency to hold up enthrallement to a “preconceived symbolic program” as the only alternative to a natural and open-minded mode of looking. Every iconographic reference, to Harbison’s mind, is equally sterile and perfunctory. Even the extraordinary rabbits squashed beneath the columns in the Rolin Madonna are dismissed as merely one of several ”rather standard symbolic allusions.” Harbison’s insistence on readings unchallenged by theological doctrine or echoes of texts has the effect of severely underestimating the referential capacity of the Eyckian image. He doubts, for example, that Van Eyck’s seated Virgins in any way symbolize the sacrament of the Mass. For if a painter had wished to represent the Eucharist, Harbison contends, he could simply have painted an actual Mass, for example a Mass of St. Gregory. After all, the Mass is itself already “a construction, or metaphor” for sacred truths. Van Eyck would surely not have bothered to symbolize a symbol; for “why would an artist go through such roundabout visual and mental gymnastics?” (p. 91).

The best passages in this strange book are Harbison’s aggressive readings of individual pictures. Meaning turns out to reside not on the surface, in legible symbols, but at a deeper structural level. With his eye alone, inquiring and creative, Harbison transfigures the pictures into allegories of the world. Coruscating painterly illusionism correlates to the illusory nature of the Burgundian court circles. The airless space of the Van der Paele Madonna stands for the narrow psychological confines of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. The Lucca Madonna disseminates the idea of Immaculate Conception through the sheer massiveness of her presence. The spatial construction of the Dresden Triptych mimics the pace and sequence of the litany. These are imaginative readings, and they should not be subjected to ordinary scholarly ordeals of verification. They are blueprints for a rejuvenated criticism of older art. Such passages almost alone for the book’s many false notes. But not quite. Harbison’s social history is too loose-knit; his moralism is intolerably sentimental and anachronistic; and his account of the referential mechanisms of the Eyckian image is a blunt caricature. Amidst all this critical noise, the moments of austerity are simply lost.

Joel Upton has also written a highly personal book, a kind of amicus brief filed on behalf of a misunderstood 15th-century artist. We are told that this painter’s “greatest accomplishment may have been to create one of those fragile links that join the most ‘humbly human’ [Panofsky’s phrase] aspects of our individual lives with the infinite condition of our existence. As such, his paintings remain a precious fragment of our history” (p. 115). His works are:

... new visual construction[s] whose affect [sic] is essentially incomplete without the viewer’s self-conscious involvement with the deliberate compositional or formal tensions within the image itself. Here, surface and space, illusion and actuality, painting and experience, have apparently been reconstituted to create the visual equivalent of a subjective correlate that assumes our direct psychological participation, in addition to our contemplation (p. 88).

The author of these momentous works is not Jan van Eyck, but rather his follower Petrus Christus.

Petrus Christus was a painter of limited imagination who came to Bruges and fell under the spell of Van Eyck. He became a citizen only in 1444, three years after the great master’s death, and thus may never have worked with him at all. But Van Eyck’s example was irresistible. Christus was actually emboldened to sign and date some of his own works; indeed, in this century he was the only Netherlands painter besides Van Eyck to have done so. Christus took up Eyckian formats and iconographic motifs and mimicked the Eyckian oil technique. He ventured several important modifications: the “corner space” background to a portrait (of Edward Grymestone in London and the unknown Carthusian in New York, both dated 1446), and a rigorous one-point linear perspective (already in the Berlin Annunciation of 1452). At the same time he was looking
closely at Rogier van der Weyden. Christus is an index of the cataclysmic impact of the *ars nova*, at once liberating and crushing. But of the three major figures of the middle generation of the century—Albert Ouweter and Dirk Bouts, both Dutchmen, are the others—Petrus Christus was the least original.

