

Location and the experience of early Netherlandish art

Jeanne Nuechterlein

In one of the signature moments of *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), Michael Baxandall described the impact of the sun's movement across Tilman Riemenschneider's *Holy Blood Altarpiece* in the church of St. James, Rothenburg-ob-der-Tauber ([Figure 1](#)).¹ This unpainted wooden altarpiece, commissioned by the city council and constructed 1499-1505, has since the 1960s stood again in its original location on the upper gallery at the church's west end, meaning that unusually for an altarpiece it faces east rather than west.² Baxandall discussed numerous aspects of the work and its context: the surviving contract, iconographic content (the depicted subjects and the holy blood relic incorporated into its upper part), formal design, Riemenschneider's artistic style and workshop practices, and the social-political tensions between the altarpiece's patrons and its wider audience. Towards the end of this analysis Baxandall addressed a factor that few art historians would have previously thought to consider, the altarpiece's changing formal appearance over the course of a bright day as the sun illuminates it first frontally from the east, then at an increasingly acute angle from the right, and finally at the end of the day shines through it from behind via the windows carved into the back. As the lighting shifts, Baxandall observed, the altarpiece's aesthetic and iconographic effects also change: over the course of the morning, for instance, the central figure of Judas is isolated ever more powerfully, while the wing reliefs become more sharply delineated.

Baxandall did not attempt to evaluate how viewers might have responded to these visual changes, since his primary concern was to assess 'the total of Riemenschneider's solution that seems to correspond to the total of his problem, the sum of the forms answering to the sum of circumstances' (p. 190)—i.e., patronage and creation, not reception. Elsewhere in the book Baxandall discussed the 'period eye' brought to German limewood sculpture (including among other sources dance terminology, calligraphy and physiognomic theory),³ but he assessed artworks' interaction with their immediate visual contexts as a factor of artistic creation rather than of cultural reception. This emphasis continues in Baxandall's later books such

The illustrations to this paper are separately available at <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/nuechterlein-images.pdf>.

¹ Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, 189-90.

² Horst Fild, 'Die Geschichte der St.-Jakobs-Kirche in Rothenburg/Tbr,' in *500 Jahre St. Jakob Rothenburg o. d. T. 1485-1985*, Rothenburg ob der Tauber: Ev.-Luth.-Kirchengemeinde, 1985, 25-38 (36).

³ Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 143-63.

as *Patterns of Intention*, where he deconstructed art-historical understanding of 'intention' as inferring complex forms of problem-solving within historical circumstances,⁴ and in *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*, where together with Svetlana Alpers he brilliantly analysed site-specific lighting and viewing conditions as factors Tiepolo incorporated into the design of the *Four Continents* fresco in the Würzburg Residenz.⁵ Likewise, in *The Limewood Sculptors* it is clear that Baxandall perceived the *Holy Blood Altarpiece's* fluidity of appearance as one of the features Riemenschneider built into it, an aspect of authorial intent. A similar conception underlies John Shearman's *Only Connect —: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, which conceives of viewer response within specific settings in relation to what artists and/or patrons wanted to achieve, in accordance with contemporary expectations.⁶

To Baxandall's acute analysis of the *Holy Blood Altarpiece*, I would add another way in which its design appears to engage intentionally with its particular location, through its 'arc of address' (p. 166). There are only two figures in the central *Last Supper* into whose gaze a floor-level viewer may enter, Christ and the seated apostle to the left of Judas; both look down to the right, the direction from which visitors first encounter the altarpiece from the stairway entrance. From a frontal angle Christ appears to look at Judas, but from the gallery entrance he appears instead to gaze past Judas towards the viewer, and on approaching closer the viewer enters into the gaze of the seated apostle ([Figure 2](#)), who in turn directs attention onto Judas, the only figure in the scene whose back is turned. Surely these aspects of the composition, which draw viewers into direct engagement and again highlight Judas's isolation, were carefully designed by Riemenschneider in anticipation of how viewers would encounter the altarpiece in its specific location. (Of course viewer appreciation of these details would have depended on both attentiveness and good eyesight, which may well have been rare commodities.)

My primary aim here, however, is to expand Baxandall's insights into a broader field of inquiry: to consider the contingent circumstances of an artwork's installation that could have affected how viewers experienced it, whether or not in alignment with the artists' or patrons' direct expectations. For instance an altarpiece currently installed in the quiet, small, spare St Clare in Nuremberg—the former convent church of the Franciscan nuns, now a Catholic chapel—may evoke a contemplative response in keeping with its surroundings ([Figure 3](#)), whereas similar altarpieces in the much larger, brighter, heavily visited and decorated Protestant parish church of St Laurence may compete in vain for visitors' attention ([Figure 4](#)). This is of course a subjective current-day observation of works sited in heavily rebuilt churches, but surely analogous perceptions existed in past centuries as well:

⁴ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

⁵ Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, esp. 107-32.

⁶ John K.G. Shearman, *Only Connect —: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

the contingencies of object location may affect viewer response in unanticipated as well as anticipated ways.

This approach highlights avenues of interpretations which will typically be lost when objects have been removed from their original contexts into museums. My object of interest for this article is not south Germany but the art of the fifteenth-century Burgundian Netherlands (more or less modern Belgium and northern France), which immediately poses a fundamental obstacle: very little of the architecture of that period survives, and almost all of the most important artworks are now in museums rather than in their original locations (churches, palaces, town halls). Arguably only the church of St Leonard in Zoutleeuw ([Figures 32-34](#)) provides anything like the rich late medieval visual context found more readily in Nuremberg and many other European cities. Imagine for a moment that the *Holy Blood Altarpiece* had been relocated at some point in its history to a museum, and consider which aspects of Baxandall's analysis would best outlive such a move (assuming that knowledge of the original location still survived). Largely unchanged would be the evaluation of the broad historical/cultural/social context, as well as the iconographical analysis, except that the interactions between iconography and setting necessarily become more abstract and cerebral in a museum: for instance there is a marked if indefinable difference between simply knowing that a work once stood on an altar and actually *seeing* it on an altar in a still-functioning church; likewise the affective force of devotion to the holy blood relic⁷ might well be more difficult to appreciate once removed from the original location. The altarpiece's intrinsic formal qualities and their potential significance might still be well understood in a museum, such as the unusual absence of polychromy—evidently due to the patrons' desire to moderate its ostentation⁸—and the cumulative effect of the sculptor's stylistic repetitions;⁹ but it would be much more difficult to anticipate (or even to question) how those formal qualities might come across in particular viewing conditions—the likely angles and distances of viewing, spatial context, site-specific proprioception, lighting. In the static conditions of a museum, no one would likely ever have arrived at Baxandall's insights about the visual impact of changing light, because the question would never have been posed, let alone answered.

The relocation of artistic objects to museums, together with the loss of information about their original locations, makers, patrons, etc.—as tends to be the case for so many northern Renaissance works—can easily lead them to appear autonomous, embodying an objective meaning and value within a network of comparable objects.¹⁰ Museums usually present artworks in an optimized and

⁷ Ludwig Schnurrer, 'Kapelle und Wallfahrt Zum Heiligen Blut in Rothenburg,' in *500 Jahre St. Jakob Rothenburg o. d. T.*, 89-96.

⁸ Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 41-42, 92, 186; see also Lynn F. Jacobs, *Early Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces, 1380-1550: Medieval Tastes and Mass Marketing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 239-43.

⁹ Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 180.

¹⁰ See Charles Saumarez Smith, 'Museums, artefacts, and meanings,' in Peter Vigo, ed., *The New Museology*, London: Reaktion Books, 1989, 6-21, and Donald Preziosi, 'Collecting/museums,' in Robert

objective fashion, in regularized displays under constant lighting; that is possibly also how many of their makers would have wanted them to be perceived, as constant, unchanging images. Analogously, scholars often conceive of an artwork's original location as a contextual fact confirming or amplifying fixed meanings already bound into the work: an altar belonging to a particular guild, the building facade onto which sculpture was applied. Here, however, I want to focus on locations as places of subjective encounters that possibly altered viewers' perceptions of meaning. Churches and chapels, homes, town halls, and other such locations created conditions of viewing that were subjective and imperfect. Artworks would have been moved, opened and closed, taken out and put away; they would have worn out over time; other objects around them might have altered their impact. Moreover, different viewers would have brought with them very different degrees of knowledge and ability to interpret what they saw, and they might often have been bored, irritable, or distracted rather than informed and engaged (as ideal viewers of the past are typically imagined). The resulting experiences need not have been merely an imperfect version of the ideal; they might simply have been different, and worthy of consideration in their own right.

