

body consisting of layers of fixed pigment to the spatial illusion created by the portrayal on a two-dimensional surface--must be perceived as a living whole.

The greater the number of layers used to build up a painting, the more the painting loses in color reproduction. Van Eyck's illusionism is incapable of being reproduced photomechanically. Responding to the embarrassment of this situation by resorting to enlargement is the latest triumph of the "imaginary museum." Intimate portraits are blown up to life size in massive illustrated books; landscapes and interiors are dismembered and monumentally swollen to the limits of what the screen process will bear--as if sheer quantity could compensate for the lack of quality. But this does not bring us a single millimeter closer to the open secret of a density that surpasses the capacity of human sight.

*Every being in the universe enjoys a unique quality, which it shares with no other being.*

NICHOLAS OF CUSA

### III

## View from Paradise



No matter what process is used, *The Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* is not photographic. In print, it seems to differ little from any of the other great paintings of the period. The impression on seeing the original in the Louvre is thus all the more overwhelming. Facing the incomparable vividness of the "true appearance," you have to rub your eyes. The reverse of the Magritte title *Ceci n'est pas un tableau* springs to mind--because this painting is a *cosmos*.<sup>1</sup>

In a space of less than 65 X 62.3 cm, the artist has captured the fullness of an entire world. The scene is the cool, airy hall of a Romanesque-looking palace, set on a hill overlooking a town, countryside, and a river. The principal figures: the work's patron, Nicolas Rolin, chancellor to Philip the Good, is kneeling with his hands clasped over a book of hours before the Virgin, who is presenting her son to him. Above her head, with its parted hair, floats the Virgin's imposing crown, decorated with jewels and pearls and held by an angel whose rainbow-colored wings are studded with peacock-feather eyes. The many-eyed angel is perhaps gazing at the artist's "repentance"<sup>2</sup> at a deeper level in the painting--the purse, later deleted,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. below, p. 175, note 9.

<sup>2</sup> "Pentimenti"—literally, "touches of repentance"—is the term used for corrections and dele-

tions of underpainted layers in the painting; these can be revealed using X-ray processes or infrared photography.

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which at first hung from the belt of the powerful and unscrupulous upstart Rolin.

According to Chastellain, Chancellor Rolin was a man who tried

to govern everything entirely by himself, to have everything passing through his own hands and at his own discretion, whether it concerned war, peace, or financial matters. The Duke counted on him in every respect, depending on him entirely as his principal advisor, and there was no office and no sinecure, either in the city or the country, throughout his whole realm, not one gift or loan, that was not effected by him and executed by him and dependent on him as the one person who had charge of every matter. The confidence with which the whole world honored him brought him profits so inestimably great that none could name the figure, guess at it, or so much as believe it, so astounding, in its size ... This man was very wise in worldly matters, but his path did not seem to encompass both maxims of wise conduct. For the more he devoted himself to things that pass away and are fallible, the further he departed from that which is certain and worthy of consideration. He was forever reaping his harvest on this earth as if earthly life were eternal for him, and in this his mind strayed from the path and his wisdom led him into foolishness, since he could never keep himself within measure and could not set for himself the limit in that next stage of existence that his advancing years might have suggested to him. His nature was such that he would let no one rule in his place so that he might pass into retirement peacefully, but strove to climb ever higher and multiply his wealth

to the very end-dying sword in hand, in triumph over fortune.<sup>3</sup>

There is no guardian angel to mediate between this embodiment of absolute earthly power and the incarnation of divine wisdom. The viewer of the painting clearly sees things that escape the person being portrayed; the Chancellor does not perceive what surrounds him. He is as large as the Virgin, and the chamber is too small in relation to him to be a *real* hall. His refined hands are suitably clasped, and he is posing with Stoic seriousness in a heavy gold brocade coat trimmed with mink, which gives his figure a massive quality. In his features, with his deeply furrowed brow and directionless, quite unreflexive gaze, one suspects a touch of impatience over the length of the sitting required of him for the portrait. Clearly he was a man of action, not of contemplation. A minor pentimento at the back of his neck reveals a late correction of a certain thickheadedness. History records a man obsessed with power, indomitable, filled with greed; yet the painting shows a human being in all his contradictory and enigmatic uniqueness. No other painter could have made him more Rolin-like. Van Eyck's contemporaries and successors might vie with the artist in reproducing costly materials-fabrics or furs that look as if the brush must have reconstructed them thread by thread and hair by hair. But depicting human skin so that it gives a living, breathing effect was a different matter. In this, van Eyck was unrivaled.

Compared with the child's delicate skin and the Madonna's girlish bloom, Rolin's complexion is coarse.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Chastellain, *Grande Chronique des Dues de Burgoyne*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. M. le baron Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels, 1836-1866), vol. 3, pp. 330-331, cited after Heinz Roosen, Runge, *Die Rolin, Madonna des Jan van Eyck* (Wiesbaden, 1972), p. 17-

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The painter has studied the various textures of the epidermis with the eye of a geologist exploring the history of the earth's crust. "To him, what is smooth and straight is emptiness and desolation."<sup>4</sup> The living quality derives from small irregularities. Each special characteristic, no matter how ephemeral, is recorded. There is a vein bulging under Rolin's shaven temple, his cheek is marked by a small wart, there is one curl resisting his circular hairstyle.

