

PICTORIAL BABEL:
INVENTING THE FLEMISH VISUAL VERNACULAR

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I. *Rethinking Vernacularity*

To a degree that might be thought unusual in the history of art, the works of the so-called Flemish Primitives comprise a pictorial style both instantly recognizable and intimately associated with a particular locale. The startling novelty of this *ars nova* originating in the Burgundian Netherlands circa 1420 engendered immediate international acclaim and, not surprisingly, wholesale imitation, such that the idiom introduced by painters such as Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck, and Rogier van der Weyden proved remarkably stable across an extended historical moment.¹ The familiar stillness of these fifteenth-century paintings was shattered, however, by the kaleidoscopic array of styles that emerged coincident with the efflorescence of Antwerp as a mercantile center at the turn of the sixteenth century.² Within a comparatively short span of years, panels exploring such divergent formal interests as Mannerism, Romanism, and myriad improvisations

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¹ The sustained and consistent reception of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting can be inferred from the opprobrious remarks on Flemish art ascribed to Michelangelo by Francisco de Hollanda in his *Roman Dialogues*, on which see Agoston L.C., "Michelangelo as Voice versus Michelangelo as Text", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (2006) 135–167. Consider, by contrast, the profound stylistic variation evinced by the most prominent painters working on the Italian peninsula throughout the fifteenth century.

² Friedländer M.J., *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 14 vols. (Leiden: 1967), provides a ready survey of the range and scope of pictorial production in early sixteenth-century Antwerp. On the economic expansion of Antwerp, see Van der Wee H., *The Growth of the Antwerp Market and European Economy* (The Hague: 1963); Van der Stock J., ed., *Antwerp: Story of a Metropolis*, ex. cat. (Antwerp: 1993).

modeled after the diabolical fantasies of Hieronymus Bosch began to appear alongside paintings perpetuating or revisiting the work of the Flemish Primitives.³ Moreover, for the first time in the Netherlandish tradition, individual painters exercised the conspicuous and deliberate choice of multiple pictorial manners: artists such as Quentin Metsys and Jan Gossaert worked in a pronounced variety of idioms, ranging from the Italianate to the archaic.⁴ The profusion of styles that characterized early pictorial production in Antwerp was matched by a proliferation of subject matter: whereas the preponderance of fifteenth-century panel painting was largely confined to the production of devotional images and portraits, sixteenth-century Antwerp witnessed the rise of multiple pictorial genres, from landscapes to tavern scenes, from still lifes to classical histories.⁵

This riotous irruption of visual interests has proven remarkably resistant to the orchestration of a coherent explanatory narrative. Recently, however, a number of attempts have been made to clarify the protean complexion of sixteenth-century Flemish painting through investigation of the concept of vernacularity. In particular, the vernacular has been yoked to an evaluation of style and subject understood in terms of a polemic between 'Flemish' and 'Italianate' modes, and harnessed to the figures of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Frans Floris, respectively [Figs. 1, 2].⁶ Identified as a self-conscious champion of an autochthonous pictorial tradition, Bruegel's art is thought to both consolidate and reify the conventions of fifteenth- and early

³ See Ainsworth M., *Gerard David: Purity of Vision in an Age of Transition* (New York: 1998); Van den Brink P., ed., *ExtravagAnt! A Forgotten Chapter of Antwerp Painting, 1500–1530*, ex. cat. (Antwerp: 2005); Marlier G., *La Renaissance flamande: Pierre Coeck d'Alost* (Brussels: 1966); Silver L., "Second Bosch: Family Resemblance and the Marketing of Art", *Kunst voor de Markt/Art for the Market, 1500–1700. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 50 (2000) 30–57.

⁴ Silver L., *The Paintings of Quinten Massys* (Montclair, NJ: 1984); Mensger A., *Jan Gossaert: Die niederländische Kunst zu Beginn der Neuzeit* (Berlin: 2002). The term *genre* is used here with caution, with an emphasis on its colloquial rather than critical sense. The concept of theoretically defined and readily identifiable categories implied within modern discourse on genre would most likely not have been available to the sixteenth-century viewer. On this position, see Falkenburg R., "Landscape", *Kritische Berichte* 35, 3 (2007) 45–50.

⁵ Silver L., *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Market* (Philadelphia: 2006).

⁶ Meadow M., "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*, Aemulatio and the Space of Vernacular Style", *Pieter Bruegel. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996) 181–205, 196.



Fig. 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel* (1563).
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum



Fig. 2. Frans Floris, *The Gods of Olympus* (ca. 1550).
Antwerp, KMSK

sixteenth-century Netherlandish visual culture, as well as adumbrate myriad critical and material concerns that have come to define a significant body of seventeenth-century Northern art.⁷ Paintings like the Vienna *Tower of Babel*, to take but one example, have been read as representative of a Flemish vernacular style, seamlessly synthesizing a panoply of visual and cultural practices by dint of their apparently unmannered naturalism.⁸ By contrast, the art of Frans Floris is held to exhibit the conspicuous, if awkward, absorption of formal and thematic principles originated on the Italian peninsula.⁹ Floris's manifest investment in contemporary Renaissance theory is sometimes said to impute a cosmopolitan character to his work, associating the artist with the broad international diffusion of humanist discourse. Moreover, the style associated in Antwerp with the paintings of Floris is tacitly identified as normative or dominant, such that Bruegel's work is commonly read as a deliberate renunciation – perhaps even repudiation – of this cosmopolitan manner.¹⁰

That the immediate and palpable differences between the works of these artists would have registered before a contemporary audience is beyond dispute, and in fact it would appear that both painters figured forth in a nascent art theoretical debate that emerged in certain intellectual circles in Antwerp during the second half of the sixteenth century. Lucas de Heere's *Den Hof en Boomgaerd der Poësie* (1565) includes within its pages the now-familiar 'Invective against a certain painter who scoffed at the painters of Antwerp', a defense of the art of Floris against the criticisms of an unnamed antagonist, often assumed to be Pieter Bruegel.¹¹ The 'Invective' refutes the accusations of cloying

⁷ Useful historiographic reviews can be found in Kavalier E.M., *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: 1999); Meadow M. "Putting Bruegel in his Place: Contextual Studies of Pieter Bruegel the Elder", *Pieter Bruegel. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996) 7–13.

⁸ Freedberg D., "Allusion and Topicality in the Work of Pieter Bruegel: The Implications of a Forgotten Polemic", in Freedberg D. (ed.), *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, ex. cat. (Tokyo: 1989) 63.

⁹ Van de Velde C., *Frans Floris (1519/20–1570): leven en werken* (Brussels: 1975).

