

A medieval manuscript illustration. In the foreground, a woman in a gold and red patterned tunic and a grey cap looks towards the right. She has a sword in a blue scabbard on her hip. Next to her, a woman in a similar patterned gown with a blue belt and a black veil looks down. In the background, two other women are visible: one in a blue gown and another in a yellow gown. The background features a red and gold patterned wall and a green tiled floor.

*Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby,  
General Editors*

# A History of Private Life

Revelations of the Medieval World

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*Georges Duby, Editor     Arthur Goldhammer, Translator*

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# ➤ Toward Intimacy: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

*Philippe Braunstein*

THE history of space in the process of becoming private, of the phases of retirement and intimacy, is one of feelings, thoughts, and mental images cultivated in secret but fixed in private writing. Compared with the sources of earlier centuries, those of the late medieval period are relatively abundant. Beginning in the thirteenth century, the volume of documents increases markedly, and a fair proportion of private documents has survived. Hence we can feel more confident of entering the private lives of certain individuals whose interest in writing or being painted ensured that some evidence of their identity, manner, and/or voice would be recorded and whose record survived the hazards of the archives.

We must, however, delineate carefully the limits of a risky enterprise. The person who writes about his or her own life, or extends it in fiction, looks inward with an eye no more innocent than that which he casts upon the outside world. But against what standard can we measure the testimony of an individual, or distinguish between the unique testimony and the common experience to which it bears witness?

As private writing, or writing about private life, became more commonplace, profound changes in the attitudes of individuals toward their families and social groups must have occurred. People felt a need to transmit, or at least describe, reactions to events about which earlier generations had been silent. Although we become aware of modifications induced by the habit of writing, the increasing availability of the "mirror" that writing provides, we must not conclude that self-consciousness did not exist or that people previously took no pleasure in private life and had no interest in defending it.

The ability to write was fairly widespread in the late

Middle Ages. The skill was more commonly found in large cities than in rural towns, and laymen shared it with clerics. Writing remained, however, the privilege of a minority of the European population. The written sources tell us about the intimate lives of a relatively small number of people, offering only occasional glimpses of the rest. Evidence from painting, sculpture, and archaeology, however, can help correct and extend our imperfect understanding.

A danger lurks in the temptation to view the final centuries of the Middle Ages as a precursor of “modernity” simply because the people of that age were more garrulous about each other’s secrets than were their ancestors. Sensitivity to the voices of the past allows us to be astonished by the freedom of a confidence, the audacity of an expression, the reverie implicit in a text, the love that is evident in lament over the death of a child. Anything that brings us closer to the intimate feelings of people who lived centuries ago tempts us to abolish the distance that stands between us and a lost world. The trap of modernity is to assume that nothing is ever new, that men expressing themselves in private speak the same language across the centuries.

The abundance of sources for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries requires us to overcome two difficulties: we must not assume a sharp break with earlier times, and we must not treat the period as though it were the beginning of the modern age. Every document used (most of the sources are either Italian or German), every expression uncovered, must be carefully weighed in the light of other, contemporary documents and expressions. Beyond the pleasure of attending to the voice, we must strive to identify the speaker and situate him in his milieu.

### THE INVENTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

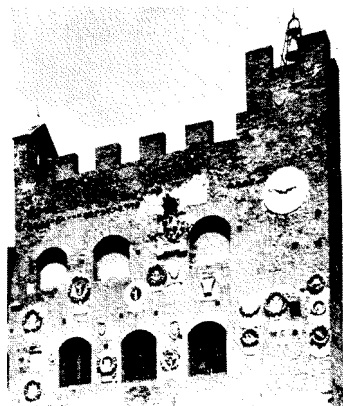
Social life comprises a series of communities: family, traditional community, professional groups, subjects of a sovereign. The individual is more than a member of so many different groups. Self-consciousness is born when the individual can see himself in perspective, set himself apart from his fellow man; it can lead to a radical questioning of the social order. Those who risked abandoning their position in society, who took to the roads and the forests, lost their social status. The restless wanderers, shady characters, and madmen who fill the pages of the romantic adventures so widely read in the

waning Middle Ages were not alone in the forests of disorder, where charcoal burners, outcasts, and hermits avidly seeking another world also roamed.

But self-consciousness, as least as it was expressed in writing, did not often cross the dividing line between the gregarious and the unorganized. Wedded to familiar habits of mind and obligations of society, the late medieval citizen was still quite conscious of the ideology of the common good, according to which the well-being of all represented an advance over the convenience of a few. Was Guicciardini's distinction between a career in public service and an "idle life, devoid of dignity and perfectly private," a mere topos? His



Piccolomini Palace, work of Rossellino. Pienza, Tuscany, 15th century.



Pretorio Palace. Certaldo, Tuscany, late 13th century.

Public pride, private show. The facade of the building bears coats of arms attesting to glorious marriages and perpetuating time. The courtyard, however, is a tranquil place.

contemporary Willibald Pirckheimer of Nuremberg makes a similar remark in his autobiography, where he describes ten years following the death of his father, three years spent *vatus* and living only for himself and his friends; after return to public life he looks upon a statue of himself and execrates those who prefer “private sentiments” to “public utility.” Pirckheimer, to participate in public life is an honor: civic humanism had clearly made its way across the Alps. Individual dignity and self-consciousness were most strikingly manifested in service to the republic. Less pretentious chroniclers such as the Florentine Velluti chose to mention only their personal matters directly associated with official events. Memoir-writers found it difficult to distinguish between public and private. Hans Porner of Brunswick, although he insists that his book is his own and does not speak for the town council in fact deals only with communal affairs, which overwhelm any personal remarks. The self remained melancholy, unable to do more than stammer; individuals dared to assert themselves only timidly, their model of behavior being that of a good citizen.

The expression of self was also still colored by reference to family. The wish to construct palace facades aligned with the street in fifteenth-century Florence has been interpreted as evidence for a break with the family, whose architectural embodiment was the compact block of houses. The need for individuals to assert their independence from their forebears is evident in the glory that attached to success in business: a career and in the exaltation of the *res privata*. Make no mistake, however: the demands of the individual did not conflict with the affirmation of family in the narrow sense. Behind the family facade people insisted on privacy, as is evident from the way in which rooms were divided among family members: the primary beneficiary was the master of the house, who also enjoyed a private study to which he could retire. This, perhaps the only place where the businessman, paterfamilias and humanist could be alone.

Work on behalf of a community or “house” honored the individual conscious of his responsibility. Prominent men who attempted such activity left little room for private life *per se*. Any time tempted to take the necessary time and resources for his private use was held back by fear of being judged selfish or vain before the community; privacy was considered “abject.” Outside of public life there was no reputation to be made: *Fama non nisi publica*.

True to their theories, many early modern writers had little to say about private life. A necessarily gregarious existence left little room for the self to flourish naturally. Authors brought up on Cicero and Livy sallied forth armed and helmeted with virtues. We would prefer less labored styles, less rigid attitudes, less self-satisfied writers. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the images these public men so carefully sculpted for posterity did in some way reflect their active, public lives and, further, that the model elaborated by a few authors represented an ideal widely shared throughout urban Europe at the end of the Middle Ages.

Must we abandon the cities for rural solitude and simplicity in order to find more intimate forms of self-consciousness? In a fine albeit rhetorical piece of prose, Ulrich von Hutten makes it clear that the private man is no more easily discovered in bucolic surroundings. The humanist conscious of his role in aristocratic and bourgeois society must not look to the country for stimulants to self-fulfillment; solitude impoverishes, and retreat into the "desert," even so benign a desert as the family castle, leads to anxiety. The mind thrives on crowds and excitement:

"The country is agitation and noise.

