

Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

Noa Turel

In the 1970s, connoisseurship experienced a surprising revival in the study of Early Netherlandish painting. Overshadowed for decades by iconographic studies, traditional inquiries into attribution and quality received a boost from an unexpected source: the Ph.D. research of the Dutch physicist J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer.¹ His contribution, summarized in the 1969 article 'Reflectography of Paintings Using an Infrared Vidicon Television System', was the development of a new method for capturing infrared images, which more effectively penetrated paint layers to expose the underdrawing.² The system he designed, followed by a succession of improved analogue and later digital ones, led to what is nowadays almost unfettered access to the underdrawings of many paintings. Part of a constellation of established and emerging practices of the so-called 'technical investigation' of art, infrared reflectography (IRR) stood out in its rapid dissemination and impact; art historians, especially those charged with the custodianship of important collections of Early Netherlandish easel paintings, were quick to adopt it.³ The access to the underdrawings that IRR afforded was particularly welcome because it seems to somewhat offset the remarkable paucity of extant Netherlandish drawings from the first half of the fifteenth century. The IRR technique propelled rapidly and enhanced a flurry of connoisseurship-oriented scholarship on these Early Netherlandish panels, which, as the earliest extant realistic oil pictures of the Renaissance, are at the basis of Western canon of modern painting. This resulted in an impressive body of new literature in which the evidence of IRR played a significant role.⁴ In this article I explore the surprising

¹ Johan R. J. van Asperen de Boer, *Infrared Reflectography. A Contribution to the Examination of Earlier European Paintings*, PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1970.

² Johan R. J. van Asperen de Boer, 'Reflectography of Paintings Using an Infrared Vidicon Television System', *Studies in Conservation*, 14:3, 1969, 96–118.

³ See Molly Faries, 'Technical Studies of Early Netherlandish Painting: A Critical Overview of Recent Developments', in Molly Faries and Ron Spronk, eds., *Recent Developments in the Technical Examination of Early Netherlandish Painting: Methodology, Limitations & Perspectives*, Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2003, 1–37, esp. 18. See below for a summary of the history of the applications of this method. Faries is a great example of an academia-based scholar who has centered much of her career on these methodologies.

⁴ Some prominent examples include Maryan W. Ainsworth, *Gerard David: Purity of Vision in an Age of Transition*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998; Lorne Campbell, ed., *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools*, London: National Gallery, 1998.

Noa Turel Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing
craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

contribution of this new connoisseurship tool to a revised understanding of authorship in Early Netherlandish painting.

The reach of IRR and other connoisseurship-oriented technical studies was far from universal. Their rise coincided with the dawn of New Art History, and as Foucault and Barthes were making their way into scholarship and syllabi in Anglo-American academia, these technologically driven methods were at times perceived as invoking the ghosts of positivism and technological determinism. The rift seemed rooted, ultimately, in the question of the nature of authorship. Following Erwin Panofsky's groundbreaking 1953 book, many scholars turned to focus on iconography, where they redefined artistic authorship in these artworks by uncovering their tantalizing erudite complexity.⁵ To many of those scholars, the return to connoisseurship may have seemed not only simplistic by comparison, but also rather futile. As the curator Maryann Ainsworth pointed out in her somewhat defensively-titled contribution to an edited volume on technical investigation — 'What's in a Name? The Question of Attribution in Early Netherlandish Painting' — the broad frameworks of attribution have long been set.⁶ Max Friedländer's monumental series of catalogues, originally published in Berlin and Leiden from 1924 to 1937, grouped most Early Netherlandish paintings extant worldwide around specific artists (named or unknown).⁷ As Ainsworth explained, the only 'uncharted territory' Friedländer had left was 'the refinement of [the groups he created] through a distinction between the production of the master and that of his workshop'.⁸ Probing — literally and metaphorically — extant panels for the sake of 'refinement' (separating hands in the very same workshops) may well have seemed less promising as a path to new insight than interpretation and contextualization. For a while the field seemed to be moving on parallel tracks, with one group of scholars, mostly (but by no means exclusively) museum-based, busying themselves amassing data in pursuit of ever finer attributions, while the other, mostly academia-based, increasingly questioned the value of this revived connoisseurship endeavour.

From the distance of nearly half a century, I return to the IRR-led connoisseurship revival to show that, ironically, it led to insight on the nature of authorship in Early Netherlandish painting that was very much in keeping with New Art History sensibilities; the parallel methodological tracks ultimately arrived

⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting, Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953. On the impact of this book, see, most recently, Susie Nash, 'Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, 1953', in Richard Shone and John-Paul Stonard, eds., *The Books That Shaped Art History: From Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2013, 88–10.

⁶ Maryann W. Ainsworth, 'What's in a Name? The Question of Attribution in Early Netherlandish Painting', in Molly Faries and Ron Spronk, eds., *Recent Developments in the Technical Examination of Early Netherlandish Painting: Methodology, Limitations & Perspectives*, Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2003, 135–147.

⁷ Max J. Friedländer, *Die altniederländische Malerei*, Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1924–33 and Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1935–37. The English edition is Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting* [trans. Nicole Veronee-Verhaegen], New York: Praeger, 1967–76.