¹⁰ Meadow, M., "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*", *passim*; Freedberg D., "Allusion and Topicality", 62–63; Ten Brink Goldsmith J., "Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the Matter of Italy", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992) 205–234.

¹¹ Freedberg, "Allusion and Topicality" 61–64. For the most recent argument and literature, see Kaschek B., "Weder römisch, noch antik? Pieter Bruegels Verleumdung des Appelles in neuer Deutung", in Kamecke G., Klein B., and Müller J. (eds.), *Antike als Konzept: Lesarten in Kunst, Literatur und Politik* (Berlin: 2009) 167–179. My thanks to Todd Richardson for this reference.

artifice purportedly leveled at Floris, and scorns the 'certain painter' for producing artless paintings unmarked by any trace of having traveled to Rome.

The cultural implications of de'Heere's commentary and its denotation of a burgeoning theoretical discourse on pictorial style notwithstanding, I would nevertheless like to suggest that the oppositional framework within which Bruegel and Floris are consistently set advances a false polemic – a situation complicated, rather than clarified, by conventional art historical readings of vernacularity. The intensive focus on style and subject as the definitive constituents of the vernacular encourages form to be abstracted from objecthood, and implies that the poles figured by Bruegel and Floris represent ideal, unalloyed exempla of vernacular and cosmopolitan modes (and that by extension, those artists whose work falls somewhere in between would be understood as hybridized).¹² Moreover, an exclusive attention to style and subject ignores conditions of medium and display that inflected the historical engagement with the objects themselves. For example, Bruegel is known to have worked in a wide range of media, from panels large and small to painted plates, and from paintings on cheap linen or canvas to prints. The cost of such objects varied significantly, and canvas paintings and prints could be distributed and sold widely, such that the audiences for Bruegel's work were potentially quite divergent – a circumstance that undermines the assertion that there was a uniform understanding of Bruegel's images that could be categorized as 'vernacular'. At the same time, Bruegel and Floris were known to attract many of the same patrons. In fact, the works of both artists were often famously hung in the same homes of the Antwerp elite, and it would thus seem unlikely that the work of these artists was recognized as diametrically opposed.¹³ Perhaps more important, these conditions suggest that style itself was not a definitive or distinguishing marker of taste or identity for the sixteenth-century Flemish viewer: it is improbable that the possession of a Bruegel painting signified an ideological affinity for indigenous pictorial traditions, nor that owning a Floris signaled committed cosmopolitanism. Rather, it seems plausible to assert that such paintings articulated the interests of their

¹² Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*" 182.

¹³ Buchanan I., "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: II. The 'Months' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder", *The Burlington Magazine* 132 (1990) 541–550.

owners in terms that were *functionally* quite similar, and that therefore the issue of vernacularity might be more productively approached through the consideration of utility than through the analysis of style.

This conceptual shift requires a reassessment of terms. Understood to encapsulate local, indigenous, or popular practices, the vernacular is typically framed in contradistinction to the cosmopolitan, the international, or the elite.¹⁴ Within this oppositional rubric, elite modes of discourse are comparatively timeless and unbounded, properties illuminated by the enduring and international character of early modern aristocratic culture, for example. The universality of such cultural models depends upon a codified inflexibility in the articulation of ideals that both conserves its own historical past and ensures its posterity. By contrast, the vernacular implicitly conditions its own reception by virtue of its role as a marker of difference: it at once identifies and differentiates what is most often a culturally, geographically, and temporally finite community.¹⁵ The vernacular is inherently momentary, topical, and marginal. Yet it is also relentlessly fluid and appropriative, constantly shifting its contours as it is employed – a characterization that comprehends the vernacular as both an indicator and an agent of change, the analysis of which need not be constrained within a simple binary framework.

Precisely because of its inherent contingency and contemporaneity, the vernacular is in many ways only realized through use. A necessarily social mode of communication, the term is perhaps better understood as an action than as an idea – that is, as an instrument employed for a particular purpose, as opposed to an expression of a given position.¹⁶ This conception not only underscores the agency of the vernacular and thus calls attention to its affective potential, but also allows for the possibility that vernacularity need not be tied so closely to the profession of a particular intellectual or ideological posture. What is more, such an elastic approach seems especially suited to assess the dynamic, appropriative character of the vernacular. Rather than attempting to view a given historical vernacular as an artifact adduced to emblema-

¹⁴ Somerset F. – Watson N., “On Vernacular”, in Somerset F. – Watson N., (eds.), *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity* (University Park, PA: 2003) ix–xiii.

¹⁵ Pollock S., “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History”, *Public Culture* 12 (2000) 594.

¹⁶ This position is deeply influenced by *ibid.*, 593.

tize a fixed cultural mentality, then, reading vernacularity in terms of function promotes attention to the process of cultural creation and transmission.

Marshalling this rubric for the consideration of sixteenth-century Flemish art encourages an expansive critical lens that holds the potential to illuminate connections and continuities between cultural and historical practices that have otherwise remained obscured by a more narrow focus on style and subject matter. Such breadth is accomplished, at least in part, by virtue of the fact that the consideration of use – or more precisely, of instrumentality – requires an assessment of the conditions under which art was experienced in the sixteenth-century Low Countries.¹⁷ To the extent that the function of images has been interrogated within the historiography of early Netherlandish painting, it has been approached most often through the analysis of reception: typically, a range of extrapictorial information – literary, political, philosophical, theological – is proffered in support of an interpretation grounded in the process of ideation.¹⁸ Function, in such instances, is linked explicitly, perhaps even exclusively, to the production of meaning derived from abstract associations brought to bear by the imaginative faculties of an ideal viewer. But the significance of an image is not solely defined by what it represents.¹⁹ Paintings were presented in physical spaces whose contexts framed certain expectations for behavior – behavior, it should be noted, that was in all likelihood vastly different from the interpretive habits conditioned by the modern museum or by contemporary scholarship – such that pictures must also be understood to have been defined *socially*. The obverse is also almost certainly true: pictures defined their viewers socially

¹⁷ The conceptual foundation for these arguments depend upon the insights found in Summers D., “Conditions and Conventions: On the Disanalogy of Art and Language”, in Kemal S. – Gaskell I., (eds.), *The Language of Art History* (Cambridge: 1991) 181–212. Summers work is elaborated at length in *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London-New York: 2003).

¹⁸ Panofsky’s palpable disinterest in questions of social engagement evinced in his formulation of iconology as a critical method was noted in some of the earliest reviews of his work. See, for example, Julius Held’s review of Panofsky’s *Early Netherlandish Painting in Art Bulletin* 37 (1955) 205–234. The study of social context popularized in subsequent decades has nonetheless remained largely grounded in a mentalist approach that cleaves closely to Panofsky’s fundamental emphasis on ideation. An excellent analysis of recent exceptions to this characterization in the study of late medieval art can be found in Williamson B., “Altarpices, Liturgy, and Devotion”, *Speculum* 79 (2004) 341–406.