"You talk of the charms of the countryside, of rest, of peace . . . Whether perched on a peak or situated in a plain, the castle was built not for pleasure but for defense, surrounded by moats and trenches, cramped within, burdened with stables for animals large and small, dark buildings for bombards and stores of pitch and sulfur, swollen with stores of armaments and machines of war. Everywhere the disagreeable odor of powder dominates. And the dogs with their filth—what a fine smell that is! And the comings and goings of the knights, among them bandits, brigands, and thieves. Usually the house is wide open, because we do not know who is who and do not take much trouble to find out. We hear the bleating of the sheep, the mooing of the cows, the barking of the dogs, the shouts of men working in the fields, the grinding and clatter of carts and wagons. And near the house, which is close to the woods, we even have the cry of the wolf.

"Every day you must worry about the next, about constant movement, about the calendar of the seasons. You must plow, dress the soil, work on the vines, plant trees, irrigate meadows, harrow, seed, manure, harvest, thresh; the harvest season comes, and then the grape-picking. And if the harvest



Donatello, *Marzocco*, 1420.  
(Florence, Bargello.)



Bernhard Strigel, *The Birth of Mary*. (Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz.)

Birth scenes enable us to enter the most intimate part of the house, the bedroom, where women attend to the expectant mother.

is bad one year, what astonishing poverty, what astonishing misery, so that one never lacks occasions for emotion, worry, anguish, melancholy, despair, or folly, for wanting to go away, to flee." (Ulrich von Hutten to Willibald Pirckheimer, *Vitae suae rationem exponens*, 1518.)

Without political ambition other than to encourage the powerful to favor scholarship, von Hutten describes himself at the court of the archbishop of Mainz as a man who knows how to find solitude in the midst of tumult. True freedom, the affirmation of his own identity, comes from the private cultivation of reading and writing, which frees him from all public obligations and family burdens. Mystics enjoy the same privilege, but by other means. In the words of J. Mombaer, a Brother of the Common Life, "Whether you are awake or asleep, you are alone even in the midst of others." Von Hutten contrasts this privilege with the hard life of the peasant, who has neither the means nor the time to enjoy the vigorous pleasure of coming to grips with the soul.

#### FIRST-PERSON SINGULAR

Men did not speak of themselves without good reason; the authority of Proverbs, Aristotle, and Saint Thomas combined to curtail narration in the first person. Some writers have held that truly unfettered autobiography did not exist until the modern age, when, they say, a new mode of self-narration was invented and autobiography finally distinguished itself from history and apologetics. Man, discovering himself at the center of the universe, between two infinities, exulted to find that God had given him the faculty to develop his potential; autobiography proclaimed the individuality of destiny.

Autobiographical narrative did not spring fully armed from the head of the now legitimate individual hero. It emerged gradually from other forms of narrative, which centered on the individual in society. Authors felt an irresistible urge to put in a word for themselves, to indicate their presence at the side of the road when history passed, to remark on events, to place before the eye of God the example of their own tribulations. In other words, egocentric narrative sprang sometimes from the model of Augustinian confession, sometimes from the concern of prudent administrators to remind themselves and their families of the lessons of everyday ex-





perience, and sometimes from the habit of recording memorable events in conveniently accessible form.

Late medieval confessions, journals, and chronicles are sources of information about individual private lives, that is, about people's bodies, perceptions, feelings, and ideas. The insights they contain are sincere insofar as sincerity is possible in memoirs based on memory, in writing that pretends "to paint the individual not in profile but head on."

In painting, the elimination of scenery from portrait art gave us faces painted against a neutral background, lending immortality to individual features for no reason other than to preserve appearances from decay. But even before that, innumerable retables and frescoes contained minor figures more powerful than the saints or magi who formed the ostensible subject of the work; among those minor figures we often find the painter, pretending he was a witness to the very scene he paints. The individual timidly makes his appearance beneath the vaults of universal history, surprised by the echoing sound of his name. The temptation to say more about his minute self comes into conflict with the majesty of the divine, so he withdraws, concealing himself behind third-person narrative or metaphoric discourse. Language served in many ways to

Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Effects of Good Government*, "Departure for a Hunt with Falcons" (detail), 1338–1341. Nobles encounter peasants at work. (Siena, Palazzo Pubblico.)

disguise the expression of private feeling. Along with the few examples of genuine self-affirmation, there are innumerable instances of reticence and hesitation, whose context and frequency may be useful for distinguishing between one kind of intimate writing and another. In a work that stands at the crossroads of autobiography and fiction, Emperor Maximilian mentions his pain at the death of his young wife, “for they loved each other a great deal, about which much could be written”—but he chooses not to write it.

### The Language of Confession

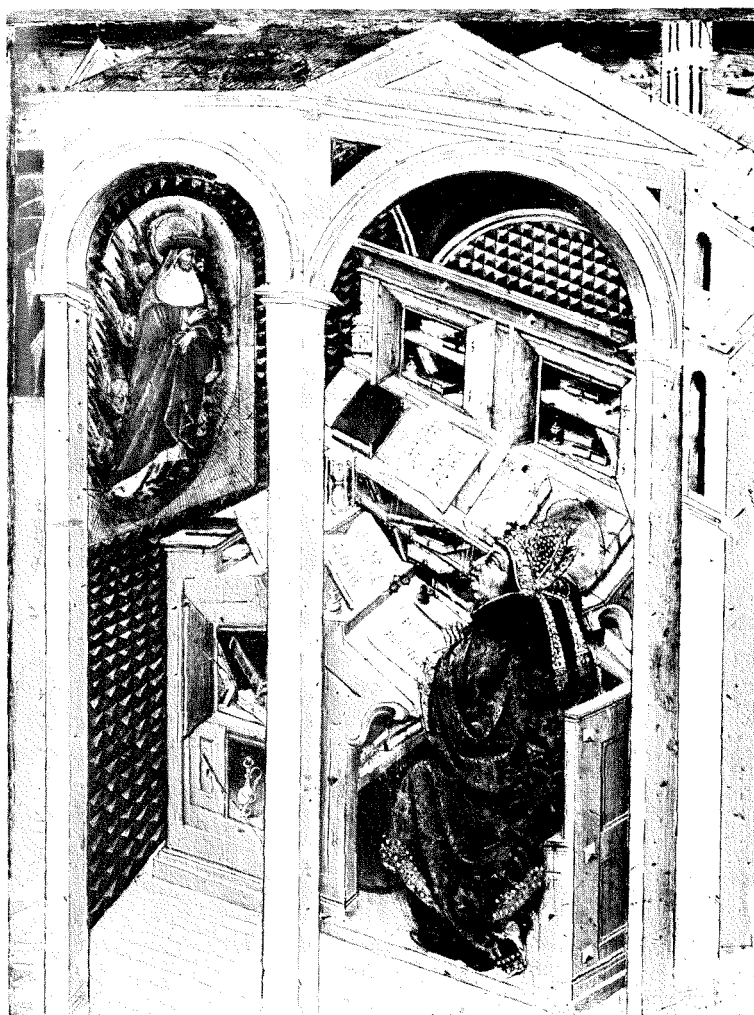
More than any other narrative form, confession encourages the author to cast himself in the role of protagonist in a spiritual adventure. Beyond Franciscan biography, the models for late medieval confession were Abelard’s self-justification, a literary contemplation of disaster, and above all the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. Whereas Abelard’s dramatic confession consisted of a series of discontinuous events, and the serene confession of Adamo di Salimbene attempted to set the sinner’s silhouette against the light of Saint Francis, Augustine’s autobiography, in which a sudden crystallization of feeling suddenly illuminates the whole of the prior life, inspired several first-rate Italian writers. The most sensitive pages in Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio derive from this profound remark of Augustine’s: “Memory brings forth not reality itself, which is gone forever, but the words elicited by the representation of reality, which as it disappeared impressed traces upon the mind via the agency of the senses.” Beneath the eye of God inner time is the resurrection of past moments, revived by the present. Through his thoughts and writing the new man gives form and meaning to the sinner’s hesitant progress; the narrative begins with conversion, just as the created world begins with mankind’s salvation.