Admittedly it is impossible now to know just what these physical encounters would have been like in the fifteenth-century Netherlands. Moreover, viewing context does not determine how individuals will respond to a work of art, either now or in the past, and perceptions must have varied from one person to the next (and also from the same person on different occasions). My primary aim here, therefore, is not to present fixed interpretations but to pose questions and raise possibilities about a fairly broad range of works, drawing on my own perceptual experiences and on ideas from archaeologists as well as art historians. A few early Netherlandish artworks can still be found in locations other than museums, either the places for which they were made, or (more frequently) other analogous settings, for instance a religious artwork moved to another church, or a museum within a historical building.¹¹ There are always significant differences between these locations now and their late medieval incarnations, due to extensive rebuilding, redecoration, and/or interventionist restoration. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of present-day encounters in these settings can prompt new questions which might lead to insights about the potential experiences of viewers in the past, even if it will never be possible to reconstruct those past experiences.

S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds, *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 407-18.

¹¹ For the latter see for instance the Memling and Gruuthuse museums in Bruges, set respectively in a former hospital and a nobleman's palace: H. Lobelle-Caluwe, *Memlingmuseum Bruges: Saint John's Hospital*, Bruges: Die Keure, 1985; *Sint-Janshospitaal Brugge 1188-1976*, 2 vols., Bruges: Commissie van Openbare Onderstand van Brugge, 1976; Katia Wittevrongel, 'De restauratie van Gruuthuse te Brugge 1883-1911,' *Gentse bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis*, 23, 1973-1975, 139-66.

The loss of architectural heritage

Very little early Netherlandish architecture survives due to repeated waves of destruction visited upon the region over the intervening centuries, from sixteenth-century iconoclasm to the twentieth century's two world wars. Even those sites that do survive in some form cannot provide a fully 'authentic' historical experience: no such thing exists, or indeed ever has, in the sense that these environments would have been constantly changing during the fifteenth century as well. Most of the architectural contexts I will discuss later — Leuven's town hall, the hospital in Beaune, churches in Tournai, Lier, Leuven, Walcourt and Zoutleeuw — are medieval or late-medieval buildings, but with significant additions (and subtractions) since their fifteenth-century state, including alterations to the building fabric, addition of later artworks/decoration, and removal of previous artworks/decoration. Before turning to these case studies, I want first to consider the problem of the loss of architectural heritage and the immense difficulty of trying to imagine what fifteenth-century spaces might have been like, via a few examples that range from significant survival or reconstruction to almost complete disappearance.

Studies of cultural heritage naturally tend to focus on urban environments, but even in the highly urbanized Low Countries the majority of the population lived in small villages or on farms and only encountered art (usually not of the highest calibre) in nearby churches or in the form of inexpensive prints, pilgrimage badges, figurative ceramics and the like. One of the rare locations that provides some sense of this type of context is the open-air museum at Bokrijk, comprising mostly sixteenth- to nineteenth-century farm and village buildings moved there from various locations around Belgium when they were on the verge of destruction ([Figure 5](#)).¹² In and among these semi-reconstructed edifices, visitors can try to envisage what daily rural life might have been like in the past, and an analogous (if much more circumscribed) opportunity is provided by Walraversijde, a museum and partial reconstruction of a fifteenth-century fishing village near the Flemish coast ([Figure 6](#)). The site opened to the public in 2000 after extensive archaeological excavations,¹³ and it offers three sections. First visitors are directed through three reconstructed houses and a bake house, built in the 1990s but replicating fifteenth-century structures and contents as closely as the archaeological evidence allowed; an accompanying audio guide presents dialogues of invented village characters (a prosperous merchant's wife, a fisherman's widow, a baker's servant girl). At the end of the tour, visitors see the actual archaeological grounds whose evidence was used to construct the houses. Then the path leads to a museum presenting the maritime heritage of the area, including displays of objects recovered from the excavation site, mostly broken and worn; many were copied for display in the reconstructed houses, including the remnants of a dish decorated with the head of John the Baptist (which

¹² Laurens De Keyzer and Michiel Hendryckx, *The Open-Air Museum Bokrijk*, Ghent: Ludion, 2001.

¹³ Charles Kightly et al., *Walraversijde 1465: van archeologische opgraving tot daadwerkelijke reconstructie*, Brussels: Provincie West-Vlaanderen and Vlaams Instituut voor het Onroerend Erfgoed, 2003.

the reconstruction presents as a prized possession of the fisherman's widow, ([Figures 7-8](#)).

The Walraversijde reconstruction attempts to bring a historical context to life, helping visitors picture what it could have been like to live in such a village, inside such buildings, using such possessions. By reconstructing the houses at some distance from the excavated site, it also preserves the material evidence intact, presenting all of this information equally to the public.¹⁴ The excavated objects in the museum are certainly the more 'authentic' in that they are the actual items used in the past, with no imposed narrative as to their original owners or use, but it could be argued that, compared with looking at broken things grouped with others in a glass case, visitors' engagement with their copied counterparts must come somewhat closer to fifteenth-century subjective experience. Virtually no other site in the former Burgundian Low Countries attempts an analogous reconstruction, perhaps not least because any other place would be far more problematic chronologically to 'recreate': the village only moved to that site in 1394, following an inundation of its original location nearer the coast; it reached its heyday by the mid-fifteenth century, declined severely in the sixteenth, and the last few inhabitants abandoned the village in the early 1700s.¹⁵ Thus focusing the museum around a general fifteenth-century timeframe was a comparatively straightforward decision that cannot be applied to most archaeological sites, and the museum's meticulous research aims to give visitors the best possible sense of both the material evidence as it stands and a fifteenth-century lived experience.

This type of reconstruction could easily be critiqued as a false image of the past, although reconstructions only manifest what takes place mentally for more experienced or knowledgeable viewers: for example, if I as a professional art historian see an altarpiece in a museum, I can easily envision it on an altar in a church, by imaginative comparison with the multitude of altarpieces I have encountered during many years of research. A material (or digital) reconstruction makes such envisioning concrete, though with the drawback of tying it to a particular enactment rather than leaving the details unfixed. Reconstructions are however particularly valuable for the great majority of viewers with limited prior experience or knowledge: I would not previously have mentally pictured the John the Baptist dish in use in a fifteenth-century rural house, having never before encountered or thought about one of this kind.¹⁶ The Walraversijde reconstruction may now carry excessive weight in my imaginative capacity, but arguably that is far better than having little or no imaginative capacity at all.

¹⁴ For discussion of the problems involved in archaeological reconstructions see John H. Jameson, ed., *The Reconstructed Past: Reconstructions in the Public Interpretation of Archaeology and History*, Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2004. See also Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, trans. Lauren M. O'Connell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

¹⁵ Inge Zeebroek et al., *Van schorre tot slagveld: een verkenning van het landschap van Testerep, Leffinge en Oostende van de Vroege Middeleeuwen tot het beleg van Oostende (1601-1604)*, Bruges: Provincie West-Flanders and Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, 2002, 45-55.

¹⁶ Much more familiar are fully sculpted versions of the Baptist's head on a platter: see Hella Arndt and Renate Kroos, 'Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel,' *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38, 1968, 243-328.

Many sites present the very different challenge of trying to visualize to any meaningful extent architecture that is mostly lost or fragmented, particularly in the case of ruins. Those of the former Cistercian abbey at Villers-la-Ville ([Figure 9](#)) are at least reasonably complete, and as visitors walk through these shells of buildings — permanently abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century — display panels explain what they used to look like and how they were used in the middle ages.¹⁷ Even less survives of Villers's artistic (as opposed to architectural) heritage, and the only extant fifteenth-century artwork that seems to have survived from the monastery is part of a carved altarpiece, now in the nearby neo-Gothic parish church.¹⁸ The survival of the site does nevertheless have advantages for visualizing the artistic settings of the past, since where many comparable institutions have vanished or been almost completely rebuilt in later centuries, visitors to Villers can at least gain a sense of how large the medieval buildings were, their main architectural features, how long it would have taken to get from one place to another, what sorts of routes would be followed, etc. The many artworks once housed at the monastery — altarpieces, tombs, stained glass windows, wall paintings, reliquaries, etc. — would each have been approached and seen from certain directions and distances, and their material construction would have interacted with their immediate physical context: for instance their proportional scale within the setting, whether they were kept out in the open or usually locked away, were well lit or in a dark corner, located near eye level or much higher or lower, etc.