¹⁹ Summers, “Conditions and Conventions” 206.

as well, reflecting a potentially stabilizing or authoritative public image of their audience. The questions framed by these assertions are thus, What did sixteenth-century Flemish pictures *do*? And what did sixteenth-century Flemish people do with pictures?

The pursuit of these interests must necessarily begin with a restored attention to physical objecthood, to the 'thingness' of the images in question. Though often taken for granted, the issue of medium is of central importance to such concerns. Images produced in tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, and prints all signified through the very stuffs from which they were made; moreover, pictures were often displayed in conversation with other images in multiple media, collectively shaping and shaped by the spaces in which they were deployed. Yet the historical study of early Netherlandish painting remains largely hermetic and relatively undifferentiated: insufficient attention is paid to the functional relationships between painting and other visual media, and distinctions between different kinds of painting – for example, between panel painting and linen painting – are seldom explored.²⁰ This pretermission is especially consequential when considered against the fact that, in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, painting had not yet been codified in terms of its social use. Previously deployed chiefly for devotional purposes and subject to an exponential increase in production volume over the course of the century, cultural engagements with the medium of painting as a vehicle of visual communication remained demonstrably fluid.²¹ It is this communicative aspect of the medium of painting – its function as an instrument in the structuring of social relations – that I suggest can be most usefully understood in terms of the vernacular. In a certain sense, the medium is the message: the historical emergence of easel painting is itself an example of visual vernacularity in action. Though vernacularity should by no means be confined to discussions of painting, this essay takes painting as its focus precisely because of its potential to model how pictures of all types and in all media were utilized in the early modern Low Countries. The arguments that follow advance

²⁰ On linen painting, see Wolfthal D., *The Beginnings of Early Netherlandish Canvas Painting: 1400–1530* (Cambridge: 1989). See also Bloom J., "Why Painting?" in De Marchi N. – Van Miegroet H. (eds.), *Mapping Markets for Paintings in Europe, 1450–1750* (Turnhout: 2006) 17–31.

²¹ Martens M. – Peeters N., "Paintings in Antwerp Houses (1532–1567)", in De Marchi N. – Van Miegroet H., (eds.), *Mapping Markets for Paintings in Europe, 1450–1750* (Turnhout: 2006) 35–51. These arguments will be explored more fully below.

this project, averring that the urban patriciate of Antwerp adapted the medium of painting to strategies of social use, communication, and engagement that had previously defined the elite practices of aristocrats and humanists, and in so doing participated in the fashioning of a new, vernacular function for the painted image: that singularly modern product of visual culture, the easel painting.

II. *The Spaces of Flemish Painting*

The relationships between visual objects and the spaces in which they were experienced provide the initial thread taken up here. Although historical evidence supporting the anthropological study of the sixteenth-century Flemish home is limited, a range of recent scholarship analyzes the conditions that shaped the experience of domestic art in Antwerp.²² In particular, a series of studies by Maximiliaan Martens and Natasja Peeters supplies quantitative data and careful analyses of multiple sixteenth-century household inventories sampled from the Antwerp archives; the general trends observed by the authors are especially compelling.²³ First and foremost, their findings reveal a significant increase in the total number of paintings maintained in individual homes over the course of the sixteenth century.²⁴ Moreover, the authors note a marked shift in the display of paintings from the more private rooms on the upper levels of the residence to the more public spaces located downstairs, intended for the entertainment of guests.²⁵ These data would seem to suggest that the burgeoning demand for painting in sixteenth-century Antwerp corresponded not only to a concomitant change in the spaces in which they were displayed, but

²² See the several essays in De Jong J. – Ramakers B. – Roodenburg H., et al., (eds.), *Wooncultuur. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2000). See also De Jonge K. – Ottenheym K., (eds.), *Unity and Discontinuity: Architectural Relationships between the Southern and Northern Low Countries (1530–1700)* (Turnhout: 2007).

²³ Martens – Peeters, “Paintings in Antwerp Houses”; idem, “Antwerp Painting Before Iconoclasm: Considerations on the Quantification of Taste”, in Cavaciocchi S., (ed.), *Economica e arte: Secc. XIII–XVIII* (Prato: 2002), 875–894; Peeters N. – Martens M., “Piety and Splendor: The Art Collection of Antwerp Burgomaster Adriaan Hertsen”, in Golhany A. – Mochizuki M.M. – Vergara L., (eds.), *In his Milieu: Essays on Netherlandish Art in Memory of John Michael Montias* (Amsterdam: 2006) 347–374.

²⁴ Martens – Peeters, “Paintings in Antwerp Houses” 39, 43.

²⁵ Ibid., 45, 50.

also, by extension, to a shift in their social function. Indeed, as Martens and Peeters note, 'Apparently, paintings were discovered by the middle classes as consumer goods during this period in Antwerp. Perhaps they were no longer only bought for their devotional function but were also seen as available luxury products'.²⁶ These developments parallel yet another significant shift in the cultural attitude towards painting revealed through analysis of the inventories. While the middle classes 'discovered' painting by emulating the increased interest in panels demonstrated by the urban patriciate during the early decades of the sixteenth century, those elite patrons themselves continued to model their own cultural practices after the aristocracy – a point supported by the conspicuous consumption of tapestries among Antwerp patricians prior to midcentury.²⁷ However, Martens and Peeters posit that in response to the symbolic encroachment of the middle classes – realized through their newfound appetite for readily available paintings – the urban patriciate turned to the collection of 'paintings of particular excellence', such as those possessed by the likes of Antwerp mint masters Jean Noirot and Nicolaes Jongelink.²⁸ Building upon this contention, I suggest in turn that the medium of painting was seized upon as an instrument by which the urban patriciate of Antwerp might differentiate itself both from the infringement of the middle classes and from the ostentation of the aristocracy – an argument perhaps best advanced through a focused assessment of the uses to which Jongelink put his now famous collection of paintings.

Nicolaes Jongelink's investment in the arts of Antwerp is unusually well documented.²⁹ In addition to owning a version of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, Jongelink kept two series of paintings by Floris – *The Labors of Hercules* and *The Seven Liberal Arts* – as well as Bruegel's cycle of *The Labors of the Months* at Ter Beke, his *speelhuis*, or recreational suburban residence, on the outskirts of Antwerp.³⁰ That Floris's

²⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁷ On the middle class emulation of the urban elite's interest in painting, see *ibid.*, 46. On the urban patriciate's appropriation of the nobility's taste for tapestry, see Peeters – Martens, "Piety and Splendor" 353.

²⁸ Martens – Peeters, "Paintings in Antwerp Houses" 43.