The organizing power of the Augustinian vision inspired individuals in diverse situations yet fascinated by Augustine’s method and moved by feelings of spiritual kinship. Such emotions touched the heart of Petrarch, who shed tears as he read the *Confessions* (*inter legendum fluunt lacrimae*) and, mimicking conversion, identified his pain with Augustine’s (*transformatus sum in alterum Augustinum*). Everyone knows how his dialogue with his soul, following a pattern inspired by the confessors’ manuals, led him to Mont Ventoux and suggested to him the image of the citadel in which he closeted himself with his master’s book.



Paolo Uccello, *Equestrian Statue of Sir John Hawkwood*, ca. 1436. Grandeur and geometry: the condottiere. (Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore.)

Dante begins his poetic autobiography, *Vita nuova*, with a methodological preamble that owes everything to the intellectual atmosphere of private reading: "In one section of the book of my memory is a heading under which I find transcribed the words I intend to use in the present work; and if I do not use them all, I shall at least make a significant summary." The reductive dryness of the analysis makes the remembered experience seem foreordained rather than freely chosen, but through the ordering prism suddenly appears that glorious creature of the spirit, Beatrice transfigured: *la gloriosa donna della mia mente*. Dante does not hesitate to show himself



Taddeo di Bartolo, *The Camerlingo's Scribe* (detail). (Siena, State Archives.)

Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint Jerome Appearing to Saint Augustine*, 1465. Works provoked thought and evoked images. (Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz.)



School of Antonio Pollaiuolo.  
Reading for work or pleasure.  
(Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

Dante, *The Divine Comedy*,  
engraving on copper attributed  
to Baccio Baldini, after Sandro  
Botticelli, 1481. (Paris,  
Bibliothèque Nationale.)

in the room where he sought refuge so that he might cry without being heard: *nella mia camera, la ov'io potea lamentarmi senza essere udito*. The intensity of the emotion depends entirely on the alchemy of writing. Writing orders the past and thus keeps the sources of memory alive; it is a liturgy that sustains love, a cult of memory that constitutes and renews the writer's pained consciousness.

Petrarch's work contains autobiographical elements, "scattered fragments of his soul." Literature enables the poet to reassemble the fleeting moments that constitute his elusive self. For that reason he diligently made marginal notes on manuscripts in his possession. In the margins of the *Aeneid*, in a manuscript embellished by miniatures of Simone Martini, Petrarch between 1348 and 1372 entered the names of persons dear to him whom he had lost, thus carrying on a secret correspondence with those of Virgil's heroes cut down in their youth. First to be mentioned is Laura, on the back of the frontispiece, "in the place that comes most often to my attention." To this immortal woman Petrarch dedicates a tender and solemn epigraph, in which the various fragments of an amorous discourse are assembled: "Laura, celebrated for her own virtues and by my poems, which have sung her at leisure, appeared to me for the first time in my earliest adolescence, in the Year of Our Lord 1328, on the sixth day of April, in



the morning, in the church of Santa Clara in Avignon; and in that same city, in the same month of April, on the sixth day of the month, at the same hour of the morning, in the year 1348, she was taken, while I was in Verona, alas, ignorant of what fate had wrought! The sad news reached me at Parma in a letter from my dear Louis on the morning of the tenth day of May 1348. Her body, so pure and so beautiful, was entrusted to the Friars Minor on the very day of her death, toward evening. As for her soul, like that of the African according to Seneca, it returned to heaven whence it came: that is my profound conviction.”

Petrarch's assiduous reading of Virgil repeatedly awakened in him the feeling that he had lost everything. In a letter to Philippe de Cabassoles he wrote: “Every day I die” (*quotidie morior*). A man leaves nothing but traces. In the margins of the *Canzoniere*, the only place where he recorded his thoughts daily, Petrarch made notes on his work. He recorded a memory that came to him, after lying forgotten for twenty-five years, during a night of insomnia, and an invitation to dine that delayed his responding to a moment of inspiration. Only God could reconstruct from such notes, such moments, the fabric of a life; but the work is there, with its cries and whispers. Memory and its orchestration, literature and life's raw stuff, are inextricably intertwined. About himself Petrarch left only a postscript, an *Epistle to Posterity*. His voice, transmitted through time, carefully contains his emotion. Despite the distance that he is pleased to establish between the man he was and the writer who will remain, he cannot resist the temptation to describe himself: “Perhaps one of you has heard something about me . . . I was one of your troop, an insignificant man among mortals . . . Though not blessed with a physique of the first order, I enjoyed the advantages of youth: a good complexion, neither brilliant nor pallid, sparkling eyes and an eyesight that remained acute past sixty years of age and then weakened to the point where I was forced, reluctantly, to seek the aid of glasses.” This self-portrait suddenly plunges us back into the miseries of private life, which Boccaccio, in his literary portrait of the great man, had attempted to efface by shrouding personal memories in a veil of ancient clichés.

After Petrarch, humanists often referred to, or produced pastiches of, Roman literature. In the fifteenth century the analysis of feeling became noticeably more serene, as writers turned conformist in style and borrowed their moral doctrine from noted authors of the past. First-person narrative contin-

Vittore Carpaccio, *Legend of Saint Ursula*. "Farewell to the Ambassadors" (detail), 1490–1496. (Venice, Accademia.)



ued to be inspired by the Christian preoccupation with spiritual accounting, but little room remained for introspection owing to the new emphasis on philology, conventional description of nature, moderation, and personal glory.

Giovanni Conversini of Ravenna, chancellor to Francesco Carrara, drew upon Augustinian tradition for the title of his self-examination, *Rationarum vitae*, but his style lacks the anguished accents of a dialogue with the soul. Poggio scooped the pages of the authors of the past ("every day I speak to dead") in search of virtuous attitudes, but about his conscience he says nothing. Pier Paolo Vergerio emulates Petrarch the Younger in describing a stay in the country. Even Francesco Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, whose keen intellect is so often evident in his writing, has left in his *Comentarios* an account of his private life that remains insipid and elusive until he receives the consecration of the tiara. Then, emulating his literary master, Caesar, he begins writing in the third person: Enea Silvio throws over his life the mantle of the papacy. Occasionally, an inflection in his objective style reveals the sound of his authentic voice. He is sarcastic, for example, in describing the maneuvers of the conclave that elected him: "Most of the cardinals gathered near the latrine there, where discretion and secrecy were most appropriate, they agreed on a way to elect Pope William." He is melancholy when he visits the region where he grew up: "Everywhere the pope encountered obvious signs of his old age." Later, out of Ancona, as he prepares for his life's final act, the impossible crusade, he is resigned: "If this route does not impel the Cf

tians to go to war, we know no other . . . As for ourselves, we know that death lies ahead, and we do not refuse it." In this style there may still be conformity, but it bears the stamp of experience and is based on the imitation of saints and martyrs.

With the *Commentaries* of Pius II we pass imperceptibly to literature of another kind, in which the only link with private life is subjective. We are no longer concerned with those privileged moments that encapsulate the past or with the need to trace the development of a conscience in intimate detail. Here the emphasis is on recording, in chronological order, events notable enough to be saved from oblivion. The elements of personal engagement and personal choice are camouflaged by the apparent objectivity of the narrative.