Most of this must remain in the imagined eye of the beholder. The modern world repeatedly impinges onto Villers, most overtly in the elevated train track built across a corner of the grounds in 1855 ([Figure 10](#)); the site also underwent major renovations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of which is patently obvious to the moderately-trained eye, such as the reconstruction of the tomb of Gobert d'Aspremont just outside the church in the north cloister, or the reconstructions of the circular openings in the transepts (visible in the right background in [Figure 10](#)).¹⁹ Various modern implements are also often scattered about: metal barriers, a power generator inexplicably sitting in the middle of a courtyard, a temporary sign at the fenced-off former chapter house pointing towards the toilets (all present on my visit in May 2011). It is impossible at Villers not to feel that its medieval existence has long since vanished, replaced by later centuries of evolution and decay; but that in itself serves a valuable function, since Villers was after all a living institution for several centuries, and it would have evolved and changed as different areas of the monastery were constructed, decayed,

¹⁷ Thomas Coomans, *L'Abbaye de Villers: histoire des ruines (1796-1984): les interventions du Ministère des travaux publics en vue de leur sauvegarde*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut supérieur d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art, 1990.

¹⁸ Thomas Coomans, *L'abbaye de Villers-en-Brabant. Construction, configuration et signification d'une abbaye cistercienne gothique*, Brussels: Éditions Racine, 2000, 255.

¹⁹ Coomans, *L'abbaye de Villers-en-Brabant*, 47, 85-89, 154-56, 288-90.

rebuilt and redeveloped.²⁰ Even from day to day the appearance of artworks could have changed, for instance as they were used or moved, or the quality of the light varied according to weather conditions and time of day. Thus the monastery never presented a singular spatial and visual context; artworks were, after all, used in most cases for decades, if not centuries, after their initial moment of construction. Such facts are worth bearing in mind at other sites that present a more superficially complete view of historical artworks: we can describe how they appear now, and try to reconstruct or imagine how they might have looked at particular moments in the past, but they did not exist in one singular historical 'reality'.

Villers at least provides a comparatively holistic sense of the architectural complex. Far less survives at another Cistercian abbey site, Ten Duinen near Koksijde (Figure 11), although Pieter Pourbus's bird's-eye painting of the monastery created in 1580—around the time the decision was made to abandon the increasingly sandy location—provides a better sense of the monastery's overall layout than virtually any other comparable institution.²¹ Visitors to today's Ten Duinen must rely heavily on visibly modern brickwork on top of foundation walls to perceive the layout, especially of the church itself, almost none of which survives above ground (and its ground surface is currently entirely gravelled, which lends it a curiously industrial air, quite different from the typical English Heritage ambiance). Perhaps because of this already modernized appearance, the museum has a disconcerting practice of placing incongruous modern art in the abbey ruins (such as giant plastic rabbits by Cracking Art Group in 2011). Ten Duinen was a highly significant location for early Netherlandish art, especially since the later fifteenth-century abbot Jan Crabbe owned a major collection of illuminated manuscripts and devotional panels including a triptych by Hans Memling, and he may have commissioned Hugo van der Goes's *Death of the Virgin* for the Maes chapel in the church's north transept;²² but it is even more challenging at Ten Duinen than at Villers to try to envisage works of art once existing on its grounds, despite the invaluable assistance of Pourbus's painting and the excellent museum adjacent to the ruins.

²⁰ On what is known of the decoration and furnishings of the church see Coomans, *L'abbaye de Villers-en-Brabant*, 239-58; the monograph also traces the evolution of the various parts of the monastic complex.

²¹ Benoît Delaey, 'De cisterciënzer abdijarchitectuur,' in Dirk Vanclooster, ed., *De Duinenabdij van Koksijde: Cisterciënsers in de Lage Landen*, Tiel: Lannoo, 2005, 118-45; Anne Dubois and Nicolas-Norbert Huyghebaert, 'Abbaye des Dunes, à Koksijde et à Bruges,' in *Monasticon Belge. Tome III: Province de Flandre occidentale*, Liège: Centre National de Recherches d'Histoire Religieuse, 1966, 353-445. For a general overview of the current museum and site see also Harry Van Royen, *Le Musée de l'Abbaye Ten Duinen 1138*, Bruges: Die Keure, 2003. Pourbus's painting is in the Groeningemuseum, Bruges.

²² Ludo Vandamme, 'Het intellectuele en artistieke leven in de Duinenabdij,' in Vanclooster, ed., *De Duinenabdij*, 145-67; *Vlaamse kunst op perkament. Handschriften en miniaturen te Brugge van de 12de tot de 16de eeuw*, Bruges: Stad Brugge, 1981, 176-206, cat. nos. 82-98; Noël Geirnaert, 'Le Triptych de la Crucifixion de Hans Memling pour Jean Crabbe, Abbé de l'Abbaye des Dunes (1457-1488). Témoignage des documents contemporains,' in Hélène Verougstraete-Marcq, et al., eds, *Memling Studies: Proceedings of the International Colloquium (Bruges, 10-12 November 1994)*, Leuven: Peeters, 1997, 25-30.

That is as nothing however compared to the effort of imagination required at an arguably even more significant location, that of the former Hesdin palace in Artois. This was once among the most favoured of the ducal palaces, and the Burgundian archives refer to many artworks there including wall paintings in the interior (by Melchior Broederlam among others) and automata in the extensive pleasure gardens.²³ However, the palace and adjacent town were destroyed by the army of emperor Charles V in 1553, and only a few vestiges of heavily overgrown foundations remain.²⁴ The pentagonal outline of the town walls and the location of the castle at the north end can still be clearly perceived in aerial photographs ([Figure 12](#)),²⁵ and the sites of the gardens and enclosed hunting grounds to the north have also been tentatively mapped. However, there is an almost complete disconnection between that sky-view and what is now visible on the ground ([Figure 13](#)): the photograph shows more or less the site of the medieval 'petit paradis' garden, with the palace where the wall paintings were located in the centre-right background, but now there is nothing but fields and trees.²⁶ It is almost impossible to visualize the wealth of artistic treasures once located at that place.

These, then, are the conceptual challenges entailed by the loss of architectural heritage: the difficulty in picturing artworks occupying a functional space, being seen and used in contingent situations, encountered in the course of everyday life. Knowledge of an artwork's original location can never match the subjective experience of *seeing* it within that location, and as a result the objects ranged along museum walls tend to appear as independent and objective artefacts. In what follows, I will examine a few cases of fifteenth-century Netherlandish artworks still located in historical settings and consider the impact of those settings on the art's visual effects. These current locations are never quite identical to those of the fifteenth century, but they can provoke significant questions concerning visibility and subjective perception that may differ from those naturally evoked by museums. I am particularly interested in what of the work can be seen within its specific context, from which other related issues also arise: effects of scale, formal connections between objects and architectural settings, the impact of other works in the same space. These analyses may then illuminate how many questions we no longer know to ask about works removed from original settings.

²³ Patrick M. de Winter, 'Castles and town residences of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy (1364-1404),' *Artibus et Historiae*, 4 no. 8, 1983, 95-118 (116); Anne Hagopian Van Buren, 'Reality and literary romance in the park of Hesdin,' in Elisabeth B. MacDougall, ed., *Medieval Gardens*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986, 115-34; Birgit Franke, 'Gesellschaftsspiele mit Automaten - "Merveilles" in Hesdin,' *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 24, 1997, 135-58.

²⁴ Pieter Martens, 'La destruction de Théroouanne et d'Hesdin par Charles Quint en 1553,' in Gilles Blicq, et al., eds, *La forteresse à l'épreuve du temps. Destruction, dissolution, dénaturation, XIe-XXe siècle*, Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2007, 63-117 (esp. 80-88, 103-04).

²⁵ Monique Sommé, 'Les déplacements d'Isabelle de Portugal et la circulation dans les Pays-Bas Bourguignons au milieu du XVe siècle,' *Revue du Nord*, 1952 no. 205, 1970, 183-97 (186-88).

²⁶ For a drawing of Hesdin from roughly the same position during the 1553 siege, probably made in the early seventeenth century after a lost print, see Martens, 'La destruction de Théroouanne et d'Hesdin', 71-72; see also p. 83 for the only other known image of the castle before its destruction.