The peak of Rolin's glittering career was the Treaty of Arras. The cross on the bridge in the distance is a reference to a clause in this peace treaty, which was intended to bring Burgundy's torments to a close. The cross was erected on the bridge of Montereau to symbolize atonement for the killing of John the Fearless,<sup>5</sup> who had himself turned murderer. The date of the peace treaty is recorded on the tile at the very front of the painting: twenty-one light and dark squares correspond to the day, and the nine at the center is the month. The painting must therefore date from after 21 September 1435.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Max J. Friedlander, *Die Alt-, nieder! Jindische Malerei* (Berlin, 1924), p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> John the Fearless (1371-1409), the father of Philip the Good, was involved in the murder of his cousin Louis of Orleans in Paris in 1407. On 30 September 1409, on the bridge of Montereau and in the presence of the Dauphin (later King Charles VII), the latter's followers split open John's skull with an axe. "A century later, a monk would accompany King Francis I on a visit to the crypt at Champmol. The monarch would pause for a moment before a skull with a gaping cleft--the skull of John the Fearless. And the monk would say; 'Sire, this

is the breach through which the English penetrated France.'" (Jean Markale, *Isabeau de Baviere* [Munich, 1994], p. 350.)

• Cf. Emil Kieser, "Zur Datierung und Deutung der Rolin, Madonna des Jan van Eyck," in *Stiidel.: Jahrbuch* (Munich, 1967), pp. 73-95. Kieser's interpretations are today dismissed as "unconvincing conjectures" (Hermann Kamp, *Memoria und Selbstdarstellung* [Sigmaringen, 1993], p. 158). The dendrochronological study of the panel carried out in 1983, however, confirms Kieser's conjecture based on a reading of the tile: the painting was made *after* the Peace of Arras. Cf. note 6 on p. 108 below.

The panorama between the columns of the open arcade, extending from the little Garden of Paradise in front of the palace as far as the firmament, occupies all of 32 X 28 cm. All over the nearby town, on the shining banks of the river, the rampart with its battlements, the arching bridge with its tower, on the stairways, squares, streets, and roads, there are tiny people busily going about; some are on foot, others are on horseback or rowing in small barques across the river's gleaming mirror. It seems to be a Sunday; houses, gardens, fields, and vineyards have all been tidied and arranged, all the work of man is done. Now one can wander along the riverbank alone or in company, admiring the mill boats, peeping down through the battlements to the colorful bustle below or gazing into the bluish distance, where far-off towns are shimmering like mirages below a range of snow-covered mountains. Or one can stroll with one's partner along the winding path between the vineyards up to the wood on the hill, or chat to a neighbor under the lime tree in a suburban square and visit friends and relations on the opposite bank, who are looking out of windows or standing in doorways ready to receive their

guests. The many churches beckon to silent prayer--it is not the hour for sermons. On the bend of the river behind the island's enchanted castle, there are children on the shore skimming flat stones across the smooth surface of the crystal-clear water, while high above, in the azure firmament, a flock of birds<sup>7</sup> is tracing its wedge-shaped course

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Lorentz, curator of Dutch Old Masters at the Louvre, describes the birds as being wild geese (Micheline Comblen, Sonkes and Philippe Lorentz, *Corpus des Primitifs Flamands, Musee du Louvre*, vol. 2 [Paris, 1995], p. 15). The tiny birds are barely visible in reproduction,

and even in the original it is not possible to determine whether they are wild geese or cranes. The latter migrate each fall across Burgundy toward Spain, flying in a wedge-shaped formation day and night. When the leading crane, exhausted from its strenuous posi-

In the farthest distance, faintly, in the glowing yellow part of the sky near the capital on the first arcade, floats the disk of the moon, almost full, with zones of shadow and light.

The miracle of the painting draws its life from the depiction of what is invisible--the shimmering air filled with light, which seems to interfere with the air the viewer is breathing. The atmosphere in the painting transforms itself as lighting conditions in the museum change, and it has consequently been interpreted at various times as showing a morning scene, a midday scene, or an evening one.<sup>8</sup> The book of hours on the prayer stool draped in blue velvet does not provide any hints regarding the time of day, since under the magnifying glass the text proves to be merely trompe-l'oeil lettering. However, on the hem of the Madonna's gown there are words embroidered in gold thread among the pearls and jewels; sometimes visible on the maddwred silk, sometimes concealed within the deep folds of the material, they are taken from the Office of the Virgin. This matins prayer praises the Virgin Mary using verses taken from the twenty-fourth chapter of the book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach),<sup>9</sup> in which Wisdom sings

tion, is replaced by the hindmost, the wedge formation collapses amid loud screeching, before being re-established in accordance with the saying in St. Matthew, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first." The significance of the crane in Christian iconology as a symbol of intelligence and vigilance seems to me to suggest that in the Rolin Madonna, the flock of birds--like those in the Ghent altar, piece and in the small portrait of St. Barbara--consists of cranes. On the symbolism of the crane, see Donat de Chapeaurouge, *Em,*

*fihung in die Geschichte der christlichen Symbole* (Darmstadt, 1984; 1991 ed.), p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Comblen, Sonkes and Lorentz, *Corpus des Primitifs*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> "Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach" is one of the apocryphal or deutero-canonical books of scripture. The author, Joshua ben Sira, is "the last canonical representative of Jewish wisdom in Palestine. He is an outstanding example of those *hasidim* (the devout) of Judaism ... who were soon to defend their faith against the persecutions of Antiochus Epipha,

its own praises in the midst of its people: "In the beloved city likewise he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my dominion."