⁸ Ainsworth, 'What's in a Name?', 135.

at a single station. I will argue that, whatever the preoccupations that originally propelled it may have been, the underdrawing craze ultimately offered a belated funeral for the dead author, or more accurately, to mythical investment in embodied authorship. Setting out to refine attributions, IRR studies ultimately led to the recognition that mastery and authorship in Early Netherlandish painting were simply not tethered to the physical execution of panels in quite the same ways as in modernity. My contribution to this special issue is thus not so much about a case study of connoisseurship failure (though those surely played a part), as it is about the undoing, in relation to these historically significant group of paintings, of one of connoisseurship's core sustaining premises: that the artist's hand is the primary locus and evidentiary basis for authorship. Stripping Early Netherlandish paintings bare, IRR also disrobed a certain notion of genius.

Early Netherlandish painting and technology

That Early Netherlandish paintings were the first to benefit from Asperen de Boer's research was hardly a matter of mere geography. As Molly Faries pointed out, these objects have long been some of the most closely associated with technical studies.⁹ The research and restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece (Hubert and Jan van Eyck, 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent) after the Second World War was a pivotal turning point in the history of modern conservation science. The findings, published in Paul Coremans' 1953 *L'agneau mystique au laboratoire: Examen et traitement*, launched decades of interest in the material history of paintings partially thanks to some sensational findings made through X-rays and the then relatively new practice of infrared photography.¹⁰ The Belgian government, through its Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) has long supported connoisseurship-oriented research into Early Netherlandish painting, including the ambitious series, inaugurated in 1951, of regional collection catalogues known as the *Corpus (Primitifs flamands, Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle)*, in which technical studies have occupied an increasingly substantial role.¹¹ Boosted by Asperen de Boer's findings, a series of colloquia established in Louvain-la-Neuve

⁹ Molly Faries, 'Reshaping the Field: The Contribution of Technical Studies', in Maryan W. Ainsworth, ed., *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads: A Critical Look at Current Methodologies*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001, 70–105, esp. 70.

¹⁰ Published in Paul Coremans, *L'agneau Mystique Au Laboratoire Examen et Traitement*, Antwerp: De Sikkel, 1953. A good retrospective summary of the findings is in Johan R. J. van Asperen de Boer, 'A Scientific Re-Examination of the Ghent Altarpiece', *Oud Holland*, 93, 1979, 141–214.

¹¹ The first volume came out in 1951 (Aquilin Janssens de Bisthoven and Remi A. Parmentier, *Le Musée communal de Bruges, Primitifs flamands, Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle*, Antwerp: De Sikkel, 1951, vol.1) and the most recent, vol.22, in 2014 (Diane Wolfthal and Cathy Metzger, *Los Angeles Museums, Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux et de la Principauté de Liège au quinzième siècle*, Brussels: Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, 2014, vol.22). See <http://xv.kikirpa.be/1/livres-et-telechargements/corpus/> [accessed 30 April 2017].

Noa Turel Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing
craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

since 1975, *Le dessin sous-jacent dans la peinture*, has focused specifically on the evidence of underdrawing.¹² In the following decades, these Belgium-centred activities have been greatly augmented by major research projects at the National Gallery in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the Fogg Museum in Cambridge.¹³

The story of technology and Early Netherlandish painting does not begin, however, in a post-war laboratory; it has a significantly longer tail. The 1456 and earliest known biography of one of its key protagonists, Jan van Eyck, opens thus:

Jan of Gaul has been judged the leading painter of our time. He was not unlettered, particularly in geometry and such arts as contribute to the enrichment of painting, and he is thought for this reason to have discovered many things about the properties of colours recorded by the ancients and learned by him from reading of Pliny and other authors.¹⁴

The biography's author, the humanist Bartholomeo Fazio, had no direct information on the painter's life, but was exposed to Van Eyck's work. By the sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari famously (if, perhaps, inadvertently) promulgated the myth that Jan van Eyck actually invented oil painting.¹⁵ Following Vasari's lead,

¹² The proceedings of the first colloquia were published in 1979 (Dominique Hollanders-Favart and Roger van Schoute, eds., *Le dessin sous-jacent dans la peinture: colloques 1 et 2*, Louvain-La-Neuve: Collège Érasme, 1979). The most recent one was held in conjunction with the *Rogier van der Weyden 1400–1464: Master of Passions* exhibition at M, Museum Leuven (20 September to 6 December 2009). See <http://illuminare.be/le-dessin-sous-jacent> [accessed 30 April 2017].

¹³ For an overview of activities in these institutions see Maryan W. Ainsworth, ed., *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads: A Critical Look at Current Methodologies*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001, and Ainsworth, 'What's in a Name?'. Key products of ongoing research in London include Campbell, ed., *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools*, and Lorne Campbell, et al., 'Methods and Materials of Northern European Painting in the National Gallery, 1400–1550', *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, 18, 1997, 6–55.