²⁹ Buchanan I., "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelink: I. 'Bacchus and the Planets' by Jacques Jongelink", *The Burlington Magazine* 132 (1990) 102–113; *idem*, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelink: II".

³⁰ On the phenomenon of sixteenth-century Brabantine *speelhuizen*, see Soly H. *Urbanisme en kapitalisme te antwerpen in de 16de eeuw: De stedenbouwkundige en industriële ondernemingen van Gilbert van Schoonbeke* (Brussels: 1977). See also the

paintings shared wall space with Bruegel's work in an environment employed expressly for entertainment suggests the likelihood that, despite their disparate pictorial styles, these painting cycles have far more in common than scholars have often claimed.³¹ Notably, though the subjects pictured by both artists were wildly divergent, they each depicted motifs that were decidedly novel relative to the conventions of pictorial representation at the time: Bruegel's peasant paintings participated in what was then a comparatively new theme in that medium, and Floris's mythological subjects were largely without precedent in sixteenth-century Flemish painting.³² Moreover, however incongruous in appearance, the disparate novelties of the subjects depicted in these paintings may well have overlapped in their meaning. Iain Buchanan has suggested that both series participated in an overarching iconographic program that unified many of the seemingly discordant commissions Jongelinck installed at Ter Beke.³³ Specifically, Buchanan posits that Bruegel's *Labors of the Months*, Floris's *Seven Liberal Arts*, and yet another series – an unfinished group of life-size bronze statues commissioned by Jongelinck from his brother Jacques that depict *Bacchus* and the *Seven Planets* – were thematically linked through their participation in a decorative scheme grounded in the representation of astrological topoi.³⁴

discussion in Onuf A., "Local Terrains: Imaging the Vernacular Landscape in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp", in this volume.

³¹ Van de Velde C., "The Labours of Hercules, a Lost Series of Paintings by Frans Floris", *The Burlington Magazine* 107 (1965) 114–123, offers the most thorough reading of Floris's *Hercules* cycle. See also idem, "Painters and Patrons in Antwerp in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in Vlieghe H. – Balis A. – Van de Velde C. (eds.), *Concept, Design & Execution in Flemish Painting (1550–1700)* (Turnhout: 2000) 29–42. Nine of the ten paintings are no longer extant; their subject is known through engraved copies made by Cornelis Cort.

³² On the development of peasant imagery in the sixteenth century, see Stewart A., *Before Bruegel: Sebald Beham and the Origins of Peasant Festive Imagery* (Aldershot: 2008). On the scarcity of paintings depicting mythological subjects in sixteenth-century Antwerp, see Healy F., "Bedrooms and Banquets: Mythology in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting", in Vlieghe H. – Balis A. – Van de Velde C., (eds.), *Concept, Design & Execution in Flemish Painting (1550–1700)*, (Turnhout: 2000) 73–96. The observations of Martens – Peeters, "Paintings in Antwerp Houses" 47, 50, corroborate the relative scarcity of mythological and peasant scenes in Antwerp inventories prior to the second half of the sixteenth century.

³³ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I".

³⁴ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I" 112, observes that the seven liberal arts were in some instances associated with the seven planets, and that the relationship between the planets and the months was still more commonly maintained.

The propinquity of these celebrated works and the possibility that all served to elaborate a particular unifying theme for their patron have done little to blunt the force of arguments that hold the works of Bruegel and Floris to be unequivocally opposed: each is still largely thought to distill Flemish vernacular and cosmopolitan Italianate interests to their quiddity. And yet what is revealed through the analysis of the physical conditions in which they were experienced is that neither Bruegel nor Floris present unadulterated expressions of the intellectual and ideological positions within which they have traditionally been located. An increasing number of studies have drawn attention not only to the discursive humanist interests that may have shaped the intellectual expression of Bruegel's work, but also to the subtle evidence of Bruegel's having absorbed various aspects of Italian pictorial practice as well (the possible allusion to the Roman Colosseum in Jongelick's version of the *Tower of Babel* being perhaps the most familiar example).³⁵ By the same token, the *Labors of Hercules* does not represent the canonical twelve labors, but rather is sourced from a late medieval treatise, the *Libellus de imaginibus deorum*, which was in turn derived from the *Ovide Moralisé*, suggesting that Floris's paintings may well have been as rooted in late-medieval moral allegory as in Italian Renaissance humanism.³⁶

What is more, when dislodged from their assumed dependence upon Italian or classical models, a number of the works in Jongelick's collection can be associated with local histories that may have informed encounters with such objects, perhaps chief among them Jacques Jongelick's bronze *Bacchus* [Fig. 3]. Though it is unlikely that at the time Nicolaes Jongelick died in 1570 he had taken possession of the sculpture, it is believed that its commission dates to approximately

³⁵ See, among others, Koerner J.L., "Unmasking the World: Bruegel's Ethnography", *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004) 220–251; Ten Brink Goldsmith, "Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the Matter of Italy"; Freedberg, "Allusion and Topicality" 63; and idem, "The Life of Pieter Bruegel the Elder", in Freedberg D. (ed.), *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, ex. cat. (Tokyo: 1989) 53–65, esp. 29, where Freedberg identifies Bruegel's peasant paintings as the Flemish equivalents of the monumental figure paintings of the Italian High Renaissance.

³⁶ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelick: I" 110. A discussion of the *Libellus de imaginibus deorum* can be found in Seznec J., *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (New York: 1953) 170–179. On the relationship of the *Ovide Moralisé* to the classical tradition, see Javitch D., "Rescuing Ovid from the Allegorizers", *Comparative Literature* 30 (1978) 97–107.



Fig. 3. Filips Galle after Jacques Jongelinck, *Bacchus* (1586).
London, British Museum

1566.³⁷ By 1585, the *Bacchus* was installed as a fountain in the square before the Town Hall of Antwerp, as recorded in an account detailing the triumphal entry of Alessandro Farnese on August 27 of that year [Fig. 4]; ironically, the entry celebrated Farnese's successful prosecution of the siege of Antwerp, during which Jongelinck's home, Ter Beke – the location originally intended for the *Bacchus* – was destroyed.³⁸ In his discussion of the sculpture, Iain Buchanan notes that, unlike Jongelinck's figures of the *Seven Planets*, which seem to correspond to the descriptions of the gods offered in the *Libellus de imaginibus deorum*, the *Bacchus* marked a distinct departure from that text; Buchanan compares it instead to the tradition of northern European carnival figures.³⁹ In fact, the record of a fifteenth-century triumphal entry hosted by the town of Mons in honor of Charles the Bold

³⁷ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I" 105.

³⁸ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: II" 547.

³⁹ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I" 110.