The purpose of late medieval memoirs and commentaries, as established by such historians as Froissart and Villani, was to examine the past in the light of experience. The narrator's emphases and omissions, enumerations and digressions, sweeping brushstrokes and minute detail, create as it were a negative self-portrait (particularly when the writer's purpose is apologetic).

The Bourgeois of Paris, who kept a journal in difficult times, is an impotent and splenetic observer of events that transcend him. Philippe de Commines, on the other hand, was not only an intimate of his protagonists, Duke Charles and King Louis, but also an official charged with public and secret missions. His account of his times, his judgments, descriptions, and portraits, are all colored by his feelings and muted by the distance between the man of action and the elderly gentleman enduring a forced retirement. But the author, the private man, appears only fleetingly, and then only if one makes an effort to divine his intentions. As for the personages who occupy the center of the stage, Commines shows them "in chambers" only when justified by his literary design. We see the fury of the duke of Burgundy at having been deceived, as well as his fearsome melancholy, and we are shown the king of France in his manor and in the agony of death, which Commines pretends to have witnessed to the final breath.

Some authors, bent on recounting their personal experiences in a historical perspective worthy of their ancient models, found themselves unable to walk the narrow line between

### *Memoirs of Action*



Piero della Francesca, *Portrait of Sigismondo Malatesta*, 1451. The rigor of the composition raises this portrait of a powerful lord to the level of an archetype. (Paris, Louvre.)



Urs Graf the Elder, *Standard Bearer*, 1514. The Swiss artist offers his impression—enthusiastic or sarcastic?—of the violent heroes he had chanced to meet in war. (Museum of Basel.)

public and private. Guicciardini wrote three separate books, one on public life, one on the history of his family, and a third on his own life: the *History of Florence*, the *Family Memoirs*, and the *Souvenirs (Ricordanze)*. But in playing the role of historiographer, he composes a portrait of his father without mentioning that he is the man's son, and when he sets out to "preserve the memory of certain things that belong to me personally," he limits himself to recounting the stages of his distinguished career and to awarding himself a satisfactory grade for having been a good son and husband. Thus, he reduces private life to little more than the reputation of a man noted for having been a good actor on the public stage.

Conversely, other writers sought to defend or explain their behavior in order to justify some public action. Jörg Kazmeier, mayor of Munich during that city's troubles in the late fifteenth century, recounts the events of that time only in order to explain his flight. Arnecke, mayor of Hildesheim in the middle of the fifteenth century, defended himself against accusations of incompetence and prevarication. Götz von Berlichingen, who in his eighties recounted his quarter of a century as a reiter from Switzerland to Hesse, sets out to silence certain persistent slanders at the cost of bending the truth about his role in the Peasants' War. His account begins in childhood, during which his leadership qualities were already in evidence: "I often heard my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, and the domestics who served them say that I was an extraordinary (*wunderbarlich*) lad." With nothing left to lose, the accused launches a counterattack.

Similarly, Benvenuto Cellini, whose glory was equaled only by his disgrace, responds to his detractors by pointing to the prodigies that accompanied selected episodes in his private and public lives. References to various heroes and villains give the narrative its rhythm and color, from the artist's service with Clement VII to his imprisonment in 1556. There is no dearth of signs to herald the boy's extraordinary fate: an ancestor who founded Florence, biblical grandparents, a salamander found near the baby. A mythological prehistory delivers the hero from the confining limits of his own time. This autobiography of extremes abandons the public domain even as it draws upon its author's established reputation. Adroitly combining narrative and symbolism, it distorts or conceals the reality of the private life.

With Cellini in the mid-sixteenth century we have reached the end of an evolution in the manner of telling others about





Marinus van Reymerswaele,  
*Tax Collectors*. (Munich,  
Pinachotek.)

oneself. Fiction, an embroidery upon true or unverifiable facts, was the final product of developments in three areas: spiritual introspection, the contemplation of past experience, and family history.

Laymen who had acquired the habit of writing usually saved private papers and records. Notaries and writers employed on public business, merchants at every level from retail trade to great international firms, and even some artisans formed a group that expanded between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries to include all the notables in every city in Europe. Nobles were not excluded, nor were women, who in some cases took up writing where their fathers or husbands left off. Writing was associated with a concern that one's property be administered well and that one's heirs inherit a capital consisting not only of real estate but also of spiritual precepts and memoirs.

It was difficult to administer or bequeath such spiritual capital if it was not organized. After 1350 an effort was therefore made to catalog and arrange the material in these family archives, stored in shops, offices, and palace studies: contracts, accounts, lists of births and deaths, remedies and potions, correspondence, family trees. Originally these records were

### *Family Memory*

Marinus van Reymerswale, *Bankers*. Reports, bookkeeping, accounts: medieval society acquired the habit of recording its activities and keeping accurate accounts. (London, National Gallery.)



kept on note cards, reminders which can often be seen stuck on nails in portraits of merchants and artisans. These gradually gave way to notebooks and ledgers in which debits and credits were recorded. It was some time before a distinction was made between commercial and household accounts, and between household records and personal memoirs.

The most complete commercial and financial records were kept first in the cities of central and northern Italy and then, from the end of the fourteenth century, in the cities of Germany as well. The use of special ledgers for accounting purposes led to the elimination from commercial records of all noncommercial information. This gave rise to so-called secret books, private business journals, *mémoriaux* and *ména-*

gers, *livres de raison* and books of remembrances, in which information of a private nature was preserved so that it might be passed on. Up to the sixteenth century and beyond, the content of such books varied widely, depending on the family's intellectual level. Their organization was quite haphazard, reflecting their origins as mere collections of daily records and notes. Clauses of a marriage contract might follow a list of children's names, or a medication for horses might be included after a record of their sale.

Mercantile practices are apparent in the summaries drawn from the account books and the large amount of space devoted to inventories (for example, of gowns and jewels given by Lucas Rem of Augsburg to his wife or of relics collected by Nicolas Muffel of Nuremberg), as well as in the practice of striking from the list of children the names of those who died young, which were simply crossed out as though they were bad debts or paid-up accounts.

As late as the fifteenth century, less sophisticated merchants continued to record a variety of irrelevant information in their account books, but such astute businessmen as Giovanni Barbarigo of Venice and Anton Tucher of Nuremberg drew a clear line between business books and private books, even though they continued to record in their domestic accounts various land rents and personal notes and anecdotes. Despite its title, the *libro segreto* of Goro Dati of Florence has nothing in common with the accounts of the Alberti firm and, notwithstanding a melancholy preamble on the passage of time, never rises above notes on personal and family business. The *Zibaldone*, "mixed salad," of the Venetian da Canal contains notes on Mediterranean commercial practices similar to those that might be found in any company office, whereas Giovanni Rucellai of Florence used the same title for a compendium of his experiences in business and politics that included reflections on keeping a household and accounts pertaining to the construction of the facade of Santa Maria Novella and the Brancacci Chapel. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century Lucas Rem of Augsburg attempted to organize his material in sections on his own career, money spent on building, and children, yet he retains the misleading title *Tagebuch*, journal.

Such a variety of information incidental to active, professional lives was recorded in these books that we are able to view from many different angles personal concerns that had to be kept carefully hidden from public sight. The book of



Marinus van Reymerswaele, *Portrait of an Unknown* (detail). Public and private papers became a subject for realistic genre painting in the 15th century. (Paris, Porgès Collection.)

the Valori of Florence bore on its cover the words: "This book must not be shown to anyone."

Of necessity each generation made its own selection. In deciding what to pass on to posterity, merchant writers were guided by two main criteria: utility and dignity. Alone in his *camera privata*, the writer insisted on the inalienable and the exemplary, that is, on decisions that either strengthened or weakened the society or the family, perhaps praising an ancestor or confessing the writer's own errors, and on knowledge essential to the family's well-being, whether it be how to drain the cesspool behind the house or how to keep up the family's network of business contacts and allies.