¹⁴ 'Iohannes gallicus nostri saeculi pictorum princeps iudicatus est. Litterarum non nihil doctus. Geometriae praesertim et earum artium quae ad picturae ornamentum accederent. putaturque ob eam rem multade colorum proprietatibus inuenisse. quae ab antiquis tradita ex plinii et aliorum auctorum lectione didicerat'. Reproduced and translated in Michael Baxandall, 'Bartholomaeus Facius on Painting: A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript of De Viris Illustribus', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 27, 1964, 90–107, esp. 102–103. This biography forms part of Fazio's 1456 *De viris illustribus*, dedicated to Alfonso the Magnanimous, whom Fazio was then serving as secretary and historian.

¹⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*, Florence: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550, 380. In this first edition, the story appears in the biography of Antonello da Messina as well as in the portion of the introduction (*Proemio*) dealing with the art of painting (section XXI, 84). In the 1568, second, edition the account is repeated in those two sections as well as in a new miscellaneous one ('Di diversi'); Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori*, Florence: i Giunti, 1568, vol.1, section XXI, 51; vol.1, 375–378, and vol.2, 857–858. In ascribing the invention of oil painting to Van Eyck, Vasari may have been informed by Filarete's 1464 treatise on

Noa Turel Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing
craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

the Netherlandish authors Lucas De Heere and his follower Karel van Mander emphasized Van Eyck's technological breakthrough as the pivotal moment and primary claim-to-fame of Northern Renaissance art.¹⁶ In modernity, especially after the advent of photography and its early sustaining discourse of mechanical objectivity, the pictorial realism of Jan van Eyck's work earned Early Netherlandish paintings a reputation, celebratory or not, as particularly objective.¹⁷ It seems almost fitting then that an art so historically entwined with notions of technological advancement and objectivity would be studied so prolifically by technological, presumably objective means.¹⁸

architecture, where the author notes that Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden used oil painting, but does not refer to this medium as a novelty. He does, however, intimate that painters in 'Germany' – such as Jan and Rogier – have more knowledge of the chemical processes involved, especially that of rendering the linseed oil lighter more quickly. Filarete, *Treatise on Architecture; Being the Treatise by Antonio Di Piero Averlino, Known as Filarete* [trans. John R. Spencer], New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, 311. See also Dani Cuypers and Pim Brinkman, *Jan van Eyck en de uitvinding van de olieverf*, The Hague: Sdu/Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1996. On the gradual emergence of the myth of Jan van Eyck as the inventor of oil painting in Italy, see Paul Huvenne and Till-Holger Borchert, 'Van Eyck and the Invention of Oil Painting. Artistic Merits in Their Literary Mirror', in Till-Holger Borchert, ed., *The Age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting, 1430–1530*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002, 221–225. In recent years, conservation scholars have become increasingly convinced that Van Eyck's painting technique entailed no new technologies or materials, but merely exceptional skill; see Jo Kirby, 'Aspects of Oil: Painting in Northern Europe and Jan van Eyck', in Marc de Mey, Maximiliaan P. J. Martens and Cyriel Stroo, eds., *Vision & Material: Interaction between Art and Science in Jan van Eyck's Time*, Brussels: KVAB Press, 2012, 255–278.

¹⁶ See Karel van Mander, *Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem: Paschier van Wesbusch, 1604. On the emphasis on innovation and the importance of the Ghent Altarpiece to early Netherlandish art historiography see Walter Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991. On De Heere's contribution to art literature see, most recently, Bart A. M. Ramakers, 'Art and Artistry in Lucas de Heere', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* [issue *Envisioning the Artist in the Early Modern Netherlands = Het beeld van de kunstenaar in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden*], 59, 2010, 164–192; Lucy Davis, 'Renaissance Inventions: Van Eyck's Workshop as a Site of Discovery and Transformation in Jan van Der Straet's 'Nova Reperta'', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* [issue *Envisioning the Artist in the Early Modern Netherlands = Het beeld van de kunstenaar in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden*], 59, 2010, 222–247.

¹⁷ On the reception of Van Eyck in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Wessel Krul, 'Realism, Renaissance and Nationalism', in Bernhard Ridderbos, Henk Th. van Veen and Anne H. van Buren, eds., *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception, and Research*, Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005, 252–273, as well as Jenny Graham, *Inventing van Eyck: The Remaking of an Artist for the Modern Age*, Oxford: Berg, 2007, esp. 89–95, for the relation forged between his work and photography.

¹⁸ 'Technical investigation' is often also referred to as 'scientific'. See, for instance, Johan R. J. van Asperen de Boer and Jan P. Filedt Kok, eds., *Scientific Examination of Early Netherlandish Painting Applications in Art History*, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 26, 1975.

Noa Turel Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing
craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

This apparent slippage into the suspect realm of determinism was compounded by the fact that IRR had renewed attention to a particularly loaded medium: drawing. No other medium has been quite as entwined, in modern art history, with mythical notions of authorship—the genius construct. As Christian Michel argues, drawings acquired their status as collectibles only in the eighteenth-century golden era of connoisseurs, precisely as consequence of a discourse valorising their alleged purer imprint of the grand artistic persona.¹⁹ While some aspect of this discourse is traceable to Vasari's sixteenth-century *Vite*, much of its implications only operated in an intra-professional context; up until the seventeenth century, drawings were preserved almost exclusively in workshops, where they served as models, pedagogic tools, and artistic heirlooms, ascertaining the vertical ties between students and their illustrious former masters. In that context, Michel notes, it does not truly matter whether a drawing was autograph or a copy, as long as it served its purposes. However, when drawings became tools in an emerging science of art, or a history of artists, authenticity became crucial. 'the idea that knowledge of painters cannot be established but on the basis of drawings of established authenticity' is already 'implicit' in the writings of erudite collectors such as Pierre-Jean Mariette.²⁰ While artists who preserved drawings were interested in ideas and forms, connoisseurs were interested primarily in the artist, and drawings were prized because their allegedly less calculated and laboured nature made them more immediate and thus authentic—an 'emanation of the painter's genius'.²¹