Much of this line of inquiry was initially inspired by seeing fifteenth-century altarpieces in Spanish churches. Spanish painting of that era was heavily indebted to Netherlandish style, but in keeping with local tradition the panels incorporate more gold leaf and are typically assembled into massive retables such that most of the intricate painted detail literally cannot be seen, especially for panels towards the top of the retables.²⁷ Especially enlightening was the contrast in seeing three altarpieces painted by Pedro Berruguete in the 1490s for the Dominican monastery of Santo Tomás in Ávila.²⁸ The massive retable dedicated to Thomas Aquinas is still in situ on the high altar ([Figure 14](#)), which is raised well above the floor level of the rest of the church and thus even more difficult to see than usual (at least for those not officiating). With concentration, good eyesight, and previous knowledge of the iconography, the main scenes could perhaps just be made out—at least if the lights have been turned on—but far more pronounced is the overall rhythm of the brightly coloured images within a resplendent gold frame, filling up almost all of the wall space beneath the ribbed vaulting. (Whether the lights are on or off has a tremendous impact on the visual effect, and of course the lighting would have been very different before electricity). In contrast, Berruguete's two smaller side altarpieces dedicated to Dominic and Peter Martyr were dismantled in the nineteenth century and the panels taken to the Prado in Madrid; typically the museum displays the Peter Martyr panels in roughly the configuration they would have had as an altarpiece ([Figure 15](#)), whereas the Dominic panels are arrayed in a row so that each can be viewed equally. At the Prado the artistic qualities of the painting style can be far better appreciated (especially in the Dominic panels) and the specific iconography also better perceived and understood, particularly as configured in the Peter Martyr panels; but the panels' affective force as sacred altarpieces and their aesthetic impressiveness as *Gesamtkunstwerken* are largely dissipated in comparison with the high altarpiece in the monastery church. The museum conveys a far better sense of what Berruguete and his workshop would have seen at the point of finishing the panels, but that view corresponds to virtually no one else's experience of the altarpieces once they were installed. I will return in the conclusion to this critical issue of museum display and its impact on understanding historical artworks.

In-situ experiences

Michael Baxandall argued that the *Holy Blood Altarpiece* ([Figures 1-2](#)) provides a maximally satisfying view at a middle distance, by which he probably meant a

²⁷ See Judith Berg-Sobré, *Behind the Altar Table: The Development of the Painted Retable in Spain, 1350-1500*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989, esp. 205-63; Fernando Benito Doménech and José Gómez Frechina, eds, *La Clave Flamenca en los Primitivos Valencianos*, Valencia: Généralitat Valenciana, 2001.

²⁸ On their iconography in relation to the monastery and the contemporary inquisition see Sonia Caballero Escamilla, 'Los santos dominicos y la propaganda inquisitorial en el convento de Santo Tomás de Ávila,' *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 39 no. 1, 2009, 357-87. On the high altarpiece see Berg-Sobré, *Behind the Altar Table*, 142, 153, 251-52.

general-audience standpoint as compared to a priest's: close enough to see the design and iconography clearly, but not so close as to become disappointed by Riemenschneider's limited repertoire of physiognomic detail.²⁹ Art history tends to favour close visual analysis for obvious reasons, but as with Berruguete's altarpieces, many artworks were probably not that clearly visible once installed, and some artists and patrons appear to have taken that fact into account, perhaps increasingly so over the course of the fifteenth century. By the end of the century artists could even be directed to spend less effort on those parts that would be least visible, as testified by the contract drawn up in 1493 for Adam Kraft's tabernacle in St. Laurence, Nuremberg.³⁰ But difficulty in perceiving artistic details did not necessarily deter artists from including them, as the triumphal cross in Leuven demonstrates (Figures 29-30, 35). I will consider here how visibility may have affected the interpretation of early Netherlandish artworks in various media including tapestry, painting, and sculpture, in many cases seemingly in accordance with authorial intention, but not necessarily always.

Although tapestries were sometimes set up for public display,³¹ their natural hanging would not have fully matched the flat, unimpeded, and evenly lit views typically found in today's museums and photographic reproductions (Figure 16).³² The fabric could have rippled or billowed, lighting may have been dim or at an oblique angle, and people and furniture would often have impeded the view. Artists and patrons likely anticipated those circumstances, given that tapestries are often most impressive for their *Gestalt* impression of overwhelming luxury rather than for the execution of particular details. The *Millefleurs* tapestry now in Bern's Historisches Museum (Figure 17) is a particularly interesting case in point. This was one of the Burgundian spoils recovered by Swiss mercenaries from Charles the Bold after the battle of Nancy in January 1477, and it is thought to be the lone remnant of a commission by Charles's father Philip the Good in 1466 for six *verdure* wall hangings, with matching coverings for a bench and sideboard (anticipating the presence of furniture).³³ The tapestry has been cut down slightly on the sides and by approximately one and a half metres on the bottom, but it is still a massive object at three by seven metres, and its large size and proportionally intricate detail are

²⁹ Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 179-80.

³⁰ Wolfgang Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art, 1400-1600: Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966, 81-82.

³¹ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, 'Portable propaganda: tapestries as princely metaphors at the courts of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold,' *Art Journal*, 48 no. 2, 1989, 123-29.

³² Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, 12: 'a large hanging... which did not hang completely flat, but "billowed" a little against the wall, would catch the light unevenly'; such issues were also discussed by James J. Bloom, 'Relational Experience, Tapestry, and Animation', Historians of Netherlandish Art conference, Amsterdam, 28 May 2010.

³³ On the tapestry see Anna Rapp Buri and Monica Stucky-Schürer, *Burgundische Tapisserien*, Munich: Hirmer, 2001, 114-43; Susan Marti, Till-Holger Borchert, and Gabriele Keck, eds, *Charles the Bold, 1433-1477: Splendour of Burgundy*, Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2009, cat. no. 11; on the Burgundian booty see *Die Burgunderbeute und Werke burgundischer Hofkunst: Bernisches Historisches Museum, 18. Mai - 20. Sept. 1969*, Bern: Bernisches Historisches Museum, 1969.

impossible to fully appreciate other than in person. Unusually for an extant work of such high quality, the *Millefleurs* contains no narrative content: it depicts only an array of flowering plants spread across the surface, with the coat of arms and personal devices of Philip the Good superimposed in the centre and along the edges. The plants are individually conceived—more than thirty species can be identified—and the lack of rows or columns conveys an impression of random placement, though surely the artful combination of seeming disorder and well-balanced coverage of the surface required a phenomenal effort of design.

Like the *Holy Blood Altarpiece*, the tapestry achieves its optimal effects at a certain distance: the craftsmanship is of a high level but inevitably, given the smallest material denominator of interweaved woollen threads, representation is necessarily coarser in tapestry (even the finest) when seen very close compared to what can be achieved in other media like painting or sculpture, or even embroidery.³⁴ But given the opportunity for close and unimpeded looking—as in an exhibition, or the Bern museum’s display space—a very attentive viewer might eventually notice that not all of the plant designs are in fact unique: for instance one group of red flowers repeats just above and to the inside of the two upper flint-and-lock motifs, near the top of the photograph shown in [Figure 17](#), and the blue flowers above the pointing woman’s head recur again near the left margin. In fact the whole array of plants begins to repeat about three-fifths of the way across, but the repetition is extremely difficult to perceive given the clever placement of the superimposed arms and devices half-hiding the plants behind them, and also because a small number of the twice-visible plants have been altered to mask the overall repetition.³⁵

Tapestry sets like these travelled with their owners and were temporarily installed in the various palaces they visited.³⁶ As a non-figurative suite the *Millefleurs* set may have been intended more for private use in living quarters than for public display in great audience halls,³⁷ but in either context such hangings would have served as imposing backdrops while daily life or more important events took place in front of them. In such a setting, surely virtually no one in the room would have noticed the pattern repeats in the *Millefleurs* tapestries, both because of imperfect visibility and because other attention-distracting activity would be taking

³⁴ On the making of tapestry see Thomas P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, 5-6, and Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 11-12. On the finer technique of embroidery see Rotraud Bauer, ‘The Burgundian vestments,’ in Luis Monreal, ed., *The Conservation of Tapestries and Embroideries*, Tokyo: Dai Nippon, 1989, 17-23, and Helmut Trnek, ‘The liturgical vestments of the Order of the Golden Fleece,’ in *Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna: The Secular and Ecclesiastical Treasuries: Illustrated Guide*, Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1991, 208-24.

³⁵ I first noticed this structure when seeing the tapestry in the *Splendour of Burgundy* exhibition in 2008 and subsequently discovered it had also been analyzed by Rapp Buri and Stucky-Schürer, *Burgundische Tapisserien*, 120-23.

³⁶ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, ‘The practical logistics of art: thoughts on the commissioning, displaying, and storing of art at the Burgundian court,’ in Laurinda S. Dixon, ed., *In Detail: New Studies of Northern Renaissance Art in Honor of Walter S. Gibson*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1998, 27-48, esp. 32-38.

³⁷ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 24.

place in the same space; and that must have been precisely what the artists and the duke wanted, given how carefully the tapestry works to mask its design—the repetition is clearly not supposed to be easily discerned. The design thus seems well suited to what can be imagined as the typically imperfect viewing conditions of the era.