Upton disagrees with this orthodoxy. Even Peter Schabacker's excellent monograph of 1974, he feels, falls into step with the "traditionally disparaging judgment of Christus's artistic talent." Upton sets out to vindicate Petrus Christus. The strategy is to persuade the reader that his art is "every bit as religious in mood, imagery, and purpose as that of Jan and Roger" (p. 93), and that it possesses great "intrinsic merit." For Upton, Christus's work was a watershed in the history of the Christian image. These paintings, with unprecedented success, "involved" their beholders. For all their "acclaimed virtuosity," Van Eyck and Van der Weyden "preserved a conceptual distance between the image and the beholder that Christus . . . carefully and deliberately closed." Petrus Christus's engaging, "interactive" images mark "an important stage in the evolution of artistic values from the objective or impersonal moral collectivism of the High Middle Ages to a more subjective, intensely personal moral individualism of the latter part of the fifteenth century" (p. 6). Upton declines to derive the rhetorical success of the paintings from any specific cultural determinants, neither patronage nor general devotional or intellectual-historical trends. He supposes that Christus "faced what must have been a growing demand for paintings that fostered ever more personal engagement in religious worship" (p. 51). Contextualization is instead consummated on the level of Upton's own rhetoric, as for example in this clever zeugma: Christus's artistic accomplishment emerges from "his own deliberate response to the formal and devotional values in Bruges . . ." (p. 43).

The novelty of the paintings is actually demonstrated by direct visual analysis. The Berlin Annunciation, for example, is conceded to be dramatically "awkward and pedantic." The figures resemble "puppets or children." But Christus's version of the story, by virtue of its linear perspective and its light effects, issues "a potent, not to say eloquent, appeal to the viewer to join in." The image "locate[s] the pictorial event in the viewer's world and experience" (pp. 38-39). How Christus's panel succeeds at this task better than Rogier's Louvre Annunciation is, to say the least, unclear. Nevertheless, Upton prolongs the thesis through a series of fine descriptions of pictures, calling attention especially to edges, perspective, inviting light effects, and illusionism. The book culminates in a long celebration of the Washington Nativity, the summa of Christus's achievement, a grandiose synthesis of the altarpiece and the icon, whose "transparent fusion of a corporeal event with the immaterial perfection of geometry would have rendered visible and palpable the most basic facts of faith" (p. 107). That being said, Upton delivers an excellent and extended iconographical breakdown of the picture.

The power of Christus's paintings to draw in their beholders is for Upton so overwhelming that it transcends any ordinary distinctions of size, format, subject matter, or function (p. 66). He considers the mesmerizing Madonna of the Dry Tree in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection—a tiny standing Madonna and Child suspended inside an aureole of brittle thorns adorned with fifteen gold Gothic letter A's, all against a flat black background—"the consummate expression of Christus's peculiar capacity to draw us into the reality of an image, so that we experience it as a subjective extension of our lives" (p. 60). But emblematic pictures like the Madonna of the Dry Tree are particularly interesting precisely because they declined to adopt the engaging rhetoric of the *ars nova*. Christus himself is most interesting for his impulse to experiment with the formats and functions of the devotional image along the lines already established by Van Eyck. The real field for research is the corpus of Savior icons by or after Van Eyck (at least one is by Christus); Christus's *Maria Glykophýlousa*, dated 1449, two years before the installation of the miraculous *Madonna of Cambrai* (in 1454 Christus was commissioned to make three copies of that famous icon); Van Eyck's New York Last Judgment Diptych and Christus's loose copy in Berlin; and Christus's *Man of Sorrows* in Birmingham. Research into the function and rhetoric of such images, and the historical self-consciousness they display, has already been initiated by Hans Belting, Larry Silver, and others. It is regrettable that Upton, even at the point where he introduces the term *Andachtsbild*, makes no reference to Belting's contributions. Upton's pictorial analyses are sensitive and penetrating. But they suffer from an extreme lack of conceptual and terminological precision. Once Hugo van der Goes's Portinari Altarpiece—a massive triptych, nearly twenty feet wide, installed in a hospital church—is described as an *Andachtsbild*, then anything is possible.