If drawing in general carries such hefty conceptual baggage, underdrawing is even more implicated in the drama of revelation. Never meant to be seen, these drawings can capture both the spontaneity of the hand so prized by the forbearers of modern art history and, occasionally, also the process of trial-and-error design that turns 600 year-old artefacts into an immediacy spectacle akin to contemporary performance art. This enchanted disrobing may appear somehow inherently 'scientific', because it is overlaid on a long history of trying to establish the objective credence of connoisseurship. Because its knowledge was ostensibly derived from the sense of sight, connoisseurship has long flirted with empiricism. Furthermore, as Carlo Ginzburg famously argued, in the nineteenth century, Giovanni Morelli's method of attribution became entangled, along with modern detective work, in a quasi-scientific triad with the methodology of medical diagnostics.²² Three practices of mythical authority seem to converge in IRR: instrumentalized vision, privileged access to hidden evidence, and expert analysis of seemingly careless traces left by an otherwise guarded perpetrator-author. Operators of the technology since the 1970s (though perhaps not the broader audience they have addressed) are mostly adapt at

¹⁹ For this and what follows, Christian Michel, 'Le goût pour le dessin en France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: de l'utilisation à l'étude désintéressée', *Revue de l'art*, 143:1, 2004, 27–34.

²⁰ 'l'idée qu'une connaissance des peintres ne peut s'établir qu'à partir d'un fonds de dessin d'authenticité assurée est sous-jacente chez bien des collectionneurs érudits, chez Mariette et son contemporain, Dezallier d'Argenville', Michel, 'Le goût pour le dessin', 30.

²¹ 'émanation du génie du peintre', Michel, 'Le goût pour le dessin', 30.

²² Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop*, 9, 1980, 5–36.

avoiding methodological pitfalls of this kind; they have devised sound research questions and presented their findings in a transparent manner. However, this baggage of mythical authority was compounded at the outset by one key false premise: the notion that Early Netherlandish paintings were usually executed by a singular embodied author.

New tools, entrenched questions

There are concrete reasons, beyond the spectres of discredited discourses, which are remarkably still at play for nearly six centuries now, for the particular nexus of connoisseurship, technology, and genius preoccupations around Early Netherlandish painting. The enthusiastic embrace of IRR in the 1970s was not merely a matter of 'refinements'; behind seemingly minute attribution questions lay true mysteries that everyone in the field, of whatever methodological conviction, tried to approach.

The question of the origins of Eyckian painting continues to be a hotly debated one, with extended projects and even a recent major exhibition dedicated to it.²³ Then as now, his paintings appeared radically new, a distinct departure from anything that preceded them. It was a profound sense of awe, evident throughout his long discussion of the artist, that led Fazio to declare the foreigner Van Eyck the 'leading painter of our time' and resort to an almost mythical scientific-technological explanation—the artist-scholar scours ancient texts in pursuit of long-lost knowledge that eventually enables him to turn into a modern Apelles.

Another set of fairly recent exhibitions attempted to shed light on another, even more vexing question pertaining to the origins of Early Netherlandish painting: that related to the so-called Master of Flémalle. Named after four fragments that did not, so it turns out, originate in the (never-existent) Abbey of Flémalle, the Flémalle master is very likely (but not quite certainly) one with Robert Campin of Tournai, who, in turn, most likely (but not definitively) trained the other Early Netherlandish star, the Brussels-based Rogier van der Weyden.²⁴ Otto Pächt once aptly commented that Campin 'owes his foothold in history to modern stylistic

²³ See Cyriel Stroo, ed., *Pre-Eyckian Panel Painting in the Low Countries*, Brussels: Brepols, 2009; Stephan Kemperdick, Friso Lammertse and Dorine Duyster, eds., *The Road to Van Eyck*, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 2012.

²⁴ The volume of literature dedicated to this question is overwhelming and transcends the scope of this article. The most recent major study is Stephan Kemperdick, *et al.*, *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van Der Weyden*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009. The latest *catalogues raisonnés* for Campin and Rogier are Felix Thürlemann, *Robert Campin: A Monographic Study with Critical Catalogue*, Munich: Prestel, 2002, and Dirk De Vos, *Rogier van Der Weyden: The Complete Works*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999, respectively. See also Lorne Campbell, ed., *Rogier van Der Weyden in Context: Papers Presented at the Seventeenth Symposium for the Study of Underdrawing and Technology in Painting, Held in Leuven, 22–24 October 2009*, Leuven: Peeters, 2012.



Figure 1 Robert Campin, *A Man*, c. 1435. London: The National Gallery. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain).