This matins prayer belongs to the eighth hour of the night, and is sung at two o'clock in the morning. Eight arms are also seen on the star on the marble tiles of the hall, in eight rows of eight columns, sometimes visible and sometimes concealed by the figures. The Pythagoreans regarded the square of eight as being related to the celestial wisdom that arranged the whole universe so purposefully. The Wheel of Fortune has eight spokes; eight human beings were saved in Noah's Ark; the Sermon on the Mount contains eight beatitudes; eight is the number of rebirth through baptism, resurrection, and eternal life--and on the eighth day, a new era begins.<sup>10</sup>

The sun, drenched day is at the same time an "over-bright night," which is why the moon is also seen in the sky. Its visibility is owed to a supernatural conjunction. The Arcadian light in which all things, no matter how disorientant and tiny they may appear, maintain their special form comes from a sun that never sets: the orientation of the cathedral shows that the source of the light lies on this

nes, and preserve little islands of faith in Israel ... Though Ecclesiasticus was not accepted into the Hebrew canon, it is frequently cited in the rabbinical writings; in the Talmud, the Epistle of St. James, and it is, next to the Psalms, the Old Testament book most frequently quoted in the Christian liturgy." (*The Jerusalem Bible* [London, 1966], p. m35.)

<sup>10</sup> The recumbent figure of the eight--the symbol of infinity in

mathematics--also belongs to this metaphorical series. "The fact that Christ rose from the dead on the eighth day, namely the eighth day after the Sabbath, forms the basis for most interpretations of the number eight." (Heinz Meyer, *Zahlenalle-gore im Mittelalter* [Munich, 1975], p. 139.) Augustine also describes the number eight as "eternal blessedness" and as "the Kingdom that has no end, so that eternity is signified both temporally and spatially." Cf. Chapeaurouge, *Symbole*, pp. 75--77-

side of the painting in the northwest, on the eighth arm of the compass.

The Rolin Madonna shows the world from the perspective and in the light of God, who sees that it is good that every thing and every being enjoys its own uniqueness. There are shadows, certainly, but there is no total darkness. Darkness is not a black pigment, but is produced by numerous transparent layers of paint that trap the light in mysterious depths. In this world, everything is familiar but at the same time different from real life. In real gardens, iris, columbine, and lily of the valley have already faded by the time the white trumpets of the Madonna lily open. In the garden of the Virgin in front of the palace, roses, peonies, lilies of the valley, irises, columbines, and lilies are all flowering simultaneously.

The painting is a view from the heavenly Jerusalem, in which all opposites are resolved; biblical and Burgundian history, vicinity and distance, day and night, light and shadow form a perfect unity, in which no mediation is needed between redeemed humanity and a mortal God.

Well might these thoughts arise and spread through all the fullness of the sphere of thought-similarities corresponding to one another, contrasts disclosing and resolving themselves, the miracle of clarity

"Another indication that the light is coming from the northwest is provided by the shadow of the rod that is the distinguishing mark of the little man on the rampart.

<sup>12</sup> With its countless churches, the city belongs to the Messianic world, but is not itself the heavenly Jerusalem, the holy city of which the book of Revelation says, "I saw

no temple in the city." The palace represents the heavenly Jerusalem, in which "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" are the temple, as Revelation declares.

"Paul Valery, *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, Pleiade ed. (Paris, 1957), vol. 1, p. 206. Shortly before his death in May 1945, the poet describes in this passage the appear,