Although art historians typically think of good artworks as worthy recipients of sustained attention, most art must have been ignored most of the time, even when it was carefully designed for particular functions in specific locations, such as Dieric Bouts's *Justice of Otto III* panels commissioned in 1468 for the town hall in Leuven.³⁸ Today the originals are in the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Brussels, a setting that naturally invites reverential attentiveness and appreciation for their importance in the history of early Netherlandish painting, but copies painted in 1888-89 hang in their original location, the town hall's small Gothic room ('*boven 't Register*') on the first floor (Figure 18), though the interiors have been much reworked since the fifteenth century.³⁹ Art historians typically (and rightly) focus on the paintings' stylistic qualities—the second panel was incomplete on Bouts's death in 1475 and so was finished by assistants—and on their iconography in relation to the town hall setting: the subject matter of an injustice rectified reminded the city magistrates to exercise their own powers wisely. A *Last Judgment* triptych commissioned from Bouts at the same time, a common subject for such civic rooms, further reminded the magistrates of the ultimate personal consequences of their decisions.⁴⁰ The same purpose lay behind the earlier commission of Rogier van der Weyden's *Justice of Trajan and Herkinbald* panels for the Brussels town hall (destroyed in the seventeenth century and now only known by related tapestries and drawings) and Gerard David's later *Judgment of Cambyses* panels for the Bruges town hall (now in the Groeningemuseum).⁴¹ The sight of the Bouts copies hanging in the Leuven town hall—no longer the seat of government, though still sometimes used for official occasions—to some degree reinforces their relevance for that particular location, but one can also easily imagine that most of the time the city magistrates would have been occupied with the actual business of governance and paid them little if any attention. Probably it was mainly when showing them off to

³⁸ Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art*, 11-13; Catheline Périer-d'Ieteren, *Dieric Bouts: The Complete Works*, Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2006, 45-59; Maurits Smeyers, ed., *Dirk Bouts (ca. 1410-1475): een Vlaams primitief te Leuven*, Leuven: Peeters, 1998, cat. nos. 232-33.

³⁹ Maurits Smeyers and Rita Van Dooren, eds, *Het Leuvense Stadhuis: Pronkjuweel van de Brabantse gotiek*, Leuven: Peeters, 1998, cat. no. 183; Anna Bergmans et al., *Brabantse Bouwmeesters. Het verhaal van de gotiek in Leuven*, Leuven: Provincie Vlaams-Brabant, 2004, 22; Cyriel Stroo and Rita Van Dooren, "'Wat hemlieden toebehoort die vonnesse wijzen zullen'. Bouts' werk voor het Leuvense stadhuis in een ruimer perspectief," in Smeyers, ed., *Dirk Bouts (ca. 1410-1475)*, 137-51 (139).

⁴⁰ Périer-d'Ieteren, *Dieric Bouts: The Complete Works*, 274-87; Jacoba Van Leeuwen, "'Een tafereel van ons Heeren oordeel". De functie en de betekenis van een Laatste Oordeelsvoorstelling in een middeleeuwse raadzaal," in Smeyers, ed., *Dirk Bouts (ca. 1410-1475)*, 153-64.

⁴¹ Stroo and Van Dooren, "'Wat hemlieden toebehoort die vonnesse wijzen zullen'"; Hugo van der Velden, 'Cambyses reconsidered: Gerard David's *exemplum iustitiae* for Bruges town hall,' *Simiolus*, 23 no. 1, 1995, 40-62; Lorne Campbell and Jan van der Stock, eds, *Rogier van der Weyden 1400-1464: Master of Passions*, Zwolle and Leuven: Waanders and Davidsfonds, 2009, cat. no. 3.

visiting dignitaries that the Bouts paintings were truly attended to, if perhaps as much for their status as art objects as for their iconographic content—Rogier’s panels in Brussels were certainly admired as local attractions, as indicated by Nicolas of Cusa’s reference in *De visione Dei* to Rogier’s self-portrait semi-hidden within the Herkinbald justice scene.⁴²

The panels’ unusually large size compared to most panel paintings of the era reinforces the impression that, like the *Millefleurs* tapestry, they were expected to be able to address an audience at some distance. Originally the commission called for four panels to be installed in the town hall’s large Gothic room ([Figure 19](#)), but when only the first two panels could be completed they were hung in the much smaller adjacent space, so ultimately they were seen in a more constricted context than first envisaged. The panels do reward close as well as more distant viewing: while the main figures are in a strikingly large scale, the execution is finely crafted, and smaller-scale detail also appears towards the top of the panels in the backgrounds—hardest to see in some respects though also the least likely to be obscured by the heads of others in the room. Perhaps part of the attraction of early Netherlandish paintings lay in making their viewers want to see them more closely than was typically possible in a public setting, encouraging the purchase of private works with unrestricted access and a more intimate address.

An early sixteenth-century triptych by Rogier van der Weyden’s grandson Goossen, one of the very rare early Netherlandish paintings still more or less in its original place, creates this sense of intimacy when seen in situ, in the church of St Gummarus in Lier ([Figure 20](#)). The work was evidently founded in the testament of a young man from a local noble family, Joris Colibrant, who died on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1512 but is depicted posthumously on the outer wings with his brother and parents and their patron saints.⁴³ The work was installed a few years later in one of St Gummarus’s then brand-new ambulatory chapels, used by the archers’ guild and also partially funded by the Colibrant family; it was the second to the right from the easternmost chapel, though the altarpiece has since been moved four chapels around to the north, a space identical in size and shape though slightly differently orientated ([Figure 21](#)). Thus while the altarpiece is not precisely in its original location, and its contemporary surrounding furnishings and decorations are lost—it sits now on an early twentieth-century neo-Gothic altar—the setting still provides a sense of the scale of the work within its original context. Where Bouts depicted unusually large figures in his *Justice of Otto III* panels, Goossen van der Weyden instead encouraged viewers to gather close around the altar by depicting the scenes from the life of the Virgin (her marriage to Joseph in the centre, and the

⁴² They were seen by Nicolas of Cusa on his travels to the Low Countries in 1451, Campbell and Stock, eds, *Rogier van der Weyden*, 268.

⁴³ Jan Baptist Stockmans, ‘De Tryptiek Colibrant te Lier en haren schenker,’ *Bulletin de l’Académie royale d’Archéologie de Belgique*, 4, 1908, 290-312; Cyriel Stroo, Pascal Syfer-d’Olné, and Anne Dubois, *The Flemish Primitives: Catalogue of Early Netherlandish Painting in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Vol. 3: The Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Bouts, Gerard David, Colijn de Coter and Goossen van der Weyden Groups*, Brussels: Brepols, 1996, 342-44.

Annunciation and Presentation to the Temple on the side wings) on a much smaller scale.

Even in the intimate space of the chapel, some of the fine detail would be virtually impossible to make out without actually standing on the altar, most notably the subject matter of the continuous sculpted frieze unifying the three panels. They represent the Seven Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin, a popular subject at that time,⁴⁴ although it seems unlikely that viewers in the chapel would be able to decipher the scenes without previous knowledge of what they were. More central to the in-situ visual experience is how the central ecclesiastical space, which Goossen emphasized by use of an inverted-T format,⁴⁵ resonates with the actual space in which the viewer stands ([Figure 22](#)): not that there is any literal rendition of the St Gummarus architecture in the painting, but its vision of the choir vault and tall clerestory windows rising beyond the screen seems to echo the soaring vertical lines and ribbed vaulting of the chapel with the ambulatory and choir beyond it. (Possibly the chapels would once have been semi-separated from the ambulatory by screens, analogous to the choir screen in the painting.) By depicting broadly analogous structures in a small format, and by focusing (at least in the centre and the right wing) on groups of figures gathered in a church to witness religious ceremonies, Goossen reinforced the proprioceptive sensations of using private chapels within larger churches: those who came to use the ambulatory chapels would have first walked through St Gummarus's large nave/transepts, then followed the lower and narrower ambulatory towards the private but still communal space of the chapel ([Figure 23](#)), whose high vault combined with a constricted ground space somewhat paradoxically makes objects around head height feel smaller than in a space with a lower ceiling. The altarpiece depicts the comparatively large space of a church crossing, but its intimate scale seems particularly well suited for viewers in a private chapel, particularly given the miniaturization of the depicted choir and screen: compare the architectural vs figural proportions in the painting with the somewhat comparable proportions of the chapel ([Figure 22](#)) and the much more unequal proportions of real church crossings ([Figures 28-32](#)). This subjective sensation of spatial resonance would vanish if the altarpiece were moved to a modern museum space, though the iconographic detail might be more easily discerned there.