Figure 2 Robert Campin, *A Woman*, c. 1435. London: The National Gallery. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain).

criticism alone'.²⁵ Hotly debated questions surround these artists, which directly bear on the question of origins: which ones of the dozens of paintings attributed to them is autograph and which is by their colleagues or the numerous assistants (apprentices and, much more significantly, journeymen) they employed at one time or another? Even more importantly, which of those date earlier than 1432, the year in which Jan van Eyck completed the Ghent Altarpiece? To appreciate the complexity and scope of these open questions, it suffices to compare two artworks installed in the same room at the National Gallery in London, both associated with the Flémalle group and each at least at one point believed autograph: *A Man and a Woman* (figures 1–2) and *The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen* (figure 3).²⁶ At stake in the web of questions surrounding the *œuvres* of Campin, Van der Weyden, and Van Eyck is no less than the history of the emergence of Western painting as we know it.

It is in this context that IRR emerged in the 1970s as an exciting breakthrough. In a number of famous cases, the enthusiasm proved well warranted. Perhaps the most striking of these is the definitive attribution to Rogier van der Weyden's of one of the most iconic and important Early Netherlandish paintings, a veritable painted art-theoretical treatise, *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin and Child* (figure

²⁵ Otto Pächt, *Van Eyck: And the Founders of Early Netherlandish Painting* [trans. Maria Schmidt-Dengler], London: H. Miller, 1999, 16.

²⁶ Campbell, ed., *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools*, 72–79 and 92–99, respectively.



Figure 3 Follower of Robert Campin, *The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*, c. 1440. London: The National Gallery. Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery (Creative Commons).

Figure 4 Rogier van der Weyden, *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin*, c. 1435-1440. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts (Public Domain).

4).²⁷ Four Renaissance versions of this painting exist: the one now known as the original, housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and three copies at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, respectively. The Munich version was the first known one and it intermittently circulated as the original (or best copy of a lost work) until the 1932–1933 cleaning of the Boston original.²⁸ One of the contributing factors to its correct attribution at that point was an X-ray faintly showing changes to the position

²⁷ The most extensive overview of the early history of attribution is found in Colin T. Eisler, *New England Museums, Primitifs flamands, Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle*, Brussels: Centre national de recherches Primitifs flamands, 1961, vol.4, 75–80; Molly Faries, 'The Underdrawn Composition of Rogier van der Weyden's *St. Luke Drawing a Portrait of the Virgin* in Boston', in Dominique Hollanders-Favart and Roger van Schoute, eds., *Le dessin sous-jacent dans la peinture: colloque 3*, Louvain-La-Neuve: Collège Érasme, 1981, 93–99 fills in the gaps for the following two decades. The latest on this question is found in De Vos, *Rogier van Der Weyden*. On the iconography and significance of this painting see the various essays in Carol J. Purtle, ed., *Rogier van Der Weyden, St. Luke Drawing the Virgin: Selected Essays in Context*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1997, and Maryan W. Ainsworth, 'À la façon de grèce': The Encounter of Northern Renaissance Artists with Byzantine Icons', in Helen Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004, 544–555. See also Eisler, *New England Museums*, 71–93.

²⁸ The earliest attribution of the Boston panel as the original dates to 1876, but it did not gain widespread traction until the period around the cleaning in Berlin (Eisler, *New England Museums*, 76).

of the Virgin's head; the back-and-forth process inherent to original composition design is only likely in the original.²⁹ However, the debate persisted until it was definitively put to rest in 1981, when Molly Faries published the results of her 1978 IRR study of the Boston panel, which revealed that the slight changes spotted in the X-ray were the tip of an iceberg; the IRR composite she compiled showed that multiple motifs were reworked between the underdrawing and the painting phase.³⁰ In 1979 she also used IRR to study the Munich version and found no evidence for such compositional changes. Evidence that can end over a century and a half of debate with such a clear exclamation point is exceptionally rare in the humanities. As it relates to questions of attribution, IRR seemed to offer almost a meta-methodology, a tool so powerful it could cut through the maze of wildly divergent and hopelessly subjective opinions generated by traditional connoisseurship.

Such optimism was ultimately misguided. Revealing the underdrawing proves definitive only when the question boils down to: is there one? As the questions grow more complex, so wanes the certitude and IRR becomes but yet another technique in a menu of non-definitive connoisseurship methods with various advantages and drawbacks.³¹ The limitations of IRR vis-à-vis broader questions—namely the big questions at stake in the history of Early Netherlandish painting—is illustrated well in the case of the *Entombment Triptych* (figure 5), which surfaced on the London art market in 1942.³² Much like the vast majority of Early Netherlandish paintings, this triptych is neither signed nor dated, and no specific documentary evidence has been found that could shed light on the circumstances of its creation. Its attribution to the Master of Flémalle (or Robert Campin) was made following its public surfacing, based on the traditional connoisseurship methods of little-mediated observation and comparison.³³ Later analyses of its materials and working techniques confirmed it is indeed Netherlandish and dates to the first half of the fifteenth century.³⁴ Precisely when in that half century has been the topic of

²⁹ Eisler, *New England Museums*, 78.

³⁰ Faries, 'The Underdrawn Composition'.

³¹ An analysis of the potential of the method is offered in Ainsworth, 'What's in a Name?'.