Consider the *livre de raison* of Etienne Benoist of Limoges, who for twenty years during the first half of the fifteenth century composed a "family memoir" to pass on to his children. In it he recorded births, marriages, and deaths; contracts (which occupy more than a quarter of the book); and spiritual advice, if one can lump together under this single heading prayers, citations from sacred texts (chosen by the entire family), and an undated "political testament" by an ancestor with the same name as the author, a code of conduct already recopied in the previous generation. The content of this testament is essentially private, political events in the Limousin

Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Sacrifice of Patriarch Zacharias* (detail), 1486-1490. (Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Tornabuoni Chapel.)



being evoked only insofar as they affect the family. Ultimately the purpose of the book is simply to secure the best possible life for the Benois family in the years to come.

Among both published and unpublished European chronicles, Florence offers the most numerous as well as the richest source material. Family histories were in vogue because the age of "civic humanism" had a taste for the antique; because bloody family rivalries had marked the city's political history; and because leading citizens were rarely tempted by maritime adventure (which in other places so often led to changes in a family's occupation or interrupted the continuity of family records).

Two of the better known texts illustrate different kinds of family memoir, one stressing personal experience, the other long-term memory. Giovanni Morelli was acutely aware of the antiquity of his family and passionately interested in reconstructing its genealogy. But the purpose of his *Ricordi* is primarily educational: *ammaestrare i nostri figliuogli* (to instruct our sons). Morelli presents himself in the third person as the very embodiment of moderation and political conformity, an exemplary merchant, whose success is due to his knowledge. "Of average height and weight . . . he did not like anything wicked, in particular anything that might harm the Comune . . . He always strove to live without complications, never opposing those who governed by word or by deed." His was a morality of moderation and abstemiousness, not to mention tax evasion, so that there is little to savor in his account of his private life except the death of the son, a tragedy for both the father and the lineage, on which note these utilitarian memoirs abruptly end.

Donato Velluti belonged to the generation just prior to Morelli's. His sense of continuity and his historical method derive, perhaps, from his profession as jurist. Looking back on his life and career and on his place in that living organism, the family, he speaks of himself in the first person: "It has seemed to me that I have written things too much in praise of myself . . . I did so not for my glory but in order to recall what happened, thinking that it would be pleasant for my future readers to know the how and the why."

Carefully selecting facts and details, he relates them to the complexities of the contemporary scene and the long history of which they form a part. He describes the gout from which he has suffered since 1347, because the affliction has prevented him from accepting public office. He discusses his marriage



Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *The Payment of the Tithe*. (Paris, Museum of Decorative Arts.)

Vittore Carpaccio, *The Miracle of the Relic of the Cross* (detail), 1494. Members of the Tornabuoni family and the Scuola of Saint John the Baptist have been incorporated into the holy story. (Venice, Accademia.)



for the sake of family continuity. He draws connections between his career and various episodes in Florentine politics. His “domestic chronicle,” which had increasingly become a narrative of public events, ends as abruptly as Morelli’s “souvenirs,” with the death at age twenty-two of his son Lamberto, afflicted by a disease that attacked his genitals.

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### *Self-Narration*

The private chronicle naturally emphasized the role of the narrator. Whether or not he was tempted to put himself in the limelight, his voice was the one that would be heard, his interpretation the one that would represent the past. After 1400 memoir-writers no longer shrank from incorporating the nonutilitarian and undignified into their writings. Some authors verged on insouciance and the picaresque: the novel was about to be born. Let us continue to concentrate on Florence this time in the person of Buonaccorso Pitti. In the first third of the fifteenth century he wrote a chronicle in which the genealogical background and childhood of the author are scarcely mentioned. Instead Pitti set out to write an account of his travels: “Now I will give an account of the journeys made to different parts of the world after the death of my

father.” The work is novel in that, once the obligatory prologue is out of the way, it breaks with the traditional model of personal narrative. The young author is pleased to offer an unvarnished account of a love affair, the murder of a mason, and a vendetta conducted against the background of the Ciompi uprising. His lively pen is guided not by moral virtue or family honor or the fatuousness of success but by the flourishing of the individual self. As the years pass and the author’s travels come to an end, the tale becomes rather leaden with details of commercial success and public office; the chronicle buries the autobiography beneath the weight of the useful and proper.

The glimpses of nature in Pitti’s journal reveal how far we have come since the time when merchants first began keeping brief records. Before life could be seen as a romance, before men could overcome their reluctance to paint themselves in intimate portraits, they had to feel that they owed more to their own efforts than to either their origin or divine protection. Pride in success coupled with dialogue between past and present contributed powerfully to the development of the new autobiographical literature. Here, however, the emphasis differed from that of penitential autobiography, which exhibited the new man looking back upon the disorder and absurdity of his past. In the new biography the accent was on youth: on the earnest, often difficult years of childhood and training. References to family, politics, and spiritual matters were supported by journals and documents. Like the self-portrait eternally mirroring the artist’s gaze, autobiography, often composed in life’s autumn years, bared the creative energy of the individual conscious of his destiny.

It is the author’s constructive regard, sometimes severe, more often resigned, that gives flavor to those singular tales of adventure composed in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, primarily in German-speaking areas. The *Bildungsroman*, or novel of apprenticeship, was destined to a great future north of the Alps. For example, Johannes Butzbach, who eventually became prior of Laach in Eifel, accentuated the harshness of his unhappy childhood in his *Book of Peregrinations* (1505). He sets the tribulations of the orphan martyr as counterpoint against his tranquil years of retirement; mysterious are the ways of Providence.

Or consider Matthäus Schwarz of Augsburg, who while still a child, at the age when the young Dürer painted his first known self-portrait, conceived the ambition of writing an



Matthäus Schwarz (1497–1574), *Trachtenbuch*. Three vignettes from among the 137 self-portraits dated and commented on by the author. In 1509, at the age of twelve, Schwarz, who wanted to become a monk at Saint Ulrich in Augsburg, shows himself decorating a private altar in his bedroom. In 1516, aged nineteen, the merchant's son has returned from an educational journey to Italy ostentatiously dressed as a gentleman. In 1547, at age fifty, he wears a sword, collar clasp, and gloves, indicating that he thinks of himself as a prominent citizen; the taffeta (*daphatt*) costume was for a public ceremony in which he must have taken part: the arrival of Emperor Charles V in Augsburg for a meeting of the Reichstag. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

autobiography, an ambition that would become a reality fifteen years later, after he had become chief financier for the Fuggers at age twenty-five. At that time he wrote an account of his private life entitled *The Way of the World* and simultaneously painted watercolors of himself in various costumes. A more narcissistic project can hardly be imagined. This brilliant mind, this confidant of one of the most powerful men of his time, led a full life yet deliberately chose to indulge himself by concentrating his attention on appearances and frivolities. Having achieved success, the adult cast an eye back on his childhood. His sentimental and mordant commentary suggests what feelings the men of the Renaissance, after generations of self-absorbed literature, harbored toward their youth.

### THE INDIVIDUAL MIRRORED

A Veronese historian conceived the plan of collecting the scattered portraits of 150 identifiable contemporaries of Can Grande della Scala, lord of Verona in the fourteenth century. To take faces of stone and restore their identity: the same immoderate ambition was shared by Michelet—to bring back to life individuals whose actions and passions helped shape the destiny of their society.

Individual portraiture is not practiced by all civilizations in all periods. In the West the revival of portraiture in the middle of the fourteenth century reflected the developing freedom of the individual from social and religious constraints.