Most aspects of Goossen's painting style recall his grandfather Rogier van der Weyden, who similarly readily adapted depicted proportions and space to representational ends. Only one of Rogier's own works remains in its original

⁴⁴ Compare for instance with Adriaen Isenbrandt's *Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows* in the Church of Our Lady in Bruges: Maximiliaan P.J. Martens, ed., *Bruges and the Renaissance: Memling to Pourbus*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998, cat. no. 40; on the popularity of this theme in the Netherlands starting in the 1490s see J.K. Steppe, 'Een Sanctuarium van de Brabantse Laagotiek. De kunstinboedel van de Sint-Leonarduskerk te Zoutleeuw,' in Lieve De Mecheleer, *Rekeningen van de kerkfabriek van de Sint-Leonarduskerk van Zoutleeuw (1405, 1452-1599)*, Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1997, 17-29 (26; this is a reprint of an article originally published in 1971).

⁴⁵ Lynn F. Jacobs, 'The inverted "T"-shape in early Netherlandish altarpieces: studies in the relation between painting and sculpture,' *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 54 no. 1, 1991, 33-65 (37, 55).

location, the *Last Judgment Altarpiece* made for the chapel in the Beaune hospital (Hôtel-Dieu) founded in 1443 by the Burgundian chancellor Nicolas Rolin (Figures 24-25), though the painting is now displayed in a different part of the building.⁴⁶ The work is understood as bearing a similar purpose to the *Last Judgment* triptych Bouts made for the Leuven town hall some years later, though here for an explicitly religious and eschatological context: the hospital inmates facing their own immanent death were reminded of the expected judgment in the afterlife, and when the wings were closed—as would have been the case most of the time—the portraits of the hospital's founders reminded the inmates to pray for their benefactors' souls.⁴⁷ Like all buildings of that era, the hospital has been renovated and restored over the years, and its current incarnation as a museum leaves visitors inevitably at a certain emotional remove from its fifteenth-century context: today one is likely to visit while on holiday, whereas in the past people went there to die. Nevertheless, the survival of the hospital building and its retention of the altarpiece has meant that the setting is well understood as crucial to the subject matter.

What has been less discussed concerns how well the hospital inmates would have been able to see the altarpiece and how that might affect their understanding of the work. Although the current furnishings of the ward and chapel are modern reproductions, they give some sense of its fifteenth-century arrangements: thirty beds, each large enough for two people, lined the sides of the 46.3-metre-long main ward, or '*Salle des Pôvres*' as it was called in the foundation document, while the chapel—which unlike in other extant medieval hospitals is not architecturally differentiated from the ward other than by its larger windows—would have been separated only by a perforated wooden screen, surmounted by a sculpture of John the Baptist and a crucifixion group.⁴⁸ Those who were well enough might have gone down into the chapel to attend services, but some would surely have remained bed-ridden (including many of those closest to death), and thus would have only seen the work from some distance, glimpsing it at most through the screen. It also must be the case that many who did see the altarpiece more closely would not have had perfect eyesight.

⁴⁶ Nicole Veronee-Verhaegen, *L'Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune*, Brussels: Centre national de recherches primitifs flamands, 1973; Dirk De Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden: the Complete Works*, trans. Ted Alkins, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999, cat. no. 17; Hermann Kamp, 'Le fondateur Rolin, le salut de l'âme et l'imitation du duc,' in Brigitte Maurice-Chabard, ed., *La splendeur des Rolin: un mécénat privé à la cour de Bourgogne: table ronde, 27-28 février 1995*, Paris: Picard, 1999, 67-80.

⁴⁷ See for instance De Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden*, 259, 262; Veronee-Verhaegen, *L'Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune*, 50-52; Shirley Neilson Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, 37-48; Lynn F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: the Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted*, University Park: Penn State Press, 2012, 111-12.

⁴⁸ Didier Sécula, 'L'Hôpital médiéval, un lieu sacré? Approche iconologique d'un monument emblématique: L'Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune,' in Cécile Voyer and Éric Sparhubert, eds, *L'image médiévale: fonctions dans l'espace sacré et structuration de l'espace culturel*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011, 93-126 (103); Étienne Bavard, *L'Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune, 1445-1880*, Beaune: Batault-Morot, 1881, 26-29. See also Lynn T. Courtenay, 'The hospital of Notre-Dame des Fontenilles at Tonnerre: medicine as misericordia,' in Barbara S. Bowers, ed., *The Medieval Hospital and Medical Practice*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 133-45.

Technical examinations have demonstrated that although Rogier clearly designed the entire altarpiece himself, much of it was executed with the help of assistants, and the variation in quality is visible upon close inspection.⁴⁹ Rogier may have deliberately delegated much of the painting work if he knew that only relatively few viewers would be likely to inspect it closely. More importantly, distant or imperfect viewing could have also shifted perception of its iconography. The Last Judgment was a long-standing subject in northern European art in various media, and most versions are more vertically oriented and dominated by the left-right dichotomy of heaven vs hell, with a great deal of narrative detail included on each side.⁵⁰ An unusual feature of Rogier's altarpiece is that although the centre of the work is dominated as per tradition by Christ in judgment and St Michael weighing souls, much of the narrative elaboration has been omitted from the heaven and hell scenes; most notably, the damned are not pulled towards their fate by demons—instead they seem compelled by some inner force—and even within hell no demons are clearly visible, as long ago observed by Erwin Panofsky.⁵¹ Moreover, Rogier constructed the work using an extended inverted-T format more common to carved altarpieces, pulling the composition outwards into an emphatic horizontal, and in the process he depicted the saints ranged across the upper parts of the panels on a much larger scale than the human figures below. While this format has been interpreted as emphasizing the iconic and hierarchical quality of the image in deliberate reference to medieval artistic tradition,⁵² I would suggest that the primary effect, particularly for a distant viewer or one with imperfect eyesight, is to shift attention away from judgment—particularly the fate of the damned, usually a major theme of Last Judgments—and instead concentrate on the heavenly company set against a gleaming gold-leaf background, which must have been particularly visually powerful when seen in flickering light from altar candles or nearby lamps. (The narrow right-most hell panel is the only one with no gold leaf.) While both Christ and Michael stand out clearly—Christ's red robe against the gold, Michael's white alb against the blue sky—the visual emphasis of the painting could be taken as the saints gathered in heaven.

Hence some of the hospital inmates could have perceived Rogier's altarpiece not as a warning about their immanent fate, but as a hopeful vision of the afterlife they would soon share. After all, although the subject likely reflects Rolin's own fears for the fate of his soul—which largely accounts for his foundation of the hospital in the first place—the inmates were expected to reach heaven more easily:

⁴⁹ J.R.J. Van Asperen de Boer, Jeltje Dijkstra, and Roger van Schoute, *Underdrawing in Paintings of the Rogier van der Weyden and Master of Flémalle Groups*, Zwolle: Waanders, 1992, 181-201; De Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden*, 262-63.

⁵⁰ Stroo and Van Dooren, "Wat hemlieden toebehoort die vonnesse wijzen zullen"; Van Leeuwen, "Een tafereel van ons Heeren oordeel".

⁵¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting, Its Origins and Character*, 2 vols., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953, 269-70. A small chained demon appears between the legs of the upside-down woman, but it is extremely difficult to make out.

⁵² Jacobs, 'The inverted "T"-shape', 60-61.

Rolin's foundation valorised the poor as the living images of Christ,⁵³ and the prayers offered for his soul were to be from people whose own experience of suffering (in contrast to Rolin's prosperity) would make their intercessions likely to carry more weight among the heavenly host.

The paintings I have discussed here do reward fairly close inspection, even if they might often have been seen from a greater distance. In the case of a sculpted *Annunciation* group by Jean Delemer in Tournai, however, a close view is not especially compelling compared to a more distanced prospect in an ecclesiastical setting ([Figures 26-28](#)). This is likely the commission recorded in the will of Agnès Piétarde in 1427 for the parish church of St Peter, which was demolished in 1821; by then the sculptures had long since been transferred to St Mary Magdalene — probably after the 1566 iconoclastic attack on St Peter — and following an interval at the cathedral they were moved to St Quentin in March 2010, after being shown in a Leuven exhibition on the artistic influence of Rogier van der Weyden.⁵⁴ According to contemporary documents, Delemer's sculptures were polychromed by Robert Campin, the artist long identified with the so-called Master of Flémalle (though with less certainty today),⁵⁵ although the current surface polychromy dates to the nineteenth century.