³² Formerly known as the *Seilern Triptych*. Key scholarship on this painting includes Jan G. van Gelder, 'An Early Work by Robert Campin', *Oud Holland*, 82, 1967, 1–17; Caroline Villers and Robert Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych* in the Courtauld Institute Galleries', in Susan Foister and Susie Nash, eds., *Robert Campin: New Directions in Scholarship*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, 27–36; Albert Châtelet, *Robert Campin: le Maître de Flémalle: la fascination du quotidien*, Anvers: Fonds Mercator, 1996, 284–286; Ludovic Nys, 'Le triptych Seilern: une nouvelle hypothèse', *Revue de l'art*, 139, 2003, 5–20; Kemperdick, et al., *The Master of Flémalle*; Thürlemann, *Robert Campin*, 28–36; Lynn F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011, 43–48.

³³ See Nys, 'Le triptych Seilern', 6 for a summary of the attribution history. Also van Gelder, 'An Early Work by Robert Campin', 1–2, who does name some dissidents to this attribution. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 160.

³⁴ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 31–33; Faries, 'Technical Studies of Early Netherlandish Painting', 5. One pigment in particular, lead tin yellow, offers a strong affirmation of the fifteenth-century date, as it apparently fell in disuse during the sixteenth century (Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 27).



Figure 5 Robert Campin (Attributed to), *Entombment Triptych*, c. 1425. London: The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery. Photograph courtesy of The Courtauld Gallery website.

wildly divergent opinions, and it is quite crucial because, stylistically, this painting seems to straddle two periods: the International Gothic Style prevalent c. 1400 and the *ars nova* of Early Netherlandish painting that emerged, well, when works such as these were created. With one foot in medieval and the other in Renaissance painting, this triptych could have been just the keystone needed to solidify a new grand narrative for the transition. That, however, would entail reaching a consensus about its author and date.

The entire technical analysis of the painting, published by Caroline Villers and Robert Bruce-Gardner in 1996, was geared towards that question. For instance, they note that the large areas of gilding in the composition are made by the old-fashioned technique of mordant gilding, while, in areas too intricate for that, the gold effect was created using the illusionary technique of combining dark brown and yellow paint, one of the key novelties of the Netherlandish *ars nova* and the future standard in Western painting.³⁵ Describing the wide range of techniques employed to achieve the colour effects in the draperies, Villers and Bruce-Gardner mention direct physical mixture of pigments, but emphasize glazing in particular, stating that 'arguably, the technical achievement in the fifteenth century was to return to and re-develop a system employing transparent glazes, after a period of relatively more opaque painting techniques in the fourteenth century'.³⁶

³⁵ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 30.

³⁶ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 30–31.

Noa Turel Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing
craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

The IRR studies initially seemed to contribute to this debate. Villers and Bruce-Gardner describe the underdrawing as 'swift and simple', noting that there are 'almost no changes visible in the drawing', which they interpret as indication that this intricate composition was planned outside of this support (i.e. in preparatory drawings).³⁷ Asperen de Boer, in a separate investigation of the panel he conducted in 1990 along with Jellie Dijkstra and Roger van Schoute, did observe some discrepancies with the paint layer, which may indicate that although not planned on the support, the *Entombment Triptych* is still a new, original composition, rather than a copy.³⁸ A significant change they discovered seems to further advance the idea that this panel is at the crux of the transition to the Renaissance: a halo around Christ's head, visible in the underdrawing, was abandoned before the painting stage.³⁹ The aborted halo may certainly point to winds of change in fifteenth-century painting. However, to accept it as evidence for the unique historic significance of this specific triptych would be to fall into a trap of largely untenable assumptions. Chief amongst these is the postulation of a historic vector towards a very particular mode of realism—namely, away from religiosity and intrinsic value—which is not really backed by the available hard evidence (neither heavy gilding nor halos, for instance, simply disappear after 1432). Likewise, if a bolder claim were to be made about the place of this painting in a grand origins narrative, it would be essential to date and attribute it precisely. This, however, has proven effectively impossible.

The plethora of valid technical data the 1996 examination amassed time and again failed to break through the initial, conclusive affiliation with the Netherlands in the first half of the fifteenth century and somewhat less securely with the Flémalle-Campin group, and thus shed any more light on the question of attribution. For instance, details such as the use of viscous paint, the modelling in three dimensions, wet-in-wet application and more, suggest a connection with other works in the Flémalle group as well as with Rogier van der Weyden (which had already been established stylistically).⁴⁰ However, what Faries terms 'idiosyncratic aspects of paint handling', was clearly not readily detectable in this group, and Villers and Bruce-Gardner found themselves concluding the investigation of paint handling by asserting that 'the technical feature of the *Entombment Triptych* that should be emphasised is variety'.

³⁷ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 28.

³⁸ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 87.

³⁹ Johan 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*, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 41, 1992, 87.

⁴⁰ For instance, the technique used for painting the right angel's purplish-white robe is comparable with that used in *The Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* (figure 3), but it was in fact quite pervasive. The combination of linseed oil and egg tempera as binding agents on a single panel seems to support a connection to the 'Campin/Flémalle' group analyzed in the National Gallery, but it may very well have been a general trend. Lead tin yellow, normally unusual in flesh pigments was also found in the Werl wings (Madrid, Museo del Prado). Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 31–33.