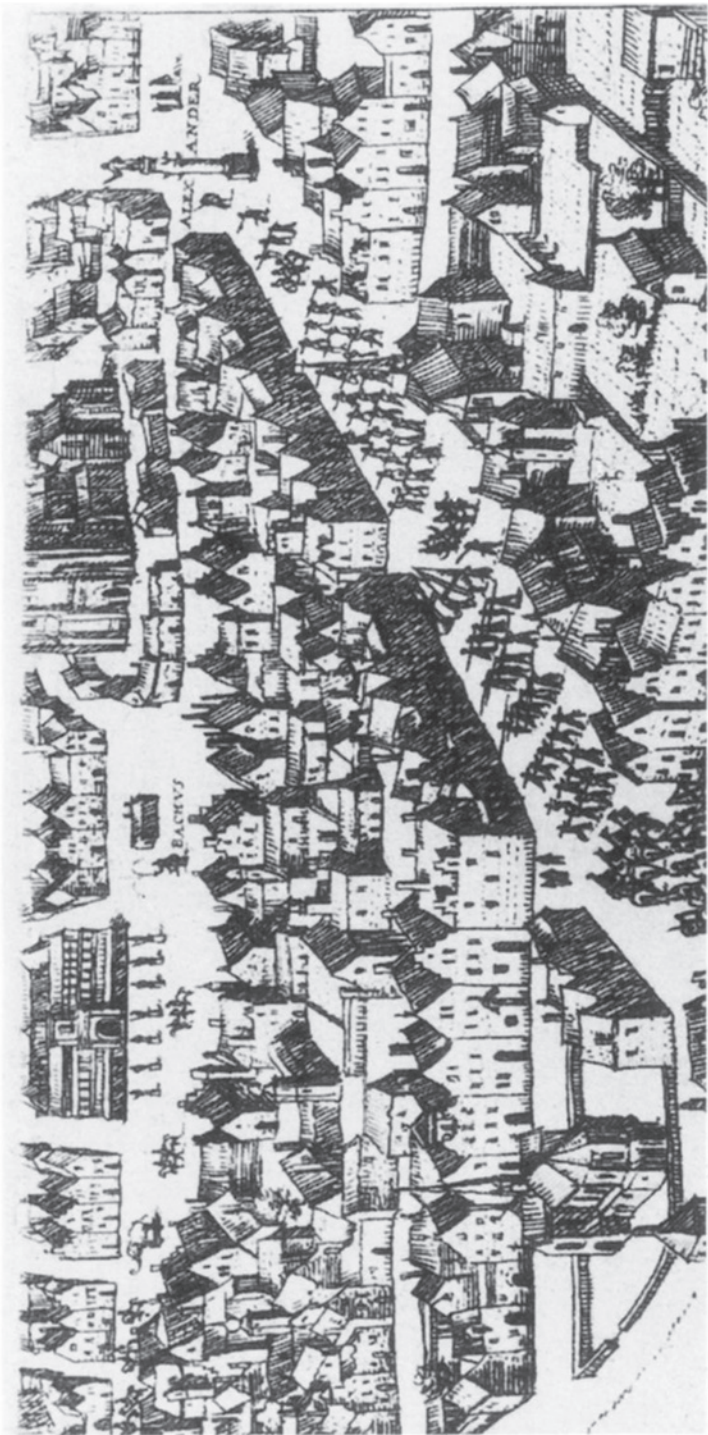


Fig. 4. Frans Hogenberg, *Triumphal Entry of Alexander Farnese to Antwerp* (1585) London, Warburg Institute. Detail

contains a description of a *tableau vivant* staged in a fountain in the town square in which one Simon Storet, of a 'monstrous and admirable corpulence', performed the role of Bacchus while sitting bestride a barrel of wine.⁴⁰ The description matches Jongelinck's sculpture neatly, and the circumstances of the Mons *tableau* correspond almost exactly with the display of the *Bacchus* sculpture for Farnese's triumphal entry in 1585. These similarities suggest the likelihood that Jacques Jongelinck's bronze *Bacchus* may well have been equally familiar to its audience both through local, late-medieval visual traditions as well as through contemporary humanist discourse derived from Italy. In turn, these examples allow the possibility that the works of both Bruegel and Floris might be more profitably understood as synthesizing multiple pictorial and intellectual traditions, rather than essentializing dichotomous cultural trajectories.

Such observations must contend against one of the more pervasive (if unobtrusive) historical arguments that has shaped the evaluation of sixteenth-century Flemish art, namely, Panofsky's 'principle of disjunction'.⁴¹ Panofsky famously held that the reuniting of form and content in art, together with a conscious sense of the historical distance separating antiquity from the space of the fifteenth-century viewer, marked one of the defining achievements of Renaissance aesthetics. This perception of unity and distance was explicitly understood in contrast to what was viewed as the medieval propensity towards self-identifying with antique models, and thus collapsing and conflating the contemporary and the classical. By implication, the unity privileged by Panofsky in the definition of Renaissance – read, humanist – art should be unambiguous and absolute. Viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that the art of Floris has been upheld as an example of unadulterated adherence to Italian Renaissance art theory, nor that Bruegel's work has posed challenges to scholars seeking to understand that artist's relationship to his known humanist patrons.

⁴⁰ Devillers L., "Les Séjours des ducs de Bourgogne en Hainaut: 1427–1482", *Compte rendu des séances de la Commission Royale d'Histoire ou recueil de ses bulletins* [Belgium]. 4th ser., 6 (1879) 323–468, quotation at 366. I am profoundly grateful to Jesse Hurlbut for sharing this reference with me.

⁴¹ Panofsky E., *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: 1960). The arguments presented here are grounded in the analysis found in Alpers S., "Style is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again", in Lang B. (ed.), *The Concept of Style* (Philadelphia: 1979) 95–118, esp. 105–6. See also Nagel A. – Wood C., "Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism", *Art Bulletin* 87 (2005) 403–415; and Kubler G., "History: Or Anthropology: Of Art?", *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1975) 757–767.

Yet constraining the analysis of sixteenth-century Flemish art within such a binary framework has proven decidedly limiting. The paintings of Bruegel and Floris are not either local or cosmopolitan, popular or elite, medieval or Renaissance; rather, they are complex amalgams of such interests. Moreover, their compound natures do not require that they be understood as compromised, falling somewhere between the idealized conceptions of unity and disjunction framed by Panofsky. Instead, their relationship to the past was multifaceted, and selectively appropriated a range of cultural and historical traditions that were synthesized in the articulation of a local, vernacular practice that defined identity through the conventions of instrumentality to which they were put. And perhaps nowhere was the appropriative character of this visual vernacular more evident than in the very spaces within which the works of artists such as Bruegel and Floris were hung.