Like Harbison's essay, this too is essentially a work of criticism. For the concepts of "involvement," "participation," and "subjectivity" are not submitted to any historical or cultural differentiation. The impact that Christus's works exert on "us" is understood as equivalent to the impact they exerted on their original beholders. His portrait subjects "loom before us, even now, simply and quietly as recognizable counterparts to our lives" (p. 32). "For the modern viewer his paintings may come to evoke a heightened sense of a self-conscious awareness of momentary, actual, or particular rather than more generalized or idealized realities" (p. 6). And like Harbison, Upton is all in favor of subjectivity, idiosyncrasy, particularity, and humanity.

The book makes no pretense to supplant Peter Schabacker's 1974 study. There is no need for a new monograph yet, and Schabacker's work was also written in English. Nevertheless, Upton partially submits to the monographic format. He provides a review of the literature, an amply documented biographical survey, and an assessment of style, supplemented by lengthy analyses of paintings deemed especially successful. This book is not easy to use. There is no catalogue of accepted and rejected paintings, or even an abbreviated checklist. But there are plenty of thoughtful connoisseurial opinions. The hardest to defend is the attribution to Christus, and the late dating, of the Friedsam Annunciation. The next hardest is the Louvre Lamentation, which looks very much like one of a pair of Hans H miniatures by an unknown artist, maybe not even a Netherlander. Upton is undoubtedly right, however, to move the Frick Madonna away from Christus altogether.

Both Harbison and Upton have written fundamentally generous and sympathetic personal testimonies. Jan Baptist Bedaux's *The Reality of Symbols* is more scholarly and more argumentative. The book brings together three previously published essays, translated or slightly revised, on Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait, on fruit symbolism in 16th- and 17th-century Dutch portraiture, and on metaphors for education in 17th-century portraits of children. Added to these is the transcribed texts of an allegorical program by the 16th-century painter Matthaeus Verheyden, together with a commentary. Bedaux is a superlative iconographer whose ingenuity and erudition are best manifested in the piece on children's portraits, in which he explicates the motif of the trained dog as an illustration of a Plutarchian parable about the efficacy of the timely application of discipline. His commentary on Verheyden's manuscripts is likewise exemplary. Verheyden's programmatic deciphers a group of overmantel and overdoor paintings he made for the town hall of The Hague in the 1730s, is exceptionally learned and involved. Bedaux complains that researchers have been more interested in attributing allegorical meaning to "genre" pictures and still-lifes than in studying the allegorical genre itself. This is true. Eighteenth-century Dutch allegorical paintings are not an obviously attractive subject, and Verheyden's canvases are no exception.

Bedaux's research into fruit symbolism was provoked by a famous essay by E. de Jongh, the dean of Dutch iconographers. De Jongh had set out to explain, among other pictures, Emanuel de Witte's *Family Portrait* in Munich, where the father conspicuously lifts a bunch of grapes from a platter. De Jongh called attention to one of Jacob Cats's moralizing emblems which framed a similar gesture as an exhortation to chastity. He then justified the presence of such a

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gesture within a family portrait by the delightful paradox that in the 17th century a marriage could be celebrated as simultaneously chaste and fertile. Bedaux roundly denies the connection between the grapes in the portraits and the chastity emblem. Their resemblance looks to him like a pure coincidence, a mere “pictorial homonym.” He counters with a superb piece of research into the manifold links between fruit in portraits and the idea of fertility.

Bedaux’s grievance against De Jongh is twofold. First, he doubts that anyone would have reasonably associated chastity with a fruitful marriage. Certainly he is right to dispute De Jongh’s hyperbolic assertion that all 17th-century moralists agreed that “the only conceivable justification for sex . . . was procreation.” But some moralists did say such things. Even Simon Schama, whose more substantial account of Dutch marriage mores generally emphasizes the generosity shown toward non-procreative conjugal affec- tion, still endorses De Jongh’s basic point: that a marriage might be praised as both chaste and fertile (The Embarrassment of Riches, New York, 1987, 424). Bedaux’s second objection is even less forceful. He actually doubts that a painting of this period could sustain both meanings at once. “The ambiguity attributed to seventeenth-century Dutch painting,” in Bedaux’s view, “is more likely to be a product of a reception guided by typically iconological premises, creating problems that must have been alien to the seventeenth-century mind” (p. 103).