This variety is the likely the result of the triptych's production mode—it quite clearly involved more than one artist. In keeping with Rogier van der Weyden's established later practices, collaboration is discernible both vertically and horizontally, that is, across different layers as well as alongside, in the same layer.⁴¹ The difference between the two flying angels in the central panel is a good example. The left one, according to Villers and Bruce-Gardner, reflects an old-fashioned 'decorative and graphic system of linear shadows and highlights [which] seems applied, or drawn, over the basic colour'.⁴² More than one assistant was likely involved. A comparison between three different red robes: the angel's, Mary's, and St. John's yielded an identification of three different working techniques, a level of variation which Villers and Bruce-Gardner found 'striking'.⁴³ They conclude that the triptych was a product of a 'busy workshop'.⁴⁴ As for hopes of the underdrawing analysis contributing to the attribution question, it was—not surprisingly, in light of the above—concluded that 'the underdrawing (...) is not highly individualized and it does not provide conclusive stylistic criteria for associating the *Entombment Triptych* with other paintings in the Campin/Flémalle group'.⁴⁵ In fact, their own previous observation that the planning was done outside the support points to the underdrawing being an assistant's work; transferring a design is a task a busy master was likely to delegate.

The hope of even making progress on thorny attribution questions based on IRR is, in general, a bit misplaced; used straightforwardly, the technique winds up relying on the exact same subjective methods as the procedures it was meant to supplement, or even replace.⁴⁶ In neatly defined *œuvres*, the IRR composites offer a delightful peephole into process and a great tool for corroborating information. In more problematic *œuvres*, such as the Flémalle group, or that of Hieronymous Bosch, revealing the underdrawings by IRR succeeds only in doubling the extant data—or, in other words, the problem. At the end of the day, much of the data culled by cutting-edge technology needs to be processed through distinctly non-cutting edge methods—those of traditional connoisseurship. Not unaware of the irony, Asperen de Boer noted that some might perceive his methods as 'too Morelli-

⁴¹ Faries, 'Technical Studies of Early Netherlandish Painting', 30.

⁴² Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 31.

⁴³ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 31–32.

⁴⁴ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 32.

⁴⁵ Villers and Bruce-Gardner, 'The *Entombment Triptych*', 29. Asperen de Boer *et al.* reached a similar conclusion in *Underdrawing in paintings of the Rogier van der Weyden and Master of Flémalle groups*, 87.

⁴⁶ Though some more creative usages rely on other resources, quite often to great results. See Jellie Dijkstra, 'On the Role of Underdrawings and Modeldrawings in the Workshop Production of the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van Der Weyden', in Roger van Schoute and Hélène Verougstraete-Marcq, eds., *Le dessin sous-jacent dans la peinture: colloque 7*, Louvain-la Neuve: Collège Érasme, 1989, 37–53 and Faries, 'Technical Studies of Early Netherlandish Painting', where she enumerates eleven ways in which to employ IRR findings, 21–24.

esque'.⁴⁷ Ludovic Nys's put it a bit more bluntly, suggesting that the serpent here seems to be 'biting its own tail'.⁴⁸

A new conception of authorship

Almost inadvertently, however, these failures did start constructing a whole new narrative in the field. For, rather than simply a frustrating example, the *Entombment Triptych* is, in fact, a faithful reflection of a norm. Early Netherlandish paintings not only bear the marks of multiple hands as a rule, there is actually a clear correlation between the renown of a master painter and the likelihood that his panels were produced while heavily relying on assistants. In her 2003 essay Ainsworth outlined a far more sober and nuanced approach to the efficacy of IRR, and her own scholarship since the 1990s, particularly on the prolific workshops of the artist Gerard David, seems to internalize the insight: 'after all', she notes, 'selling works under his own name that were mainly produced by apprentices was a significant way in which a master could make a profit'.⁴⁹ One of the first books to incorporate the insights of technical studies into a primarily social art history study, Jean Wilson's 1998 *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages*, sheds light on another key difference between fifteenth-century and modern criteria: the valuation of copies.⁵⁰ Copies of fifteenth-century Netherlandish artworks were understood as something closer to homages than copyright infringements. They construct a period notion of authorship much closer to the contemporary than the eighteenth-century one, namely, one anchored in invention, rather than execution, as the primary locus of the artist, and informed by a disenchanting conception of authorial originality as always inevitably a 'tissue of quotations'.⁵¹ Ainsworth most recently edited a volume specifically focused on this collaborative mode of production.⁵² Setting out to uncover traces of individual genius, adopters of IRR ultimately discovered an industry at work.

These findings should not be couched, of course, in the 'half awake' and 'childish' medieval 'consciousness' of Jacob Burckhardt's old bias, where the individual allegedly does not yet exist and thus certainly neither does the individual

⁴⁷ Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and van Schoute, *Underdrawing in paintings of the Rogier van der Weyden and Master of Flémalle groups*, 10.

⁴⁸ 'Le serpent se mord la queue!', Nys, 'Le triptych Seilern', 6.

⁴⁹ Ainsworth, 'What's in a Name?', 146.