And in central and northern Italy portrait art no doubt owed something to the custom of hanging pictures of condemned criminals on the walls in order that the opprobrium of the community might be heaped upon them. Finally, portraiture embodied the respect of families for their ancestors. In Florence (remotely related, perhaps, to Etruscan tradition) likenesses in wax were displayed as devotional objects at Santa Maria Annunziata or preserved in private palaces and brought out for holidays and processions as evidence of the clan's ancient roots and present power.

The first individual portraits are so laden with exemplary virtues that it is impossible not to speculate about their truthfulness. It is no accident that the superb knight of Bamberg has been compared with the idealized portrait of Saint Louis. Theoretical visions were embodied in painting, just as images and sensations were encapsulated in written descriptions. Political and religious authorities shrewdly made use of both at a time when hierarchy was embodied in a symbolism of attitude, gesture, and ornament. Even today the forms and colors of Westminster constitute a striking totemic incantation. Charles IV was the first medieval Western sovereign to offer a likeness of himself and his family instead of a portrait of the perfect monarch. (He was also the first emperor to write his own biography, in which he included private events devoid of exemplary value.)

Literary portraits derived from an ancient tradition, which was carried on in the early Middle Ages by narratives retelling the glorious deeds of sovereigns (*res gestae*) and later by chronicles and family histories. The royal portraits of the late Middle Ages, a compromise between conventional representation of the monarchic function and the use of physical details to convey private virtues, are useful for determining when people began to concern themselves with veracity in physical description. Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries accurate detail became increasingly important as the rhetoric of kingship lost its celebratory function and adopted the free and easy tone of the chronicler or diplomat.

Emperor Louis the Bavarian (died 1347) was remembered in four eulogies. One simply noted his elegant appearance; the other three added color to the portrait by mentioning that he was slender, solid, well-proportioned, tall, and upright in posture. These details support the judgment of elegance, which

### Royal Portraits



Giovanni Pisano, *Margaret of Brabant, wife of Emperor Henry VII* (d. 1311), fragment of her tomb (1313). An image of the queen but above all a powerful affirmation of her personality. (Genoa, White Palace.)

This miniature, from an illustrated late-15th-century manuscript of Cicero's *Rhetoric*, shows the painter at work. An assistant prepares the colors in small saucers. The patron himself is represented in the canvases that decorate the room. (Ghent, University Library.)



no doubt struck observers even though it was a traditional feature of the princely type. Albertino Mussato's portrait of Louis's predecessor, Henry VII, emphasizes his stature and harmonious proportions. Both descriptions insist on maintaining the proper proportion (*commensurata conformitas*) between parts of the body, a proportion said to be worthy of a statue: in the case of Henry VII it is between the legs and the feet, and in the case of Louis the Bavarian, the shoulders and the neck.

Beyond these general observations, three of the four authors mention the king's hair. Mussato says it was sparse and rather reddish, a detail that would be perfectly plausible were

it not contradicted by the other writers and repeated word for word in the portrait of Henry VII mentioned above. His complexion, florid for one author, pink for another, seems to be a figure of rhetoric. The portrait is completed by a few facial details: prominent eyebrows, a strong nose. Mussato adds a few character traits: the king, he says, was enterprising, persevering, courteous, amiable, and gallant. Thus there is agreement about the monarch's overall appearance, disagreement about the details, and on the whole an overabundance of adjectives that casts doubt on the portrait. All that is left is the image of elegance, the memory of a physical presence, summed up in Heinrich Rebdorf's witticism: Why can't a king look like one's image of a king?

For the Scholastics, every visible form revealed the invisible; the created world deciphered itself. The rhythms of architecture, the proportions of the human body, the structure of society—all were in harmony, and the highest expression of that harmony was the person of the monarch. Charged with a divine mission, the royal personage was supposed to conform in appearance, gesture, and voice to the image of his office, an image recognized by all Christians. To know his rank it was enough to set eyes on him. Joan of Arc finds Charles VII in the crowded hall of Chinon. That the king's appearance should be worthy of his office was part of the natural order of things. "Majesty was evident in his face," said Poggio of old Sigismund, entering Rome for his coronation. According to Johannes Grünbeck, Frederick III, whose broad shoulders did not conceal his small size (*statura plus quam mediocri*), had worked since childhood to compose his appearance; all observers were struck by the gravity of his features and by his amiable reserve. His long face, rather squat body, shortness, and timidity were natural defects that Frederick somehow turned to his advantage, proving that a sovereign's behavior could compensate for the graces nature had denied him. More than other men, the king, a public person, constructed his own image.

In describing Emperor Maximilian, the Viennese humanist Cuspinian resorted to the scholastic metaphor of the four-square king (*statura quadrata, figura quadrata*), built like a church and resplendent with divine majesty. Vitruvius had already established an analogy between the perfection of the human body and that of architecture. Beauty and form (*forma-formosus*) were often linked in scholastic thinking about creation and, later, in the numerological speculations of the geometers



Andrea della Robbia, *Portrait of an Adolescent*, terra-cotta (above). Donatello, *Anonymous Bust*, bronze (below). These may have been members of the Medici family. (Florence, Bargello.)



Peter Parler and his team of sculptors (1375–1385), *Portrait of Emperor Charles IV*, one of twenty-one dynastic statues on the triforium of Saint Guy's Cathedral, Prague.

and artists of the Renaissance. Applied to the person of the prince, this symbolism illuminated both physical and moral qualities. Just as stained glass filtered the divine light and made it radiant, so did the gaze of Maximilian dazzle with its brilliance. Johannes Grünbeck, vanquished by the emperor's sparkling eyes, by his almost sidereal power, thus evoked the charm to which men and women alike succumbed.

An astonishing tale of seduction shows how susceptible the emperor was to the physical qualities of others. With the help of Duke Frederick of Saxony, the young Count von Zimmern used his physical appearance to win from the emperor, in 1497, the restitution of land that had once belonged to his family: "Sire Wernher, who knew how benevolent and loyal the prince-electors was, did himself up in the most elegant possible manner and, since he was a handsome man, well formed in face, body, and figure, he awaited the king's arrival along with the other counts and lords. And after supper, when the princes' dance was over, Sire Wernher put himself forward, and that was all it took for the emperor to notice him several times and to feel from his appearance a particular pleasure; and he asked Duke Frederick, who had done his utmost to remain close to the king, who this person was." Nothing could be denied to beauty.

Nevertheless, some late medieval sovereigns were so common-looking or unattractive that the portraitists refused to make a virtue of their defects and instead heaped criticism upon their heads. The embarrassment of the chroniclers at the sight of ugliness offers proof by contradiction that their more flattering portraits are truthful. Small stature was the primary complaint: "though he was small" (*etsu oarvys statyra*), said Thomas Ebendorfer of Charles IV. After meeting the sovereign, Matteo Villani painted this unflattering portrait: the king, he said, was of mediocre stature, particularly for a German, almost a hunchback, with a neck and face that thrust out ahead of his body. He had black hair, large cheekbones, protruding eyes, and a bald head. The Prague bust confirms the truth of this portrait. On this foreign observer the magic of the royal presence was apparently unavailing, and we hear details of royal behavior that do not sit well with the stereotypes of sovereign majesty: during public audiences the emperor whittled a stick with a knife without once looking at the supplicants who came before him. We sense a reticence to report attitudes that flagrantly flouted the conventions. Ebendorfer, the king's

biographer, deplores the fact that the monarch dressed in short clothes, like a pauper (*formam pauperum exprimebat*).

On the whole, the realism of the description is all the more physical when the author cannot sum up the image of royal majesty in a word. The accumulation of accurate detail takes the place of the first impression. Whenever the sense of a perfect harmony (*congruentia*) underlies the palpable reality, whenever the private person is able to assume without apparent effort the public role, then the overall tone of the royal portrait seems truer than its accumulated detail. It satisfies the spirit even if it fails to assuage all curiosity. In literature as well as painting realism was presumably reality without spirit, mere juxtaposition of details without a guiding idea.