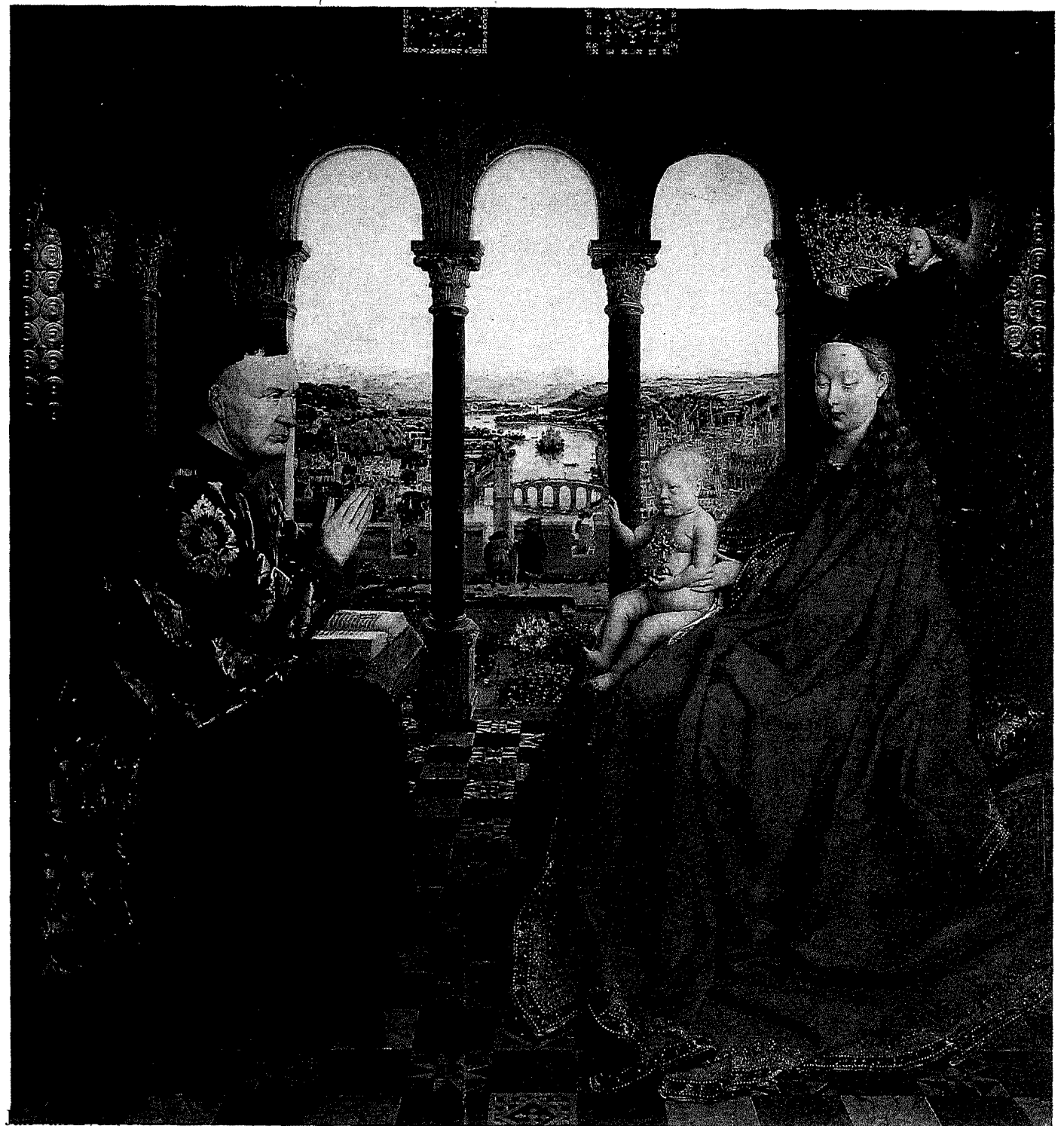
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scribes in this passage the appear,





incessantly enacting itself, and all the Ideas glitter,  
ing in the gentle radiance of each like gems-for  
that is what they are--in the crown of unifying  
cognition.†,

It is not heaven on earth that Van Eyck is depicting, but a  
world that has ascended into heaven, and that is almost  
indistinguishable from the real one. Here, however, the  
city's "gates shall never be shut by day-and there shall  
be no night there."<sup>14</sup>

Reminiscences of the expulsion from the Garden of  
Eden, the murder of Abel, the Flood, and the drunken-  
ness of Noah are consigned to the capital above the  
chancellor's head; on the Virgin's side, the capital shows  
the justice of Trajan.<sup>15</sup>

At the center of the visual square,<sup>16</sup> between the world  
and the palace, at the crosshairs of the artist's gaze, there is  
a man in a fur-trimmed blue coat, with a red turban and  
red socks, standing at the battlements. His figure casts a

shadow of "a kind of angel" in human  
form who sits weeping on the edge  
of a fountain. He is living in an age  
in which it is only through despair  
that even angels are able to hold fast  
to the image of wisdom. It is an  
image in which the angel of the  
Rolin Madonna seems to find voice,  
five hundred years after its creation.

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 21.25.

According to the interpretation  
given by Panofsky in *Early  
Netherlandish Painting*,  
Runge interprets the scene as a  
depiction of the Queen of Sheba  
before Solomon--each art historian  
has his own interpretation. Cf.  
Roosen/Runge, *Rolin Madonna*.

<sup>15</sup> "The city lies foursquare, its  
length the same as its breadth" is

the description of the heavenly  
Jerusalem given in the book of  
Revelation (21.16). In order to  
give the effect of squareness, a pic-  
ture has to be taller than it is wide.  
Since it appears as a square to the  
eye, without actually being one, it  
is termed "visual square." Eber-  
hard Schenk zu Schweinsberg has  
reconstructed the geometrical de-  
sign of van Eyck's picture for-  
mally. The visual square in the  
Rolin Madonna is constructed on  
the formula  $h = h_2 + g/2$ : "two ele-  
ments in a relationship of immedi-  
ate interaction with one another,  
such as half the width plus the  
height of a triangle of that width  
on one side, add up to produce the  
height of the painting." (*Bildformat*

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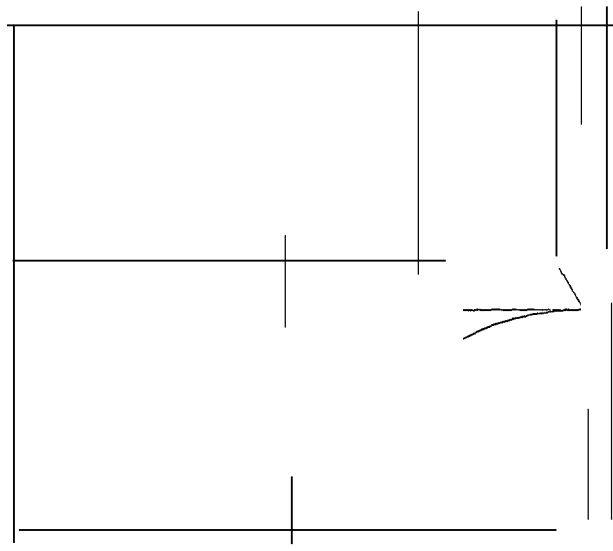
shadow on the wall,<sup>7</sup> from which his striking profile stands out. He is holding a rod in his hand, showing his status as a court official, and he seems to be waiting for his brother, with the black turban and black stockings, who is peering endlessly downward, to turn back to him again. It is Van Eyck standing at the center of the picture he has painted, risking a glance back at the viewer out of the corner of his eye.