Within the Leuven exhibition, in the very modern spaces of the 'M' museum, the two sculptures were shown close to each other on plinths around head height. The modern date of the recently-cleaned polychromy is fairly obvious to the trained eye when seen closely, and the heads are both replacements of the early seventeenth century; partly for those reasons, partly because of their formal design, in the bright light of the museum the sculptures appeared rather disappointing, significant as rare artefacts of early fifteenth-century sculpture but not artistic matches to many of the Flémalle and Rogier panels. The Virgin ([Figure 26](#)) is the more successful figure, with the elegant sweeping folds of her long cloak creating attractively contrasting views from left and right, although the polychromy makes her look more nineteenth-century than fifteenth. Gabriel appears distinctly awkward ([Figure 27](#)): his semi-genuflection reflects some painted counterparts, as in the central panel of the *Mérode Triptych* painted around 1425,⁵⁶ but the posture appears far more clumsy here, particularly viewed from below. From a frontal position his open arms and legs look especially undignified, as if the sculptor took inspiration from a painted model in profile without fully thinking through how the concept would translate into three dimensions.

Within St Quentin, however, the pair is far more effective ([Figure 28](#)). They are placed against the piers on either side of the nave before the transept crossing,

⁵³ Sécula, 'L'Hôpital médiéval, un lieu sacré?', 103-04.

⁵⁴ Campbell and Stock, eds, *Rogier van der Weyden*, cat. no. 26; an alternative opinion on the attribution is expressed in Felix Thürlemann, *Robert Campin*, Munich: Prestel, 2002, cat. no. II.2.

⁵⁵ Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sander, eds, *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden*, Frankfurt: Städel Museum, 2008.

⁵⁶ Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen, eds, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, 89-96.

far above head height, and although there is no way of knowing how far this matches their position in St Peter, when installed in the church of St Mary Magdalene they were similarly positioned on piers towards the west end of the nave.⁵⁷ Both St Peter and St Quentin were built in the Romanesque period, though St Quentin was significantly enlarged when the choir ambulatory and probably also the Gothic vaulting above the choir and transepts were added in 1464;⁵⁸ in any case, even imagining the *Annunciation* in a smaller church, Gabriel's awkwardness becomes less obtrusive viewed from the greater distance, and he is at his best as one enters the church and sees the group in profile. Moreover, within the church the relationship between the two figures becomes paramount: Gabriel's benediction arcs across the width of the nave to the Virgin, and the gesture appears to encompass the church itself, sanctifying the space for viewers below. The *Annunciation* was sometimes portrayed as a domestic event in the new style of painting then emerging among the Flémalle group (as in the *Mérode Triptych*), but Delemer's commission reflects an older tradition of situating the *Annunciation* in a more overtly sacred location.⁵⁹ Installed in an ecclesiastical space, the sculpture encourages viewers to perceive the moment of Christ's mysterious incarnation as perpetually re-enacted in the church community, and this sensation would be lost in a secular setting.

This type of sculpted *Annunciation* group appears to have been fairly rare in the Low Countries, at least as far as surviving evidence indicates, but most churches of almost any size – whether parish, collegiate, or abbey – would have contained an analogous sculptural group in the form of a large-scale crucifixion in the archway dividing the crossing from the choir. The earliest extant Netherlandish examples, at St Brice in Hollogne-sur-Geer and St Denis in Forest, date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively, though most of the surviving works date to the fifteenth century or later.⁶⁰ In many cases they surmounted stone or wooden choir

⁵⁷ V. Boulez, 'Église Sainte-Marie-Madeleine (Tournai): Étude préliminaire à la reaffectation et à la restauration. Inventaire du patrimoine immobilier par destination', Tournai: Intitut du Patrimoine wallon, 2006, 28.

⁵⁸ Barthélemy Noël Dumortier, *Étude sur les principaux monuments de Tournai*, Tournai: Imprimeurs de la Société historique et littéraire, 1862, 112, 123-36. St Peter was originally of basilican plan divided into three aisles by piers, with a total length of about twenty metres; at some point perhaps in the fifteenth or sixteenth century the small apsed choir appears to have been significantly enlarged, although little specific evidence remains of this work. See Raymond Brulet and Laurent Verslype, *Saint-Pierre de Tournai: l'archéologie d'un monument et d'un quartier. Travaux du Centre de Recherches d'Archéologie Nationale de l'U.C.L. et de la Société Tournaisienne de Géologie, Préhistoire et Archéologie*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Département d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art, 1999, 162-79.

⁵⁹ Jeanne Nuechterlein, 'The domesticity of sacred space in the fifteenth-century Netherlands,' in Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer, eds, *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, 49-79.

⁶⁰ On the two earliest crosses see Emmanuelle Mercier and Simonne Verfaillie, 'La croix triomphale de l'église Saint-Brice d'Hollogne-sur-Geer. Het triomfkruis in de Sint-Brixiuskerk van Hollogne-sur-Geer,' *Bulletin de l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique*, 31, 2004-2005, 39-63, and Agnes Ballestrem and Martine Puissant, 'La croix triomphale de l'église Saint-Denis à Forest. Essai d'identification, examen et traitement,' *Bulletin de l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique*, 13, 1971-1972, 52-77. To my knowledge there has not yet been a systematic study of triumphal crosses in the Low Countries, or indeed many

screens, which appear from documentary evidence to have become common in the Low Countries in larger churches as early as the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries and in smaller parish churches in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although almost all of them have been lost.⁶¹ In only one case does a fifteenth-century Netherlandish cross and screen ensemble survive in something like its original state, at St Pieter in Leuven: the stone screen was constructed by an unknown artist c. 1488-90, and Jan Borreman added the wooden triumphal crucifixion group in 1491-1500 (Figure 29). The ensemble today differs somewhat from the original condition, particularly in the elimination of the altars and rear walls beneath the left and right arches of the screen: originally only the central archway could be opened up to the choir via two bronze doors, so that there would have been a greater visual division between choir and crossing at ground level. The screen's current niche statues and polychromy are also partially altered.⁶² The wooden Calvary group, on the other hand, is in remarkably good condition and retains much of its original polychromy.⁶³

According to medieval theologians, all such triumphal crosses were meant to symbolize Christ's incarnate flesh and his ultimate triumph over death as re-enacted in the Eucharist on the altar.⁶⁴ In a smaller parish church lacking a choir screen, lay viewers could take in the cross and high altar in a single glance, as still commonly seen in many Belgian churches today; or if a screen were present, the cross might be directly identified with the masses performed at the altar(s) below it. The extant ensemble at Leuven also suggests a visual connection between the cross and the upper parts of the church architecture: from the end of the nave, the cross appears silhouetted against the east windows of the choir clerestory (Figure 30), which used to be filled with stained glass donated by duke Philip the Good in 1443,⁶⁵ and as the

studies of individual cases, though many can be found through the database at www.kikirpa.be; surveys have been done of German examples, including Reiner Hausscherr, 'Triumphkreuzgruppen der Stauferzeit,' in Reiner Hausscherr and Christian Väterlein, eds, *Die Zeit der Staufer: Geschichte, Kunst, Kultur*, Stuttgart: Württembergisches Landesmuseum, 1979, 131-68, and Manuela Beer, *Triumphkreuze des Mittelalters: Ein Beitrag zu Typus und Genese im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2005.

⁶¹ Jan Steppe, *Het koordoksaal in de Nederlanden*, Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1952, 28-36. See also Jacqueline E. Jung, 'Seeing through screens: the Gothic choir enclosure as frame,' in Sharon E. J. Gerstel, ed., *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2006, 185-213.

⁶² Isabelle Leirens, 'La Jubé de la Collégiale Saint-Pierre à Louvain (1488),' *Bulletin de l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique*, 27, 1996-1998, 303-10; Isabelle Leirens, 'Matierële studie en behandeling van het koordoksaal,' in Anna Bergmans, ed., *Leuven in de late middeleeuwen. Dirk Bouts, Het Laatste Avondmaal*, Tiel: Lannoo, 1998, 104-14; Bergmans et al., *Brabantse Bouwmeesters. Het verhaal van de gotiek in Leuven*, 31.

⁶³ Myriam Serck-Dewaide, 'Het onderzoek en de conservatie van de calvariegroep,' in Bergmans, ed., *Leuven in de late middeleeuwen*, 115-31.

⁶⁴ Jacqueline E. Jung, 'Beyond the barrier: the unifying role of the choir screen in Gothic churches,' *Art Bulletin*, 82 no. 4, 2000, 622-57 (632-34).

⁶⁵ Martin Horsten, 'Ter ere van God en van de stad: de bouw van de nieuwe Sint-Pieterskerk,' in Bergmans, ed., *Leuven in de late middeleeuwen*, 38-51 (40).

viewer approaches closer, the cross rises in the field of vision ([Figure 29](#)), with its arms and shaft echoing the transverse ribs of the vault and the vertical wall pilasters. As with Delemer's *Annunciation* ([Figure 28](#)), the setting can generate the sensation that the biblical event merges into the church itself, as a building and as an institution that aims to lift its members towards a higher realm.