III. *Translating the Burgundian Past*

Let's return for a moment to Nicolaes Jongelinck's household at Ter Beke. The work of Claudia Goldstein argues convincingly that Jongelinck used *The Labors of the Months* to adorn his dining room, a physical context replete with cultural significance.⁴² Goldstein connects the display of images in sixteenth-century Antwerp dining rooms to the humanist discourse modeled in Erasmus's 'Feast' colloquies, which narrate convivial gatherings around the dinner table whose conversations not infrequently turned to the images that surrounded the company.⁴³ The dining room is also identified as a site of humanist intellectual exchange by Margaret Sullivan, who asserts that the kitchen scenes of Pieter Aertsen would have stimulated members of the middle class to display their familiarity with satire ancient and modern during social engagements at table.⁴⁴ In drawing attention to the dining room as a venue for entertainments that may have advanced humanist

⁴² Goldstein C., "Artifacts of Domestic Life: Bruegel's Paintings in the Flemish Home", *Woencultuur. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2000) 173–193; idem, "Keeping Up Appearances: The Social Significance of Domestic Decoration in Antwerp, 1508–1600" (PhD diss., Columbia, 2003). See also Gibson W., *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley: 2006). The specific rooms appointed with the two painted cycles by Floris remain unknown.

⁴³ Goldstein, "Artifacts of Domestic Life" 182–184.

⁴⁴ Sullivan M., "Aertsen's Kitchen and Market Scenes: Audience and Innovation in Northern Art", *Art Bulletin* 81 (1999) 236–266, 255–257.

ideals, both authors note the appreciable incidence of paintings hung in such spaces mentioned in contemporary accounts.⁴⁵ It should be noted, however, that such practices were comparatively recent – a fact underscored by the analyses of Martens and Peeters discussed previously. Allowing that the nascent tendency to display paintings in the public spaces of middle class homes was modeled upon the practices of the elite encourages the exploration of historical connections between visual traditions that are often assumed to be unrelated. To wit, the exhibition of paintings as visual complements to the lavish entertainments pursued by sixteenth-century Flemish burghers might be understood to derive, *mutatis mutandis*, from the display of tapestries common to the celebrated banquets of the fifteenth-century Burgundian nobility.⁴⁶ What this permits, among a host of other possibilities, is the assertion that the decoration of domestic spaces can be linked both to the spread of new humanist practices and to the adaptation of indigenous precedents. In turn, the elaboration of the relatively new interest in using paintings to adorn the domestic interior exhibited by the middle class in sixteenth-century Antwerp can be read as synthesizing multiple elite modes into the articulation of a particular, local vernacular. These claims are supported by the physical characteristics of the paintings themselves and by the spaces of their display.

When comparing Bruegel's *Labors of the Months* and Floris's *Labors of Hercules*, for example, among the more striking features of each is their unusually large size: the six paintings of Bruegel's cycle all measured roughly 162 × 117 cm, while the smallest of the ten canvases that comprised the *Labors of Hercules* was thought to have spanned 212.5 × 141.5 cm [Figs. 5, 6]. The consistent dimensions of Bruegel's *Labors of the Months* correspond neatly with the standardized sizes employed for the production of *waterverfdoeken* – 'watercolor' paintings executed on cheap linen and produced in almost industrial quantities during the sixteenth-century in the nearby city of Mechelen, where Bruegel was known to have worked and perhaps trained.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See also Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* 106–123.

⁴⁶ To be clear, the object of middle class emulation identified by Martens and Peeters in their study of Antwerp homes is not the nobility, but the wealthiest members of the urban patriciate; the authors do not advance the possibility that the cultural function of paintings in sixteenth-century Antwerp might be analogous to the display of tapestries by the nobility.

⁴⁷ I cannot adequately thank Dr. Joost vander Auwera, Senior Curator at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels, for sharing both this information and the following citations with me; I am deeply indebted to him for his generosity. The relationship



Fig. 5. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Hay Harvest* (1559).
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 6. Cornelis Cort after Frans Floris, *Hercules and Atlas*
(1563). Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek

It was common practice in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for watercolor or linen paintings to be used as inexpensive substitutes for tapestries.⁴⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, in functioning as a means of substitute acquisition for the elite medium of tapestry, linen paintings served as an instrument by which painted images came to be hung on the walls of domestic interiors in the early modern period, and in so doing established a functional model that was later adapted for more expensive panel paintings.⁴⁹ The dimensions of the paintings displayed in Jongelinck's dining room at Ter Beke thus corresponded precisely with a standardized pictorial format that was commonly employed in the emulation of tapestries.

Jongelinck likely displayed his paintings in ways that are perhaps still more conspicuously redolent of tapestry. The monumental scale of the three series of paintings should be imagined to have occupied the near entirety of the respective rooms in which they were hung, dominating the walls of each space in a manner that, adjusting for the likely scale of the rooms, approached the model offered by conventions of use native to the display of tapestry by the aristocracy.⁵⁰ Specifically, the nobility exploited the architectonic character of tapestry, using the monumental woven pictures to frame various events with images that were thematically suited to the activities pursued before them. For example, in the fifteenth century, Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, commissioned a series of tapestries depicting the story of Gideon that was regularly hung at chapter meetings of the Order of the

between Bruegel's formats and those of *watervferdoeken* was first observed in Glück G., *Bruegels Gemälde* (Vienna: 1932) 13. It was brought to the attention of modern scholars by Wied A., *Lucas und Marten van Valckenborch, (1535–1597 und 1534–1612): Das Gesamtwerk mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog* (Freren: 1990) 17 and footnote 47 with reference to Glück and to Auner M., "Pieter Bruegel – Umrisse eines Lebensbildes", *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 52 (1956) 78, footnote 131. Dr. Vander Auwera first presented his research on these observations in a paper entitled "Format(s): Its Meaning and Use in the Art and Trade of Western Painting During the 16th and 17th Centuries", at the Historians of Netherlandish Art Conference in Antwerp on March 16, 2002. On the production of *watervferdoeken* in sixteenth-century Mechelen, see De Marchi N. – Van Miegroet H., "The Antwerp-Mechelen Production and Export Complex", in Golhany A. – Mochizuki M.M. – Vergara L. (eds.), *In his Milieu: Essays on Netherlandish Art in Memory of John Michael Montias* (Amsterdam: 2006) 133–147.

⁴⁸ Wolfthal, *The Beginnings of Early Netherlandish Canvas Painting* 5.

⁴⁹ Bloom, "Why Painting?" esp. 31.

⁵⁰ Campbell T., *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, ex. cat. (New York: 2002).