*der Bruder van Eyck* [Limburg, 1952], p. 12.)

<sup>7</sup>If the sun were just setting in the west, as some art historians have thought, then the shadows of the figures on the rampart would have to be much longer and at a greater angle to the wall. Cf. Roosen, Runge, *Rolin, Madonna*, and Elisa,

beth Dhanens, *Jan van Eyck* (Antwerp, 1980).

"The court painter has here taken the place of the angel in Revelation, who "had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls." On the interpretation of the rod in Christian iconography, see Chapeaurouge: "In addition to



Rolin Madonna (Paris)

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His painting has thrown up a great many puzzles for art historians. They have tried in vain to explain the two magpies on the garden path.<sup>8</sup> Why should there be two birds of misfortune, known for their thieving and talkative ways, in a garden whose flowers glorify the virtues of the Virgin Mary: Admittedly, magpies are among the birds that remain faithful to a single partner throughout their lives; apart from that, however, nothing is known about these nesuobbers. A medieval morality tale records the story of a magpie that steals a guilder from a rich man in order to bring good cheer to its poor master.<sup>20</sup> The birds' fascination with glittering objects, and their motley plumage, suggest a role in restoring equality between rich and poor—at least in fairy tales. Infrared photography<sup>21</sup> of the Rolin painting has revealed two pentimenti involving alterations that affect its composition. Who, other than Rolin himself, can have requested that the purse at his belt be deleted from the picture, or can have had the arm of the Christ Child, which was

the crown of laurels as a sign of eternal victory, it is above all the rod that gives a person importance" (*Symbole*, p. 56).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Roosen, Runge, *Rolin, Madonna*. The peacocks on the rampart and parapet seem to be easier to decipher. In the fifteenth century, the peacock was considered to be a bird of Paradise, and was a symbol of resurrection and eternal life. The ancients regarded its magnificent tail as reflecting the starry sky, and Augustine mentions in the *City of God* the legend that its flesh was imperishable. Cf. also Manfred Lurker, *Wörterbuch der Symbolik* (Stuttgart, 1991). According to a French legend, magpies are metamorphosed peacocks: they once had a golden bush of feathers on their

heads, their feathers reflected the light shimmering in every color, and their tails were even longer than the peacock's. They arrogantly mocked the dying Savior on the cross, laughing on him and laughing and playing the fool. In punishment for this, God transformed their glorious costume into black and white, and turned their formerly splendid song into a hoarse croaking. Cf. Ernst and Luise Carriker, *Die Vogel im Volksglauben* (Wiesbaden, 1989), p. 179.

<sup>20</sup>Albert Wesselski, *Mirchen des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1925), p. 114.

<sup>21</sup>J. van Asperen de Boer, "La Vierge au Chancelier de Rolin de Van Eyck: Examen au moyen de la reflectographie à l'infrarouge," *Revue du Louvre* 15 (1990), 37-49.

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originally lowered, raised in benediction of the Chancellor? There was to be nothing in the portrait that might recall its patron's notorious greed. Among his fulsome compliments to the artist when inspecting the underdrawing for the portrait on its chalk ground, the cunning strategist must therefore have included a couple of small "buts" expressing his reservations. "But the purse!" "But the benediction!" The first had to be removed and the second had to be painted in. Rolin wanted to present an immaculate image of his own sanctity to an ungrateful world, which had eyes only for his purse, ignoring the blessings of his statesmanship, his charitable works, his countless donations.<sup>22</sup> The artist would probably have

"The historian Hermann Kamp regards Rolin's overpainted purse as indicating the patron's desire to conceal how recently he had been elevated to the aristocracy: "The purse was a symbol mainly worn by counselors working in the administration ... By requesting the removal of the purse, the Chancellor was deliberately eliminating a symbol that would have suggested a similarity with portraits of nonaristocrats or recent aristocrats. Rolin was simply behaving as if he had always belonged to the aristocracy." Cf. H. Kamp, *Memoire*, p. 259. Without questioning Kamp's method, Philippe Lorentz in 1994 proved that the interpretation of the purse as symbolizing a court official was incorrect. Lorentz presents, among other evidence, that of a contemporary witness who describes the Duke of Burgundy as wearing such a purse in 1461. Cf. Philippe Lorentz, "Les Rolins et les Primitifs Flamands," in the catalog of the Rolin exhibition *La bonne Etoile des Rolins* (Autun, 1994),

pp. 23-29. Kamp presupposes a rigid interpretative scheme: purse = symbol of court official. However, symbols can alter their meaning in context; their significance can never be stated a priori, but can only be deciphered from their relationship with other symbols. On the belt of the traitor Judas, the purse signifies treachery; St. Matthew the Evangelist wears one since he is a former tax collector; St. Louis wears one to symbolize a stable currency. In depictions of the Vices, the purse hangs on the coat of the cardinal sin of greed, while in images of the humors it hangs heavily on the melancholic's belt. As an age-old symbol of wealth and greed, the purse became in the fifteenth century a constant feature of Saturnian images. Cf. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (London, 1964), p. 285. In an illustration in Hennegau's chronicle, Rolin is seen with his purse at

been subjected to a long, winded tirade; he may have voiced objections to altering the composition to the annoyance of his patron, who would have dismissed him with a halcyon threat to withdraw the commission; he had heard of one Rogier de la Pasture<sup>23</sup> who wasn't a bad painter, either.