One can imagine what Bedaux thinks of the 15th-century mind. His target in the irascible opening essay, which like the book as a whole the title “The Reality of Symbols,” is Panofsky’s interpretation of the Arnolfini Portrait. Bedaux’s argument is simple: the various artifacts surrounding the couple are not symbols of marriage that Van Eyck has cleverly disguised as ordinary household objects. They are the actual ritual accessories and wedding gifts that would have ordinarily been at hand during a private marriage ceremony. The painting describes the room and the event as it must have really looked. Bedaux defends this rather sensational conclusion—whether ingeniously or disingenuously it is hard to say—as the “common-sense notion” of the picture (p. 22).

One way to begin thinking about Bedaux’s interpretation is to reopen Panofsky’s case for “disguised symbolism.” Bedaux’s distaste for the concept is currently shared by many in the field, including Craig Harbison (see his comments on pp. 16–17, 177, 200–201, 204, 212, 214). There may be some call, therefore, for a clarification of the term. “Disguised” symbolism does not mean secret, encoded, or esoteric symbolism. It refers neither to Early Christian art, nor to Mannerist conceits and devices. A disguised symbol is a symbol that has been motivated within the fictional world proposed by a picture. An object appears motivated when its presence within the fiction strikes the beholder as plausible according to standards furnished by experience of the real world: the laws of physics, for example, or human nature, or cultural expectations about what objects might be found in a bedroom. Motivation is an unstable quantity, not only because different beholders have different ideas about what is plausible or not, but also because different standards of plausibility are applied to different fictions. In a representation of the Kingdom of Heaven, no matter how naturalistically rendered (for example, the central panel of the Ghent Altarpiece), many things are possible. No one would raise the objection that a lamb is not likely to be found standing on top of an altar. Within this fiction, the presence of the lamb—a symbol of the crucified Christ and the Eucharist—is perfectly motivated. But when the settings of sacred narrative come to resemble the familiar spaces of sublunary existence, the symbol, if it is to be motivated, must be made to resemble a familiar object that might plausibly be found in such a space. In Melchior Broederlam’s altarpiece in Dijon from the 1590s, for example, the Virgin of the Annunciation is juxtaposed to the figure of Isaiah, who had prophesied her mission. But the painter transforms the prophet into a sculpture and mounts him on the corner of the portico sheltering the Virgin. Other painters created proper domestic settings for, say, the Annunciation, and then stocked them with plausible objects which might simultaneously be read as symbols: a brass laver and pitcher as a symbol of purity, for instance, or a candleholder as a metaphor for the Virgin who bears the Son of Man in her womb.

Not only did settings become more familiar. Fifteenth-century painters also explored the paradox of the earthly nature of the sacred personalities: Christ as man, Virgin as woman. The paradox was most savoy at the Annunciation, the precise moment when the divine decisively intervened in Mary’s terrestrial existence. Paintings often suggested Mary’s similarity to ordinary mortals and the normalcy of her reactions to the event. The test of motivation becomes an imaginary psychological test: if the inhabitant of the fictional world were to turn and look at the objects arrayed around her, and then apply to them the standards of plausibility of the outside world, our world, would she recognize them as symbols? The nursing Virgin in the Salting Madonna by the Master of Flémalle, for example, is seated directly in front of a circular wicker fire-screen. The circle reminds the beholder, outside the fiction, of a halo. But the Virgin herself, if she were to turn around, would see only a fire-screen. Nothing about her surroundings registers the terrible weight of the divine mission that has descended upon her. The effect is one of powerful dramatic irony: because the household object has been invested with meaning on the level of the representation (by means of its shape and its alignment with the Virgin’s head), and not already inside the fictional world, the beholder “knows” something of which the actor inside the fiction is unaware, or still incompletely aware.