⁵⁰ Jean C. Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages: Studies in Society and Visual Culture*, University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1998.

⁵¹ On the artwork as a 'tissue of quotations' see Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* [ed. and trans. Stephen Heath], New York: Hill, 1977, 142–147. On parallel ideas prevalent in the Late Middle Ages see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, esp. chapter 2, 56–92.

⁵² Maryan W. Ainsworth, ed., *Workshop Practice in Early Netherlandish Painting.: Case Studies from Van Eyck through Gossart*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2016.

artistic persona.⁵³ As evinced by high salaries, laudatory mentions, literary biographies, and a burgeoning secondary market for the works of painters such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, artistic celebrity very much existed in the fifteenth century Netherlands (and, for that matter, much earlier as well).⁵⁴ Rather, what did not exist is the odd notion that this artistic persona is somehow fully embodied in—and contingent upon—the hand. Documentary evidence from the era suggest patrons fully expected there to be assistants; in fact, those were often named and compensated directly when a master was employed at court, and it was customary to tip them when a patron visited a workshop.⁵⁵ Any concerns patrons had about the involvement of assistants, as evinced by contracts, had to do with quality, not with any fetishizing of the artist's hand. While there certainly were plenty of followers and imitators, any attempt to draw a clear dichotomy between highbrow authorial works and cheap imitations is thwarted by the complexities of the habitual mode of production in the best workshops. If the old Netherlandish painters were resurrected today to witness the intrusion beyond their paint layers, they would likely find it perplexing and somewhat indecorous. There was little investment in artistic process in the fifteenth century and the fascination that propelled the dissemination of IRR would seem like an inexplicable desire to see the sausage being made, or, in a better analogy, to intrude on a dress rehearsal when one already has tickets to the premier.

The latest iteration in the deployment of IRR in the field is therefore exceptionally ironic. In the major exhibition celebrating the 500 anniversary of the death of Hieronymous Bosch at the Museo del Prado in Madrid this summer, to-scale translucencies of infrared-images of several paintings were presented on vertical lightboxes in the gallery. Such imaging does feature greatly in both the exhibition catalogue and the *catalogue raisonné* produced earlier the same year (2016) along with an accompanying volume entirely dedicated to technical studies.⁵⁶ Little

⁵³ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [ed. Irene Gordon, trans. Samuel George Chetwynd Middlemore], New York: New American Library, 1965, 100.

⁵⁴ On Van Eyck's celebrity see Catherine Reynolds, "The King of Painters", in Susan Foister and Delphine Cool, eds., *Investigating Jan van Eyck*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000, 1–16. On the international influence of Netherlandish art in the fifteenth century see Marina Belozerskaya, *Rethinking the Renaissance: Burgundian Arts across Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, as well as Paula Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting, 1400–1500*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. More broadly about this question see Sherry Lindquist and Stephen Perkinson, eds., 'Artistic Identity in the Late Middle Ages' [special issue], *Gesta*, 61:1, 2002.

⁵⁵ Famous example of such recorded gratuity payments are listed in William Henry James Weale, *Hubert and John Van Eyck, Their Life and Work*, London: J. Lane, 1908, xxxii (document 4, to assistants of Hubert van Eyck by Ghent city officials), xxxv (document 18, to assistants of Jan van Eyck, by Bruges city officials as well as again to Jan's assistants by Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy).

⁵⁶ See Pilar Silva Maroto, 'Bosch and his Work', in Pilar Silva Maroto, ed., *Bosch: The Fifth Centenary Exhibition*, Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2016, 17–71, esp. 50–58; Luuk Hoogstede, et al., *Hieronymus Bosch: Painter and Draughtsman: Technical Studies*, New Haven:

Noa Turel Genius disrobed: The Early Netherlandish underdrawing
craze and the end of a connoisseurship era

consensus emerges even amongst these two most recent publications; in Bosch's ever-complex *œuvre*, as in the case of the Flémalle group, IRR offers few definitive answers as a functional tool of attribution. Except perhaps to ascertain, once again, what I heard one senior curator in the field wryly refer to as the 'Disney mode of production' within the master's workshop and (to make matters ever hairier), those of his followers and imitators as well. The purpose of the prominent display of the IRR images to the public was certainly not scholarly; it is unlikely that a connoisseurship prodigy would rise from among the ranks of the general public to resolve questions that have been vexing professional art historians for generations. Rather, it seems that the same curators who have spearheaded the process that has so effectively helped dispel the a-historic notion of embodied authorship are now offering the public disrobed paintings precisely to rekindle and enhance a certain nostalgic enchantment with process and presence, that 'emanation of the painter's genius'.

Noa Turel's research area is Renaissance European art. In her current work she draws on evidence at the intersection of the histories of art, theater, and science to explore the changing epistemology of pictorial representation over the period 1300-1600. She has authored several peer-reviewed articles and chapters and recently completed the manuscript of her first book, *Living Pictures: A Formative History of Early Netherlandish Painting*. Dr. Turel has been the recipient of multiple awards, including a 2016 Smithsonian Dibner Fellowship, a 2012-2013 Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Getty Research Institute, and the 2011-2012 Robert H. and Clarice Smith Fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art.

nturel@uab.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)