Studies of the background in the painting have shown that its numerous details were not included in the underdrawing. Perhaps the magpies flew into the painting unexpectedly, once Rolin's request had been complied with: If this were the case, then the enigma of the two thieves in the little Garden of Paradise would be solved.

Van Eyck's learning, his knowledge of ancient authors, is attested to by various sources.<sup>24</sup> Some of his paintings contain references to Ovid, so it would be no surprise if the wily birds here had been transformed in the manner described in the *Metamorphoses*: "Nine magpies, birds who can imitate any kind of sound, had settled on the hedges, and were lamenting their fate." The nine daughters of the rich landowner Pierus, "proud that they were nine in number," challenge the Muses to a singing

the Burgundian court. The context of the heavenly Jerusalem is completely different. In Paradise, the absent Purse only works if the presence of its bearer is not to be called into question. The needle's eye through which the Kingdom of God is reached is, of course, fashioned in such a way that it is easier for a camel with two humps to get through than a rich man with a purse.

<sup>23</sup> This was the French name of the painter Rogier van der Weyden, whom Rolin commissioned a decade after the van Eyck painting to paint the triptych for the hotel, Dien at

Beaune that he had endowed. The reverse of the altar wings shows the elderly Rolin with his third wife, Guigone de Salins. "*Il est bien juste que Rolin, apres avoir fait tant de pauvres pendant sa vie, le 11r / aisse un asile apres sa mort*," Louis XI is said to have remarked on the foundation of the hospital. ("It is very just that Rolin, having created so many paupers during his life, should leave a refuge for them after his death.") Cf. M. G. Abord, *Nicolas Rolin* (Dijon, 1958), p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Dhanens, *Jan van Eyck*, p. 181.

contest. "Though it was shameful to contend with them," as Urania, the Muse of astronomy, tells Pallas Athene, "there was more shame—we thought—in turning down their challenge." The Pierides begin with a loud song of falsehoods belittling the gods and praising the hundred-, armed titan Typhoeus, "who dared to hope for heaven as his kingdom." When they lose the contest, they even revile the goddesses who have defeated them. At this, Calliope, the Muse of poetry, says, "You challenged us: for that alone, you merit punishment. But now you dare to add your rude abuse. Our patience is not endless: you would test our anger, and our wrath will rage-unchecked." At once, the rich man's mocking daughters find their nails turning to claws, their arms becoming covered in down and plumage, and their faces narrowing into horny beaks; all that is left of their laughter is a clacking noise. "Yet, though they now are winged, their endless need for sharp, impulsive, harsh derisive speech remains: their old loquacity—they keep."<sup>25</sup>

Arrogance is thus transformed into a bird that steals from the nests of *songbirds*. The two "daughters" of the wealthy Rolin, his two little "buts" of reservation, may have suffered a similar fate.<sup>26</sup> As embodiments of Rolin's croaking criticism, the two magpies with their notorious greed, with their doubts about salvation, may have been a witty touch of revenge at a deeper mental level, through which the artist consciously gave wings to the touches of

<sup>25</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5. 294-678 (*The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum [New York, 1993]).

<sup>26</sup> On the personification of abstractions in ancient rhetoric and *descendants* of the technique in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque, cf. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1953), pp. 131-134; p. 132: "In medieval didactic poems on the virtues and vices, we find the rudiments of a 'genealogy of morals.' These genealogical relationships are not always clear. Is the desire for fame the sister, the grandchild, daughter, or the daughter of Pride?"

*die Age*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1953), pp. 131-134; p. 132: "In medieval didactic poems on the virtues and vices, we find the rudiments of a 'genealogy of morals.' These genealogical relationships are not always clear. Is the desire for fame the sister, the grandchild, daughter, or the daughter of Pride?"

"repentance" he had been forced to add. This interpretation of the magpies had to be hidden from contemporaries, but a shrewd observer might still have said to himself, "If a man like Rolin can dwell in the heavenly Jerusalem, then even magpies can live in a garden of virtues ..."

Rolin himself would hardly have been concerned about the trivial birdlife in the background, once he had been portrayed without a purse, and receiving God's benediction in "a home in heaven." After all, the plumage of the unlucky birds<sup>27</sup> fitted the picture mimetically as a continuation of the black, and, white stars in the *filig*.