Bedaux confesses these two levels. His attempted refutation of Panofsky runs as follows:

If symbols are disguised to the extent that they remain consistent with (historical) reality, as implied by the concept of “disguised symbolism,” it is no longer possible to prove that the painter indeed intended them as symbols . . . . The more accomplished the painter’s use of it, the more elusive it is to the scholar. Paradoxically, we can only speak of “disguised symbols” if the disguise is inadequate, and if these symbols betray themselves as such (p. 11).

But in fact there is nothing “elusive” about the well-disguised symbol, not to the historian standing outside the pictorial fiction. It is the characters inside the fiction who will have trouble recognizing it.

This hypothetical “polling” of the inhabitants of a picture is a curious exercise, to say the least. One would never have thought to do it before a stained-glass window or a cathedral portal. For the window and the sculptural field were not meant to reconstitute an absent world according to empirical criteria. It would make no sense to ask a sacred figure on a window whether he was “aware of” the symbols arrayed alongside him. Yet this is a question that beholders and readers ask almost automatically and unconsciously whenever a work of visual or literary art professes mimetic ambitions.

Panofsky’s fine-grained account of the structural tensions between the new rhetoric of realism and the older conventions of textual and doctrinal reference in early 15th-century pictures made sense to Meyer Schapiro and Millard Meiss. It was perfectly grasped by Otto Pächt, whose 1956 review of Early Netherlandish Painting is nevertheless constantly quoted by the opponents of iconography (see, instead, the posthumous publication of Pächt’s university lectures on Van Eyck). And the fundamental legitimacy of the iconographic strategy is vigorously vindicated by Mieke Bal in her singular new book on Rembrandt. Yet Harbison still urges us to “remind ourselves constantly that in van Eyck’s paintings the meaning or symbolism does not exist separately from the portrayed structure of the world; it is, in fact, inevitably and completely embedded within it” (p. 16). Nothing could be further from the

truth. The whole point of visual symbolism is to direct the recipient’s attention away from the sensible presence of the image and toward an absent concept. Iconography is, precisely, reading an image as what it is not.

Jan Baptist Bedaux’s argument about the Arnolfini Portrait, again, is that all the objects in the room are pre-invested symbols. They had symbolic character, he claims, well before Van Eyck called our attention to them by framing them in a picture. It was customary, for example, to light a candle when drawing up certain legal acts (p. 25). The prayer beads hanging on the wall “were an all but obligatory wedding present from the groom to his bride” (p. 32). The furnished room itself may have been a wedding gift (p. 47). There is a brush hanging from the bed because after the ceremony the new bride, according to folklore, “would occasionally have to perform the ritual of sweeping to prove that she was capable of household work” (p. 46). If the Arnolfini turned and looked about them, Bedaux says in effect, they would of course recognize the assembled objects as the accessories to the wedding ceremony they are involved in. The problem facing the painters of the ars nova was how to integrate symbols into a hypothetical world, a second nature, without disrupting the unities of space or time or the dramatic bienséances. Bedaux’s point is that in this case the integration had already been effected in real life. The symbolic content of the painting pre-existed; Van Eyck only had to transcribe it onto a flat surface.