Golden Fleece, such that participants were surrounded by narratives that corresponded to the intellectual program of the event.⁵¹ By comparison, the rustic activities described in Bruegel's *Labors of the Months* displayed in Jongelinck's dining room at Ter Beke comprised subjects suited to humanist discourse conducted during dinner parties in the convivium tradition.⁵² Perhaps more interesting still, Goldstein observes that members of the urban patriciate with whom Jongelinck associated were known to conduct *tafelspelen*, or dinner plays, during such evenings, in some cases even dressing themselves as peasants to perform their parts.⁵³ In these instances the relationship between the images framing the space of the dining room and the social activities performed before them should be understood to have closely followed precedents established by the practices of the nobility in their use of tapestry.⁵⁴ What is more, by virtue of the variety of pictorial series maintained by Jongelinck at Ter Beke, we might imagine that each defined the particular spaces in which they were displayed for the conduct of different social or intellectual activities – a possibility that would illuminate our understanding of the dramatic differences in style and subject between the works of Floris and Bruegel.⁵⁵

It is perhaps not coincidental that both the *Labors of the Months* and the *Labors of Hercules* were subjects common to fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century tapestries produced for the Burgundian nobility. In fact, one of the most storied tapestry series of the fifteenth century treated the Labors of Hercules, and was written into the several accounts recording the most renowned spectacle of the era, the so-called 'Feast of the Pheasant'.⁵⁶ Held at Lille in 1454 and organized at the behest of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, the *Hercules* tapes-

⁵¹ Smith J.C., "The Practical Logistics of Art: Thoughts on the Commissioning, Displaying, and Storing of Art at the Burgundian Court", in Dixon L., (ed.), *In Detail: New Studies of Northern Renaissance Art in Honor of Walter S. Gibson* (Turnhout: 1999) 27–48.

⁵² Goldstein, "Artifacts of Domestic Life" 184–185.

⁵³ Goldstein, "Keeping Up Appearances" 42–48.

⁵⁴ These remarks are explored in more detail in Bloom J., "Performance as Paradigm: the Visual Culture of the Burgundian Court", in Borchert T.-H. (ed.), *Staging the Court of Burgundy (1419–1482). A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Turnhout: 2011), forthcoming; and idem, "Animated Bodies: The Performance of Images at the Burgundian Court", forthcoming.

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Todd Richardson for offering this especially provocative insight.

⁵⁶ Lafortune-Martel A., *Fête noble en Bourgogne au XV^e siècle* (Montreal: 1984).

tries served as the principal background for a spectacle of staggering ostentation designed to inspire the Burgundian nobility to join Philip in a crusade against the Great Turk. Imbricated as they were in crusader myth, the *Labors of Hercules* not only modeled the conduct expected from the knights of the Golden Fleece, but also exhibited the deeds of one of the celebrated (if putative) forbears from whom the duke himself claimed direct descent. Published in multiple accounts that were broadly disseminated across Europe, the Feast of the Pheasant may well have comprised one of the most enduring legacies of the Burgundian dynasty, ensuring that the cultural practices of the court were closely associated with historical inheritance of the Low Countries.

The resonance of the Burgundian past was palpably felt not only in mid-sixteenth-century Antwerp, but also within the very household at Ter Beke. Jacques Jongelinck, from whom Nicolaes had ordered the *Bacchus* and the *Seven Planets*, had been commissioned by Philip II of Spain to complete the sculptural program for the tomb of his great-great-grandfather, Charles the Bold.⁵⁷ Installed at the cathedral of Bruges, the commission was part of a program intended to affirm Philip II's Burgundian inheritance, and to assert thereby the legitimacy of his claims to dominion over the Netherlands. This was also the agenda prompting the extended tour of the Low Countries conducted by Charles V and Philip II in 1549, during which the latter was repeatedly fêted with images that likened Philip to the figure of Hercules and thus linked him to the historical associations between his Burgundian forbears and the Greek hero.⁵⁸ Scholars have described the campaign of ritual entries as motivated in part by the attempt to effect the 'Burgundianization' of Prince Philip, who had been born and raised in Spain.⁵⁹ Though the term refers to efforts made to familiarize the prince with the protocols and etiquette he would be expected to observe when in the company of the nobility in the Netherlands, it also implicitly

⁵⁷ Smolderen L., *Jacques Jonghelinck: Sculpteur, médailleur et graveur de sceaux (1530–1606)*, (Louvain-la-Neuve: 1996). See also Roberts A., "The Chronology and Significance of the Tomb of Mary of Burgundy", *Art Bulletin* 71 (1989) 376–400.

⁵⁸ On the program of the triumphal entry, see Meadow M., "Ritual and Civic Identity in Philip II's 1549 Antwerp Blijde Inkomst", *Hof-, Staats- en Stadsceremonies. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 49 (1998) 37–68.

⁵⁹ Peeters E., "1549 Knight's Game at Binche. Constructing Philip II's Ideal Identity in a Ritual of Honor", *Hof-, Staats- en Stadsceremonies. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 49 (1998) 19–23; Meadow, "Ritual and Civic Identity" 40.

underscores Philip's inherent foreignness. Philip's Burgundianization was thus further intended to encourage the public acceptance of his dynastic inheritance by framing his conduct in terms familiar to the citizens of the Low Countries through their historical relationship with the Burgundian dukes. Viewed in these terms, the cultural legacy of the Burgundian court should be understood to embody an indigenous tradition that was embraced as part of the local history of the region. By extension, while Burgundian practices can be read as aristocratic and thus both elite and international, they also came to signify as native customs that were adopted by an urban patriciate familiar with such behaviors for more than a century.

Philip II was reported to have actually viewed Floris's *Labors of Hercules* at Ter Beke during a stay in Antwerp in 1556. Accepting this account profoundly inflects the interpretation of the series: the presence of Philip II before the monumental cycle of paintings connects their heroic subject to the physical person of the king and to his celebrated descent from the Burgundian dynasty; it also offers a powerful example of the functional parallels between the conventions of tapestry display and the novel character of Jongelinck's installation of paintings at Ter Beke. Though this reading is contingent upon the historical moment of the king's visit, it does not seem implausible to suggest that such an event would have indelibly marked Jongelinck's subsequent understanding of his own paintings. Regardless of Jongelinck's initial motivations in commissioning Floris's series, then, the *Labors of Hercules* would have remained a perpetual physical reminder of Philip II's appearance at Ter Beke and, by extension, of the iconographic significance of its theme to the local dynastic tradition.⁶⁰

Finally, Jongelinck's purchase of Ter Beke itself reflects a similar admixture of humanist and indigenous historical influences. The maintenance of a suburban villa was a practice advocated by Alberti in *De Re Aedificatoria*, and Jongelinck's investment in Ter Beke has generally been understood to demonstrate the influence of Italian models of consumption.⁶¹ Evidence of this assertion is suggested in a poem by

⁶⁰ Van de Velde, "Labours of Hercules" 117. Jacques Jongelinck was appointed sculptor and metal founder to Philip II in 1572. It merits mention that after Nicolaes Jongelinck's death, Jacques Jongelinck offered the series to Philip II in repayment of an outstanding debt. His offer of Floris's series was refused (*ibid.*, 122).