<sup>27</sup> The only case in which the magpie apparently does not bring bad luck is when it accompanies Arithmetic in depictions of the seven liberal arts; cf. G. Heinz, Mohr, *Lexikon der Symbole* (Düsseldorf, 1971), p. 172. The magpie's modest plumage sometimes accompanies paintings of "Lady" Rhetoric: in ca. 1493 in a woodcut, "Cicero and Rhetoric," in *Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Hanschriften des Mittelalters*, ed. N.H. Ott et al. (Munich, 1991), vol. 1, no. 10. In paintings the magpies often are seen perching on gallows, or on the cross of the thief at the Crucifixion. In depictions of the Vices, it represents vanity and extravagance. In Wolf, *Eschenbach's Parzival*, it is compared with doubt concerning salvation: "If vacillation dwells within the heart the soul will rue it. Shame and honour clash where the steadfast man is motley like the magpie. But such a man may yet make inry, for Heaven and Hell have each part in him" (trans. A. T. Hatto; [Harmondsworth, 1980],

p. 15). According to one legend, the magpie has a motley coat because it laughed at Christ's crucifixion. Cf. Lurker, *Wörterbuch*, and Hans, *Wörterbuch*, Ernst Badestiöbner, and Helga Neumann, *Christliche Ikonographie in Stichworten* (Munich, 1994). The Latin name for the magpie, *Pica pica*, is related to the root for "pitch," "pitch, black." In French, the bird is called *pie*, and there is also a dialect word *agace* (*agacer* originally meant "to screech" like a magpie, with the senses "irritate," "aggravate," "pester" later deriving from it). Up to the nineteenth century, *pie* (from the Latin root *pious*) in refined speech was an adjective meaning "pious, charitable, merciful": *faire oeuvre pie* meant "to do a pious work." The magpies might also therefore be taken to refer to Rolin's charitable endowments. In French, *pie* is only used today as the adjective meaning "pied, particolored." Superimposing the two senses of the word in *oeuvre pie*, the pious/parried deed might mean "whitely." This is exactly the sense in which the

The magpies' coat is chiaroscuro, but the peacock shimmers in the colors of the rainbow. Ambivalent like many of the birds and animals in Christian iconography, the peacock's significance varies according to its surroundings. It is sometimes good, sometimes evil. In Paradise, it symbolizes immortality,<sup>28</sup> but in the secular world it is the first of the Vices, Superbia (arrogance, pride). Its seraphic plumage is a feast for the eyes, but its shrill cry is a cacophony to the ears. Ever since the *Physiologus*, the bird's shrill cry has been linked to its scratching claws and interpreted as a complaint:

For the peacock is a quite delightful bird, above every other fowl under heaven, having splendid plumage and delightful wings, striding about here and there, regarding itself with admiration and ruffling its feathers, and contorting itself and turning to look at itself

Magpies are regarded in the *Wyngaerden der Sele*, a tractate formerly attributed to Johannes Veghe (c.143/32-1504), which may be of Dutch origin. In this text, magpies are described as worldly, wise people who are trying to atone for evil deeds on earth by doing as many good deeds in compensation. (*Ti Wyngaerden der Sele des Johannes Veghe*, ed. Rademacher [Hiltrop, 1940], p. 48. On the question of its authorship, see Dietrich Schmidtke, "Bemerkungen zum 'Wyngaerden der Sele' des Ps. Veghe," in *Verbum et Signum: Festschrift für Friedrich Ohly*, ed. Hans Fromm et al. (Munich, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 413-436.)

The peacock symbolizes resurrection in two different periods. It can instantaneously raise its tail into a fan, while its tail feathers,

lost in the fall, grow back again in spring after the intervening winter. In the tenth book of his *Natural History*, Pliny writes that the peacock sleeps perched in trees in the dense forests because it feels shame on losing its feathers in the fall, and it only reemerges in spring. This is probably the source of the legend that its flesh is imperishable, allowing feathers to be instantaneously or cyclically resurrected from it. The bird's negative associations surely derive from its behavior: "The most outstanding characteristic of the peacock is its arrogant thirst for domination, which it manifests not only toward its mate, but also toward human beings: often making it intolerable on a poultry farm" (*Brehms Tierleben* (Leipzig, 1911) vol. 7, p. 49).

But when its gaze falls upon its feet, it cries out in loud complaint; for its feet do not match the rest of its form at all.

The moral of the allegory:

You too, wise human being, when you consider your destiny and the good things that God has given you, rejoice and be glad and exult in your heart; but when you look at your feet—which is to say, at your sins—then cry out and weep to God, and scorn the injustice of it, just as the peacock scorns its feet.<sup>29</sup>

The peacock is simultaneously attractive and repulsive. Its screech is the link between its ability to produce a glorious fan and its sinfully ugly feet; it offends the human eye, but placates the divine one.<sup>30</sup> Once it reaches Paradise, the screecher has nothing more to reproach itself with;

The painting shows three peacocks in the first arcade on Rolin's side of the painting. Concealed by his sleeve,

<sup>28</sup> *Physiologus*, trans. and commented by Otto Seel (Zurich, 1960; 1992 ed.), p. 78. "In old Italian proverb says that the peacock has the plumage of an angel, the voice of a devil, and the gait of an assassin." (*Brehms Tierleben*, vol. 7, p. 49.)

<sup>29</sup> The change in the peacock's significance seems to have begun in the late Middle Ages, when the sense of sight began to vie with the sense of hearing for predominance. See the excellent study by Donat de Chapeaurouge, *Das Auge ist ein Herr, das Ohr ein Knecht* (Wiesbaden, 1983). In symbolism, the peacock falls gradually silent as time goes

on. Its feet receive hardly any attention anymore, and the contradictory interpretations both involve the fan. The peacock came to be regarded as the vainest of all the birds only after the belief in immortality became a *seu*, serving one. This was when the peacock's puffed-up courtship display entered the symbolism of Vanity. The feet and the screech are forgotten, although the physical examples of the species are still heard to complain.