This argument relies on the assumption that Panofsky was right about the function of the picture. Angelica Düllberg, in her cornucopian book on the functions of Renaissance private portraits, is open to the idea that such a “documentary” type existed.10 But there is no proof. As far as we know, the Arnolfini picture was no more than a double portrait of a married couple. Why then are the couple standing in a bedroom rather than against a neutral background, as is Lysbeth van Duvenvoorde, the subject of a Dutch full-length marriage portrait from about 1430 in the Rijksmuseum? (The pendant with her husband is missing.) Because the room and its furnishings push the portrait into an overlap with contemporary representations of sacred scenes. The husband recalls Gabriel, hand raised in angelic salutation; a single candle burns in the chandelier, just as in the Miracle of the Assumption a filet candelabrum is juxtaposed to an empty one; Arnolfini has taken off his clogs, just like Nicodemus in the Master of Flémalle’s Deposition, the worshipping donor on an altar wing by Petrus Christus in Washington, D.C., and the Joseph in Christus’s Washington Nativity, and indeed just as Moses was instructed to do at Exodus 3:5–6. This overlapping with sacred iconography permits Van Eyck to introduce into his double portrait various ideas about the sacrament of marriage, about spiritual and carnal intercourse, and even about pregnancy. The inescapable resemblance of the portrait to a sacred image ensured that beholders would try to read, or “unmotivate,” the objects in the room. But the equally inescapable fact that these figures were not sacred personalities but real people worked to the opposite effect. The resemblance of the portrait’s setting to a contemporary furnished room worked to “disinvest” the symbols: the plausibility of the space, not to mention Van Eyck’s painterly technique, encouraged the beholder to accept the setting simply as a bedroom. This would not have been the obvious reading of the portrait; such a reading would have had to overcome the powerful prejudice that an actual couple’s actual bedroom hardly belonged on the surface of an oil painting, even a panel by the most prestigious painter in Europe. Panofsky’s reading of the Arnolfini panel as a narrative with documentary and performative status followed from his perception of the structural analogy between the portrait and contemporary sacred images. Mario Praz’s reading of the portrait as a quasi-magical enlivenment of the ordinary followed from his perception of the extreme precision and finitude of Van Eyck’s “motivations”: his technique, and his uncanny feel for the rhythms of interior space, leave no apparent residue of textual reference.

Bedaux does not convey any sense that the function and status of this early independent panel could have been problematic even in its own time. On the contrary, he has a clear idea of the distinction between sacred and secular: “Panofsky’s approach looks like a classic example of a confusion of genres, a fallacy warned against by Gombrich in the footsteps of Hirsch, and with justice: a profane picture like this should not be treated as an altarpiece” (p. 53). But in this case the confusion of genres is very much the point of the picture.

Such exquisite confusions, by the 17th century, are no longer the province of the extraordinary painter. They are the very stock in trade of the culture of painting. Still-life—born out of exactly that instability between subject and accessory initiated in Van Eyck’s generation—can appear on its own, or imbedded within portraits or narratives. Still-life can affect to remember its origins in sacred symbolism, or it can affect to forget them; or it can do both at once. By this time, moreover, textual meanings were indeed very often deliberately concealed and encrypted behind innocent visual façades, purely to give pleasure to the clever beholder.

All this hardly needs to be said. It would be difficult to contribute anything helpful to the congested debate about realism and symbolism in Northern painting. So many sound opinions have been expressed since the publication of Svetlana Alpers’s Art of Describing (Chicago, 1983) and its attendant controversy. But a cornerstone of Bedaux’s polemic is his contention that Panofsky’s theory of disguised symbolism has unjustly governed the modern subfield of 17th-century iconographic studies. Here again there is some call for clarification. Scholars of Dutch art often refer to their own practice interchangeably as “iconography” and “iconology.” Bedaux does it; so do De Jongh, Jochen Becker, and Eric Shuijer in their essays in the recent Getty publication Art in History. History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture (Santa Monica, 1991). This usage is confusing. The word “iconology” has a long history, and indeed scholars may like it because it recalls the title of the classic handbook by Cesare Ripa (1593). But since Warburg and Panofsky, “iconology” has had a quite specific meaning. Panofsky defined “iconology” as the study of pure forms, motifs, images, stories, and allegories as manifestations of the underlying principles of a culture. Iconology was his vision of art history as a hermeneutic of culture at large. Panofsky’s iconology was “iconography in a deeper sense”; it was interested in “symbolical values” or “symbolic forms,” but not necessarily in concrete symbols of the sort we have been thinking about in the Arnolfini Portrait or in Dutch family portraits. The term is to this day worn like a badge by iconographers, even when they are not really doing iconology. For it must be admitted that the “deeper” cultural history ventured by the iconographers is usually rather predictable. It tends toward tautology, as for example when Bedaux observes that Matthias Verheyden’s pairing of The Century’s Good Fortune under a Prudent Administration with The Development and Flourishing of Arts, Sciences, Trade, and Industry “reflects the prevailing belief” in the connection between prudent administration and the flourishing of arts, sciences, etc. (p. 179); or his statement that children’s portraits “should be regarded as arguments ad oculos to support the views on education prevailing at the time” (p. 109). One is reminded also of Upton’s observation that Petrus Christus’s art “not surprisingly” possesses the same narrative piety found in the popular devotional tracts of the period (p. 52).