⁶¹ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: II" 547. Goldstein, "Artifacts of Domestic Life" 184, is more tentative in her estimation of Jongelinck's dependence upon the Italian model.

Domenicus Lampsonius that forms the dedication of the engravings executed by Cornelis Cort after the *Labors of Hercules* series Floris had painted for Jongelinck. Lampsonius heaps praise upon Jongelinck's house at Ter Beke, which he identifies as a paragon of art-loving enterprise that even Italy should strive to emulate.⁶² Despite this relatively clear indication of the impact of Renaissance humanist cultural and literary forms on Jongelinck's purchase of Ter Beke, the possession of the property can also be read in terms of the desire to imitate the historical practices of the late-medieval nobility. Jongelinck's *speelhuis* was part of an early modern subdivision just outside the city walls of Antwerp. The grounds of the development had been purchased by Gilbert van Schoonbeke from a local nobleman, Willem van de Werve, Margrave of Ryen, in 1546, and sold in plots of various sizes to prominent Antwerp merchants.⁶³ Jongelinck's property was one of the largest, and his villa one of the most lavish, including a courtyard, orchard, and grounds. The castle of Van de Werve's former estate was purchased by Jacob van Hencxthoven, a wealthy merchant who acquired the title Heer of Hemiksem.⁶⁴ Other merchants known to have bought villas in the subdivision include the brothers Gaspar and Melchior Schetz, who famously purchased the village of Hoboken in 1559 and who were depicted in a painting by Gillis Mostaert being received as lords of the village.⁶⁵ The notional interests of such acquisitions seem rooted in the attempt to arrogate the historical privileges of the nobility who, despite the relative neglect of modern scholars, still occupied a central place within the structures of sixteenth-century society.⁶⁶ Understanding Jongelinck's purchase of Ter Beke as, at least in part, motivated by the desire to appropriate the cultural forms of the aristocracy frames yet another perspective from which the paintings with which he decorated his house might be viewed. Bruegel's *Labors of the Months*, long associated with the pictorial traditions emerging from the elite medium of manuscript illumination, can also be understood as complements

⁶² Buchanan, "The Collection of Niclaes Jongelinck: II" 547.

⁶³ Van de Velde, "The Labours of Hercules" 117; Buchanan, "The Collection of Niclaes Jongelinck: II" 547. Buchanan gives the date of purchase as 1547. On Van Schoonbeke, see Soly, *Urbanisme en kapitalisme*.

⁶⁴ Soly, *Urbanisme en kapitalisme* 333. See also Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel* 165.

⁶⁵ Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel* 165.

⁶⁶ Sullivan, "Aertsen's Kitchen and Market Scenes" 255.

to the seigniorial affectations of wealthy Antwerp merchants.⁶⁷ Floris's *Labors of Hercules*, typically read as evocative of the burgeoning local interest in international humanism, at the same time reflects the emulation of patterns of consumption and exhibition that characterized the owners of late Burgundian tapestries.

What makes the efforts of men such as Jongelinck all the more interesting is that their assumption of aristocratic entitlements was accomplished not simply through the acquisition of sufficient wealth to purchase the trappings of the nobility (albeit on a smaller scale); rather, they made use of both classical and contemporary literature on the country house and garden as means to introduce an alternative cultural narrative to authorize their ambitions.⁶⁸ In effect, they married the historical practices of the indigenous, late-medieval aristocracy with the intellectual armature of humanist discourse introduced by the spread of Renaissance ideals. The result was a distinctive – indeed, a definitive – visual program that distinguished the urban elite from the traditional aristocracy, whose abuses and excesses were subjected to myriad criticisms; from the encroachments of the middle classes; and from the lower classes, whose impoverishment marked one of the perils of Antwerp's rapid urbanization. The integrated display of paintings that embodied such complex appropriations should thus be understood not simply as varied expressions of particular stylistic preferences, but also as deliberate, communicative acts that articulated a decidedly vernacular function.

IV. *The Vernacularity of Easel Painting*

Pieter Bruegel never painted an altarpiece.⁶⁹ It is likely that he was the first Netherlandish painter of any account about whom this can be said, and it is a claim of no small consequence. Unlike Floris, who

⁶⁷ Silver L., "Pieter Bruegel in the Capital of Capitalism", *Pieter Bruegel. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996) 125–153, 132–133; Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel* 165; Goldstein, "Artifacts of Domestic Life" 184–185.

⁶⁸ Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel* 165, and 317–318, n. 43–44.

⁶⁹ Koerner, "Unmasking the World" 245. Bruegel did work on an altarpiece in Mechelen with Pieter Baltens, who received the principal commission, on which see Monballieu A., "P. Bruegel en het altar van de mechelse handschoenmakers (1551)", *Handelingen van de Koninglike Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen* 68 (1964) 92–110.

was a prolific painter of altarpieces and whose wealth and fame were based in no small part thereon, Bruegel trafficked in designs for prints and, more important for the concerns of this essay, in easel paintings. The exceptional character of Bruegel's exclusive attention to easel painting rather than altarpieces submits yet another indication of the comparative novelty of that cultural product, a claim advanced at various points throughout these arguments. The patrons of such works were, by and large, members of a burgeoning constituency that can be broadly described as the merchant middle class. That the advent of the easel picture and the middle class were essentially coincident is a compelling historical observation; it impels an assessment of the relationship between these two developments, and prompts an evaluation of the social function performed by easel paintings in sixteenth-century Flanders.⁷⁰ And it is precisely here that a consideration of the vernacular as a critical term holds its richest potential. Understanding the vernacular not as the reflection of an idea (style, for example), but as a communicative act exercised to define a particular community, shifts the basic terms upon which meaning is determined. Analysis of the utility of paintings – of their essential instrumentality, defined through the conditions of their display and the social engagements they precipitate – exposes the multifaceted appropriations embedded in their adaptation to the sixteenth-century Flemish domestic interior. The easel painting might thus be positioned as a novel visual medium harnessed to a broader cultural program that attempted to shape a social identity for the nascent middle class elite, woven from multiple pictorial and cultural traditions. This understanding welds long-standing patterns of cultural appropriation to contemporary discursive interests pursued in the attempt to articulate a discrete, local vernacular.

⁷⁰ This project is elaborated in Bloom J., *The Social Image: The Origins of Easel Painting in Early Modern Flanders* (forthcoming).

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