St Pieter is a bright church today, probably more so than it would have been at the end of the fifteenth century. Very little medieval stained glass survives from all of the Low Countries, although the rare extant remnants suggest that large windows often combined coloured images of saints or narratives with grisaille for architectural detailing.⁶⁶ Painted representations of church interiors, though not necessarily entirely accurate, depict mostly clear glass quarries alongside grisaille and a smaller amount of coloured glass, though the latter probably increased substantially in the sixteenth century, a period from which far more Netherlandish glass survives.⁶⁷ The effect may have been like the relatively bright interior of York Minster, which contains England's largest amount of medieval stained glass but also lets in plenty of natural light.⁶⁸ But even well-lit churches would have looked dark sometimes: when parts of the building were under scaffolding (as they must often have been), on heavily overcast days, in the early morning or evening in winter. In this age of electricity, only rarely are church interiors seen in such conditions, but those rare moments when the lights are left off can generate very different impressions than on bright days. At St Materne in Walcourt, for example, where a fifteenth-century crucifixion group hangs above a sixteenth-century choir screen, the brighter lighting of the choir clerestory contrasts with the much dimmer crossing and transepts (whose windows are almost entirely filled with modern coloured glass), which especially on an overcast day can throw the crucifixion group into a strong silhouette against the choir vault ([Figure 31](#)). What stands out in such lighting are the shape of the cross and the profiles of the Virgin and John, in this case standing in elegant mirrored curves, though elsewhere in slightly contrasting stances, John looking up while the Virgin lowers her head (as at Leuven and Zoutleeuw, [Figures 29, 34](#)). If the entire choir/crossing area darkens, Christ's sacrifice becomes lost in shadows and a true mystery, as seen on a stormy day at St

⁶⁶ Jean Helbig, *Les vitraux médiévaux conservés en Belgique: 1200-1500*, Brussels: Weissenbruch, 1961; see for instance the entries for St Martin in Halle, 79-118.

⁶⁷ Isabelle Lecocq and Christiana Van den Bergen-Pantens, eds, *Les vitraux des anciens Pays-Bas: l'apport du fonds Goethals de la Bibliothèque royale de Belgique*, Brussels: Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Corpus Vitrearum-Belgique, and Institut royal du patrimoine artistique, 2002, 14-19; see also the *Corpus Vitrearum* series for Belgium. Among the early Netherlandish paintings depicting church interiors are Jan van Eyck's c. 1435 *Madonna in a Church* in Berlin; the late 1430s Rogier van der Weyden-workshop *Exhumation of St Hubert* in London; Rogier's c. 1445 *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* in Antwerp; Albert van Ouwater's c. 1455-60 *Raising of Lazarus* in Berlin; Hans Memling's *Presentation in the Temple* panels within triptychs in Madrid and Bruges; his c. 1490 *Virgin and Child with Sts James and Dominic* in Paris; and Vrancke van der Stockt's c. 1460s *Crucifixion in a Church* in Madrid. Among these the latter shows the most coloured glass, though still with plenty of plain glass letting in natural light.

⁶⁸ Sarah Brown, *Stained Glass of York Minster*, London: Scala, 1999.

Leonard, Zoutleeuw, whose crucifixion group was carved by Jan Mertens in 1479 and polychromed in 1482 ([Figure 32](#)).⁶⁹

Dim or distant viewing may often have usefully mitigated lesser quality work or extreme stylization—for instance Jan Mertens's group appears distinctly broad in style as if anticipating the great distance of viewing, although admittedly the current neo-Gothic polychromy makes it difficult to judge.⁷⁰ Perception of the group today is also affected by the loss of the medieval choir screen, whose presence in the fifteenth century with an altar beneath it to St Blasius is attested in the building accounts.⁷¹ In other respects, however, St Leonard presents a virtually unique opportunity in the Low Countries to apprehend a crucial and mostly vanished factor of early Netherlandish art: that it would have been seen in the presence of other artworks that could have affected how viewers thought about meaning, even in ways not anticipated or intended by the artists or patrons. The Zoutleeuw crucifixion group, for example, could be seen in the same glance as a monumental *Last Judgment* painted by Aert de Maeler in 1478 high on the south transept wall ([Figure 33](#)), in which case Christ's role in securing the possibility of human salvation might appear paramount;⁷² or the cross could be seen through the branches of the 5.68-metre-tall paschal candelabrum cast by Renier van Thienen in 1483-85 in imitation of a lost exemplar at St Pieter, Leuven ([Figure 34](#)), in which case the viewer's act of looking up towards Christ is doubly mirrored at successive heights by Mary Magdalene and the two Virgins and St Johns, reinforcing a physical sensation of humility and devotion;⁷³ or, from 1534 onwards, the cross could be seen to face the *Marianum* suspended above the nave ([Figure 32](#)), thus emphasizing the critical dual roles of Christ and the Virgin in the Christian faith. Whether any fifteenth- or sixteenth-century viewers did in fact draw those particular connections is of course impossible to know, but the unusually rich assemblage of artworks still at St Leonard serves as a reminder that past experiences of works of art must often have been affected by what else happened to be situated nearby. Once artworks have been removed to museums, they enter new collections of objects which can cast new light on their significance, but never quite in the same manner.

⁶⁹ Cor Engelen, *Zoutleeuw, Jan Mertens en de laatgotiek: Confrontatie met Jan Borreman. Essay tot inzicht en overzicht van de laatgotiek*, Kessel-Lo: Van der Poorten, 1993, 64-73; De Mecheleer, *Rekeningen van de kerkfabriek*, 128-29, 143.

⁷⁰ Engelen, *Zoutleeuw, Jan Mertens en de laatgotiek*, 72.

⁷¹ Engelen, *Zoutleeuw, Jan Mertens en de laatgotiek*, 67; Steppe, 'Een Sanctuarium van de Brabantse Laatgotiek', 21-22.

⁷² Engelen, *Zoutleeuw, Jan Mertens en de laatgotiek*, 154-57.

⁷³ Originally the candelabrum stood within the choir rather than as now in the north transept, so the analogous view would have been towards the back of the cross. Renier van Thienen also produced another candelabrum in 1482 for the St Leonard chapel but it does not survive, and it evidently took another form, since only the one in the choir was specified as after the example in Leuven. Engelen, *Zoutleeuw, Jan Mertens en de laatgotiek*, 146-53; De Mecheleer, *Rekeningen van de kerkfabriek*, 137, 140, 143-44.

Museums and meaning

In this essay I have touched on a range of early Netherlandish case studies to suggest possible reactions arising from contingent appearances in particular locations. I do not wish to imply that location determines specific responses to these or analogous works, especially since different viewers would surely have come away with varying impressions. Rather, I hope to have elucidated how located viewing *could* affect perception and interpretation: variable lighting, distanced or distinctive angles of viewing, resonances with surrounding architecture and/or nearby objects may alter an artwork's effect, and such factors will never be fully replicated in museums. Museums do of course offer distinct advantages for understanding works of art, particularly those of a high calibre; one could almost wish that Jan Borreman's *Crucifixion* group were transferred to a museum (and to a far lower display position) since in situ the exceptional quality of its carving and polychromy can only be fully appreciated through a telephoto lens ([Figure 35](#)). Despite Baxandall's singular insights into Riemenschneider's *Holy Blood Altarpiece* and Tiepolo's *Four Continents*, it could be argued that on the whole museums provide the best setting for studying artists' intentions, since they usually maximize access and visibility, as with Berruguete's altarpieces ([Figures 14-15](#)). In exchange, museums lose most of the sensations of subjective viewing, together with appreciation of contingency's potential value.

The benefits of this methodology are admittedly limited in that many works of art now re-located to museums—including the majority of northern Renaissance works—have not only been separated from their original contexts, but those contexts remain largely or entirely unknown, so that it is impossible to reconstruct any historically accurate 'location eye'. Even so, when encountering artworks in museums, it may still be worth asking what might emerge if the lights were dimmed or one's angle of view altered, if only as a reminder that viewers' experiences might have varied from expectations in the most interesting ways.

Jeanne Nuechterlein is a Senior Lecturer at the University of York, where she teaches northern Renaissance art history in the Department of History of Art and the Centre for Medieval Studies. Her research has been supported by the DAAD, the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust, and her publications include *Translating Nature into Art: Holbein, the Reformation, and Renaissance Rhetoric*, University Park: Penn State Press, 2011.

jeanne.nuechterlein@york.ac.uk