Bedaux thinks “we should give serious consideration to the desirability of dismissing the method of ‘disguised symbolism’ in religious images” (p. 53). But “disguised symbolism” is not a historiographical “method,” nor is it a “paradigm” (p. 11). It was a rhetorical device employed by early Netherlandish painters, which, according to Panofsky, reveals something about the culture as a whole. To identify the symbols imbedded in the pictorial fiction—to “demotivate” them—does not in itself constitute iconological analysis. If that were so, then the iconologist would simply be repeating, five hundred years later, an act of interpretation performed by the painting’s first beholders. In fact, the rhetorical device of disguised symbolism is itself the “symbolic form,” and Panofsky’s explication of the device within the context of 15th-century Flemish culture and within the tradition of Northern painting—something the initial
holders would have been incapable of doing—is the iconology. Finally, the hypothesis of disguised symbolism is not transferable to the 17th century. By then, the paradoxes of the ars nova had long since been resolved. Every element in a 17th-century painting had to be motivated (of course this rule was constantly being broken to spectacular effect, for example by Jan Steen). The grapes in De Witte’s family portrait were an entirely plausible accessory to a family gathering. In the 17th century, the rhetorical versatility of even ordinary paintings was vast. Deciphering the 17th-century picture calls for learning and tactfulness, but not quite so much historical imagination as it takes to understand a 15th-century picture. For the modern historian’s act of reading overlaps to a far greater extent with the acts of readings performed by 17th-century beholders.

Normally, a general reflection on method of this sort would be a disproportionate response to a novel iconographic reading of a single famous painting. But Bedaux’s querulous and conceptually incoherent attack on Panofsky in the introduction to his book, and then again in the essay on Van Eyck, was a potent inducement to digress. The achievements of iconographical research are great and manifold. But cultural history is best left to true iconologists like Alpers and Schama. Nor is iconographical research a sufficient rejoinder to the greatest and most articulate works of art. That challenge is most impressively met by truly supple and creative interpretative sensibilities, like Otto Pišť or Mieke Bal. The single mind that combines both faculties is a rara avis. We encounter it maybe once in a century.

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The title of Carol Armstrong’s brilliant book on Degas sandwiches the word “inan” between “odd” and “out.” This positioning points to what has made Degas the focus for some of the most intense debates currently engaging art history. For it is crucially Degas’s oddness as a man that is at issue, not, of course, in the biological sense, but in the sense that his images are assumed to reflect a male gaze and to embody typically male social and cultural investments and privileges. Could it be that Degas’s oddness puts him outside the traditional definitions of gender, that he is, oddly, not a man when he paints but something else, something other?

The most negative response to this question comes from the combatively feminist perspective represented by Griselda Pollock’s two contributions to Dealing With Degas (her introduction subtitled “What Difference Does Feminism Make to Art History?” and her article entitled “The Gaze and the Look: Women with Bonuccius—A Question of Difference”). As far as Pollock is concerned, Degas’s representational practice is anything but odd. It is, on the contrary, typical of the male subject’s defensive violence caused by his traumatic fantasy of female lack. Appealing to Freudian and Lacanian theory to produce a culturally normative male fantastist, Pollock considers Degas exceptional only in his obsessiveness. “Degas’s practice is exemplary,” she writes, “with its obsessive, repetitious re-enactments of sadistic voyeurism narrativised in bathing scenes, with its fetishism of its own means of aesthetic production and transformation of the model’s body, which in social exchange he debase and abused, . . ., and which in aesthetic practice he punished and tortured” (p. 33). Given her revulsion from Degas’s “images of women” (a phrase she associates with the compensatory projections of masculine desire), one may wonder why Pollock wanted to write about Degas at all. So it comes as no surprise that her essay in the volume uses Degas only as a springboard to talk about Mary Cassatt—and to return to Lacanian theorizing about castration and the gaze.