What changed toward the end of the Middle Ages was the method of analyzing the real, the tools and the vocabulary: physicians practiced dissection, everyone took frequent confession, private correspondence was in vogue, mirrors were commonplace, oil painting had come into fashion. But multiple viewpoints, virtuosity in imitation, and anatomical accuracy alone were not enough to enable the artist to penetrate to the private individual, any more than squares of colored glass were enough to make a mosaic.

Fifteenth-century Flemish painting is fascinating not simply because of its realistic portrayal of faces and domestic scenes but because it is inspired by an idea, a symbolic vision. The spectator, who stands before the smooth surface of a portrait, is expected to discover its key, to reconstruct the individual portrayed and render up his secret.

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Late medieval painting and sculpture allow us to compare sources and verify the accuracy of descriptions. Instinctively, we tend to place greater trust in the painter than in the chronicler. Yet painting was shaped in part by social convention and the intentions of the person commissioning the work. If we use portraits as sources in the history of private life, we must ascertain the limits of their reliability. For the portrait placed the private man in the public eye; it immortalized a pose, usually depicting some prominent personage rather awkwardly decked out in his Sunday best. Late medieval Europe was awash with portraits, not least in churches and family chapels, where pictures of donors and their families threatened to drive out the Madonna and Child and all the saints. Ap-

*Donors and Heroes*



Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of Lucrezia Tornabuoni* (Frankfurt, Städtische Galerie.)

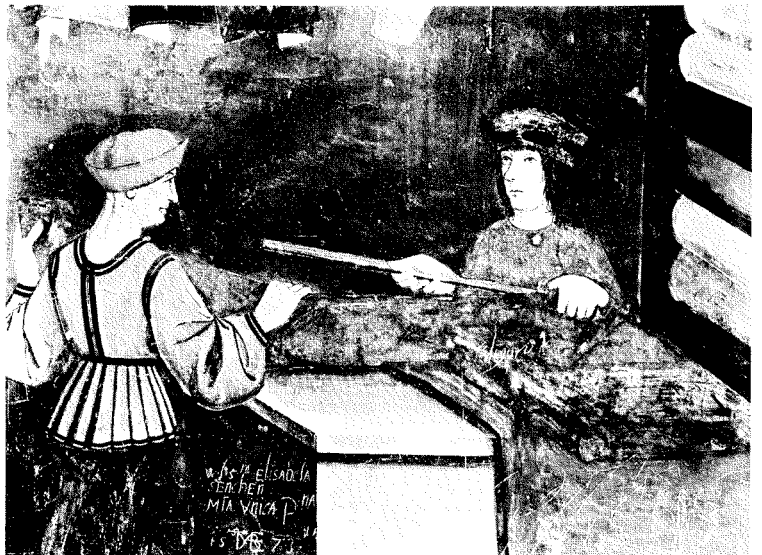
The fresco showing the draper at work draws upon the imagery of the trades. The tax collector wanted to leave behind memory of his appearance, his specialized skills, and his happy marriage. The portraits of Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Barent van Orley not only perpetuate fascinating faces but illustrate the virtuosity of Botticelli and Dürer in the representation of character. Painted in profile, with impassive features and striking dress, the wife of the Florentine banker achieves the inaccessible beauty of a goddess. The official painting of the governor of the Netherlands has the earnest grace and urbanity that Dürer believed appropriate to the genre.

*Drapers at Work*, a fresco from Issogne Castle (Val d'Aosta), 15th century.

parently there was something reassuring about being physically present in sacred surroundings. Chancellor Rolin does not seem surprised to find the Virgin posing in the studio of Saint Luke; he quite properly falls to his knees.

In the meantime, enthusiasm for things ancient led to renewed interest in the sharply chiseled profile, which, from Piero della Francesca to Uccello, emphasized and in some cases idealized the impassive features of the aristocratic hero or his lady. The spirit in which such commissions were executed, the manner adopted to immortalize a face and a name, are matters for a history of forms and fashions and perhaps, in the case of retables, for a social history of representations.

We learn more about individuals by concentrating on changes of two kinds that took place in the fifteenth centuries in the Low Countries as well as in Italy and the cities of the Empire. First, artists began to paint patrons engaged in their professional activities as goldsmiths, moneychangers, businessmen, or geometers. Although the portrait is still carefully staged, the patron's pride in personal success, coupled with the artist's excitement at developing a new genre of painting, combined to create a new illusion of realism. The likeness of a face stands out against a familiar background from which we gain valuable information about the work environment, interior decoration, and shop tools. The theme of intimate space, the room in which the humanist's thoughts take wing





Marinus van Reymerswaele,  
*The Tax Collector*.  
(Valenciennes Museum.)

above inkwell and library, was finally treated for its own sake (using, as pretext, the portrait of Saint Jerome) by Carpaccio, Dürer, and many others.

Some paintings delved even further into the interior, focusing on the family quarters rather than the shop. Study of the portraits of bourgeois notables would no doubt reveal that family pride outweighed professional pride the moment social success was achieved. No longer depicted exclusively on retables, kneeling and ordered by rank, families now formed a tranquil circle in which age, character, and individual aptitudes subtly modified the harmony that was considered an essential feature of the style. Culminating the evolution of a genre, Konrad Rehlinger of Augsburg commissioned the painter Bernhard Strigel to paint his eight living children and also to show, through an opening in the wall onto a heavenly scene, those siblings who had died young (see illustration facing the start of this section). This is a perfectly abstract scene, nothing less than an embodiment of part of the family tree.



Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Barent van Orley*, 1521.  
(Dresden, Gemäldegalerie.)

In some paintings family feeling is the main subject, to the point where all trace of ambient decor is eliminated. Francesco Sassetti, an agent of the Medici, had himself painted by Ghirlandaio, without any social affectation in his costume or pose, alone with his son Teodoro II. The child looks up con-

*Expressions and Secrets*



Two paintings by Domenico Ghirlandaio. Above, *Portrait of Francesco Sassetti and His Son Teodoro*. (New York, Jules S. Bache Collection.) Below, *Portrait of an Elderly Man with His Son*. (Paris, Louvre.)

fidently at his father, who has eyes only for the boy. The pose is as studied as a photographer's portrait might be today. There is no wink of the eye toward the spectator, and we have no way of interfering in the dialogue between father and son. In another portrait the impression of harmony (*congruentia*) between father and son is not disturbed by the realism of the veinous, warty nose, which the feeling transcends. The Franciscan air of bareness must be seen in light of the serene gravity of the will that Sassetti drafted in 1488, two years before his death. It is important to stress that this painting is the product of a commission; the intimist portrait, painted at a time when the Florentine banker was responsible for the disastrous finances of the House of Medici, assumes the character of a manifesto.

The second change that affected European painting in the fifteenth century was the advent of the front or three-quarter view in portraiture, coupled with the elimination of picturesque backgrounds; painting relied instead on sharp contrasts or velvety blacks, as everything superfluous was eliminated from the canvas, leaving only a few signs (a coat of arms or a motto) and a few mute objects (a book, a flower, or a paternoster). The subject stared out at the spectator: think of the incisive gaze in the portrait of a man by Memling that hangs in the Accademia at Venice; or the humble, gentle gaze of Van Eyck's man with a carnation; or the implacable gaze of the condottiere Antonello da Messina; or the almost wild-eyed stare of Oswolt Krel as painted by Dürer. At a time when the *ars moriendi* and *danse macabre* were drawing attention to the body's decay, to its definitive separation from the soul at death, the individual portrait reaped the benefits of a mutation in the painter's technique, which since Van Eyck had conferred previously unparalleled depth and transparency on the painted gaze. The use of oil paint and surface effects made it possible to make the pupil of the eye shine like a mirror, a luminous presence that inhabited the portrait as the soul inhabits the body. When Alberti said that painting was a "transparent window," he was complimenting a mere surface that could somehow reveal depth. Fifteenth-century portraits take us into an imaginary space, an inner space, a vertiginous space born of the encounter between the painter and his model and destined to recreate in every spectator an image of that encounter.