<sup>30</sup> The symbolism of the number three here refers to the three days that Christ spent in the tomb before the Resurrection.

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the body of one of the birds seems to have been separated from its head, like Argus Panoptes in Greek mythology. In the ancient world, the peacock was honored as the bird of Juno, the Queen of Heaven. Jupiter's jealous wife transformed the hundred eyes of her herdsman Argus, who was tricked by Mercury and beheaded, into "jewels that glittered like the stars,"<sup>32</sup> which she set on the tail of her favorite bird. In Christian interpretations of Ovid, Argus was seen as representing secular princes and the shepherds of the Church, who practice wise foresight with a hundred eyes, but can still be deceived. "One who has lost his prudence is like a peacock without a tail."<sup>33</sup>

None of the peacocks in the Rolin portrait has fanned out its feathers. With its tail of eyes turning toward the curios in the space above, one of the peacocks is standing on the battlements and peering in the direction of Rolin. Its clumsy feet are clearly visible; as the *Physiologus* shows, these are no obstacle on the path to eternal life. Its own screeching complaint follows swiftly on its heels, just as forgiveness follows the complaint—provided that the sinner will part with his purse.

The anniversary of the Treaty of Arras was the annual feast day of the apostle and evangelist St. Matthew, whose symbol is his purse.<sup>34</sup> "Matthew sinned by avarice by seeking ill-gotten gains, since he was a tax gatherer, a keeper of the customs." Speedily converted by Christ,

<sup>32</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.720-724.

<sup>33</sup> Gudrun Schleusener, Eichholz, *Das Auge im Mittelalter* (München, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> In the case of the Evangelist, the presence of the purse reveals the vanquishing of greed, while the absence of the purse in Rolin's case conceals the vanquishing of greed

only in *effigie*. September 21 had been celebrated as St. Matthew's Day, a public holiday, since the early Middle Ages. I am grateful to K. Ferrari d'Occhieppo for this observation.  
<sup>35</sup> is Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, 1993), vol. 2, p. 187.

Matthew has his greed for profit transformed into generosity. He humbly confesses the baseness of his origins: "following the prescription that the just man is his own first accuser, he called himself Matthew the publican."<sup>36</sup> The evil dragons that fell asleep at his feet are seen decorating the arch of the central arcade. His sermon after overcoming the dragons also fits the picture:

Now the apostle began to preach a great sermon to the people about the glory of the earthly paradise, telling them that it had stood above all the mountains and had been close to heaven; that in it there were no thorns or brambles, and lilies and roses did not wither; that old age never came, and people always stayed young; that there the angels played upon their instruments, and that when the birds were called, they obeyed at once. The apostle went on to say that mankind had been expelled from this earthly paradise, but that through the birth of Christ they had been recalled to the paradise of heaven.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, even the tiniest detail in the painter's cosmos contains hidden significance.

Johannes van Eyck evolved a technique so ineffably minute that the number of details comprised by the total form approaches infinity. This technique achieves homogeneity in all visible forms as calculus achieves continuity in all numerical quantities. That which is tiny in terms of measurable magnitude yet is large as a product of the infinitesimally

<sup>36</sup> *The Golden Legend* was the most popular religious book of the Middle Ages.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 184.



small; that which is sizable in terms of measurable magnitude yet is small as a fraction of the infinitely large.<sup>38</sup>

Panofsky makes reference to Nicholas of Cusa, whose theological and mathematical speculations prepared the way for the modern spatial concept of quantum continuum, and whose philosophy parallels van Eyck's art.

<sup>38</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.), p. 181.

*Does not all philosophy ultimately consist of this: behaving as if it did not know what well-know with certainty—and as if, on the contrary, it knew precisely what we certainly do not know?* PAUL VALERY

## IV A Cosmographer's Conjectures



toic, Platonic and Neoplatonic, nominalist, and mystical currents fuse together in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa to form a single, unique structure. If we were to regard the collapse of the foundations of Medieval philosophy as a fall from grace—and at the end of the twentieth century there might be good reason to do so—then the Franciscan William of Ockham might be seen as the serpent on the Tree of Knowledge, and Nicholas of Cusa would be among those who devoured the fruit. In contrast to other students of the serpent, however, Nicholas never lost sight of Paradise, in spite of the rupture caused by the forbidden fruit. The Invincible Teacher—one of the honorifics by which Ockham was addressed—challenged the Aristotelian distinction between celestial and earthly matter, and ascribed the same nature to celestial bodies as to ephemeral earthly bodies. Here below and there above, there was not the slightest difference. Everything in the world and everything above it must be contingent, for God could have created everything quite differently.

<sup>1</sup> Another term of praise was *Venerabilis Inceptor*—the Admirable Initiator.

**T**here was a contest between which we had perceived and the world of the eye, which is a new breed of painter; the world of the senses their goal was to reveal details and vanities in a way of perception.

Anita Albus's translation of trompe l'oeil, sixteenth-century focusing her attention on European artists. As a scholar, like Panofsky; as a critic, others have not seen she skillfully translates vivid and exciting technique of assumes an ability different levels, in them.

The first perception of the visibility of the Eyck-his visual technique, an third parts are the genres of and "forest of bumblebees, which bokov emerge in literature of ish from the field continuing perception conjectures are.

**Anita Albus**



**HEART  
OF ARTS**

*Rediscovering Painting*

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON



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