Pollock makes it seem morally reprehensible to like Degas. Such moral failure, she suggests, is to be expected of men, whose scopic regime she sees Degas as reinforcing. But she expects better of feminist women, who should counsel to forget about “good and bad images, good or bad artists” and to “put sexual difference on the line as the topic” (p. 36). This topic, it seems, justifies her contemptuous side-lining of Degas as an artist who offers no justifiable pleasure to the female viewer. “As a woman viewer,” writes Pollock, “I am forced to take up the preferred sadistic masculine position and symbolically enact the violence of Degas’s representations, or identify masochistically with the bizarrely posed and cruelly drawn bodies” (p. 33). We may wonder just what or who is doing the forcing here. I would say that the enforcer is, on the one hand, the doctrinaire theorization of woman’s viewing position: a politically correct woman will not allow herself to get pleasure from an image she has convinced herself can only be voyeuristic or sadistic. On the other hand, the supposed coercion derives from the equally dogmatic power of a tradition that reads Degas as a cruel misogynist. Pollock does not feel obliged to confirm this judgment through the detailed close analysis of images or through a careful reading of the critical tradition. She finds nothing compellingly odd about Degas. He is interesting to her only insofar as he teaches something (negative) about the politics of the gaze within the dynamics of sexual difference.

At the opposite extreme from Pollock is a critic, not included in this volume, who finds Degas so odd that she imagines his gaze as “neither male nor female, since the issue of sexuality has been entirely divorced from the issue of gender” (p. 78). This critic is Wendy Lesser, whose compelling chapter on “Degas’s Nudes” in His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art (Harvard University Press, 1991) deserves mention in this context. To be true to her argument, Pollock would have to condemn Lesser as a masochist, for Lesser sees no degradation and contortion in the portrayal of Degas’s bathers. On the contrary, she maintains that the viewer is invited to identify with the bathing women and thereby to experience moments of deeply private, self-conscious eroticism. Degas’s oddness, in Lesser’s view (a view shared to some extent by Eunice Lipton in her Looking into Degas, Berkeley, 1986), comes from his empathy with women. His repetition of motifs, she argues, reflects his interest in the trivial, unreflective actions of daily life. The poses that have been called tortured and awkward, Lesser sees as sensuous and kinesthetic. The dominating perspective, often described as voyeuristic, is for Lesser a means to elicit a lingering, caressing gaze, which is further attracted by the sensuous facture of the dense web of pastel marks. The class hierarchy that critics have found in the images of mistress and maid are collapsed in Lesser’s reading to demonstrate the sharing of intimate privacy among women. Rather then finding continuity between the brothel monotopes and the bather pastels, Lesser distinguishes between the two by stressing the actual or implied presence of men in the monotypes and their complete absence, even by implication, in the pastels. This absence enables Degas, as Lesser reads him, to express a kind of prelapsarian androgyny of vision. It is as if sexual difference had been voided of desire, creating a feeling of sensuous immediacy that Lesser compares to the relation of infant and mother.

Now, it is interesting that it is precisely with a discussion of Cassatt’s paintings of mothers with young children that Pollock ends her article comparing Degas to Cassatt. Interesting also that the language Pollock uses to describe these images—“the gaze becomes a kind of touch in the almost physical embrace of the mother’s look” (p. 124)—is very close to the language Lesser chooses to evoke the viewer’s experience of Degas’s nudes—“The sense of touch becomes internal as well as external: we can feel those female bodies from the inside even as we caress them visually from the outside” (p. 78). Moreover, Pollock uses the same words, “obsessional and repetitious” (p. 124), to characterize Cassatt’s multiple stagings of the mother-child exchange that she uses to condemn Degas’s “sadistic” bathing scenes. But she cannot imagine that Degas, a man, could be so odd as to be driven by a fantasy that excludes his