In a climate favorable to enigma, portraits were not innocent; they said more by saying less, adopting the rhetoric



of the unadorned. In the simplest cases an object or two was enough to reveal the secret: a missal, a pair of embroidered initials, a letter of exchange. But how can we go beyond “this small pile of foolish things”? The person who was cannot be summed up in a snapshot with accessories; the unsaid is no less important in painting than in literature.

At a somewhat higher level of artifice, concern for personal virtues and personal distinction gave rise to more subtle and exciting compositions, such as Carpaccio’s great portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, duke of Urbino, in which the hero stands out against a forest of signs. Organized like a heraldic puzzle, the picture space seems to have sprung fully armed from the thoughts and nightmares of the sweet-faced adolescent knight.

A further dimension of mystery was introduced into painting by the invention of the self-portrait. It is impossible to count the number of painters who, like master masons carving the keystone of an arch, succumbed to the temptation to leave a record of what they looked like. At first they slipped portraits of themselves into groups of worshipers in their paintings: Hans Memling stands, a curious onlooker, behind the retable of Sir John Donne, and Botticelli painted himself in the proud posture of one of the powerful men of Florence with whom he spent his time. Later, ceding to the imperious impulse to paint themselves and forgetting their patrons altogether, some painters produced solitary self-portraits. The power of the self-portrait over the spectator comes from the fact that the painter’s relation to his own image incorporates the mirror into the field of transparency; with a gaze and a few signs the self-portrait creates a novel of self.

Albrecht Dürer painted himself at least eight times. By the age of fourteen he was already peering intently into his mirror. His three self-portraits in oil are milestones in the history of introspection that bridge the divide between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The *Portrait with Holly*, which hangs in the Louvre, dates from 1493; it was painted while the artist was working in Basel, engraving the frontispiece to the *Letters* of Saint Jerome. The young man, whose elbows rest on the base of the frame (Alberti’s “transparent window”), holds in his hand the sprig of holly from which the work takes its name. The grave look and neutral background focus attention on the symbolic plant and the thoughts

### Mirrors



Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Oswolt Krel*, 1499. (Munich, Pinachotek.)



Two self-portraits by Albrecht Dürer. Left, *Portrait with Holly*, 1493. (Paris, Louvre.) Right, *Portrait*, 1498. (Madrid, Prado.)



Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500. (Munich, Pinachotek.)

it arouses. It is impossible to decide which of two possible interpretations is correct. One holds that Dürer, who would marry the following year (1494), portrayed himself holding a symbol of marital fidelity (*Männestreue*). The other is based on the fact that holly in Greek is *dypsakos*, meaning thirsty, hence that the young man of twenty-two depicted in the painting is “thirsty” for the truth. The legend, which reads *My sach di gat/als es oben schtat* (My affairs stand as the things above), is of no great help in settling the matter.

A major milestone was passed in 1498 with Dürer’s second self-portrait in oil, which hangs in the Prado. In Venice the painter had discovered not only light and color but also Mantegna and the ancient style of draftsmanship. He invented the independent landscape and the atmospheric watercolor. And since the *Apocalypse with Figures* he had achieved renown throughout Europe. Without arrogance but certain of his worth, the artist hurled down a challenge to the milieu of artisans and merchants to which he belonged: he proudly insisted that he be granted a status in society worthy of his exalted mission. From Venice in 1506 he wrote his friend

Willibald Pirckheimer: "Here I am somebody; at home I am a parasite" (*Hier bin ich her, daheim ein schmarotzer*). Hence the elegance of the pose, the insolent provocation of the attire, and the Leonardesque *veduta*, which expresses an accord between the secrets of the individual and the mysteries of nature.

The final portrait is striking for its rigorously frontal pose with raised right hand and for its air of mystical fervor. Regardless of whether it was painted in 1500 or 1518, the Munich portrait clearly accentuates the painter's resemblance to the figure of Christ. Does the painting connote an inward spiritual reform, or is it a declaration of the creative power of the artist, which emanates from the creative power of God? In either case Dürer's life henceforth glowed with the light of spirituality, as is evidenced by the fervent character of his painting and intimate writing and by the public testament that accompanied his gift to the city of Nuremberg of his last monumental work, the *Four Apostles*.

By the late Middle Ages it is easier to know people as individuals, whether they are portrayed by others or yield themselves up to our regard. Perhaps there was even a new idea afoot in Europe: an idea of individuality, by which I mean that a few groups of cultivated, high-ranking individuals showed greater awareness than their ancestors of the fragile value of their personal lives.

Making a virtue of what previously would have been considered a want of reserve, they dared to exalt whatever was singular in themselves. To that end, they developed new means of expression, which help us discover who they were. We possess public and, increasingly, private sources of information about urban society in the late Middle Ages with which we can construct snapshots of individuals as they saw themselves or were seen by their contemporaries.

Conjugal love is not surprising, but the invention of the double portrait of the married couple is: on one side husband and wife are shown in grace, with all their attractions intact, and on the other in the horrid putrefaction of death. Realism in physical description is striking for its lack of moral overtones (derived from the tradition of the clinic); it reflects both medical knowledge and a new intimacy in man's relation to his body. One of Dürer's last self-portraits shows him anxiously and without modesty staring at the image of his worn body. Disease justifies this further step toward intimacy.

### Candor



Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1512. Casting aside ornamentation and composition, Dürer pursues his investigation: the intense truthful stare peers out of the somber mirror. (Weimar, Castle Museum.)

### THE BODY CLOTHED

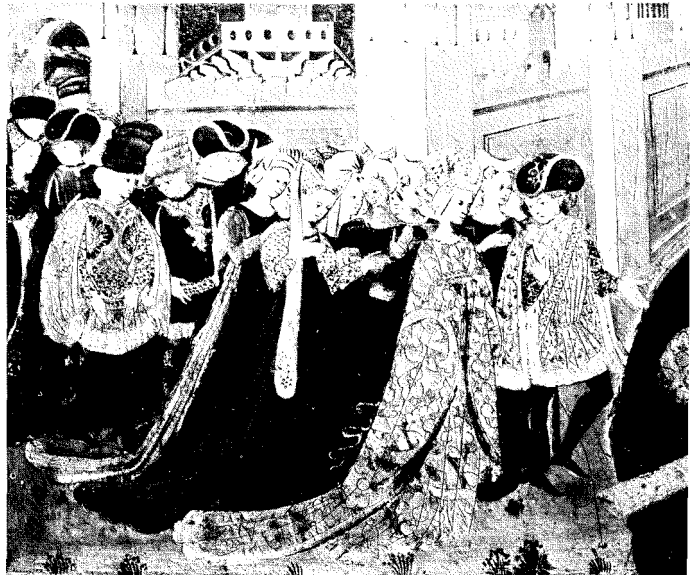
In one of Sercambi's novellas we read of a furrier of Lucca who goes to a public bath and removes all his clothing whereupon he is seized with panic at the idea of losing identity in the crowd of anonymous bodies. He there affixes a straw cross to his right shoulder and clings to a buoy. But the cross comes loose and is grabbed by a neighbor, who says, "Now I am you; begone, you are dead." The furrier, out of his wits, is convinced that he has died

#### *Customs and Society*

Black humor is a constant of all ages, as is the without qualities who can be killed by a word. The Tufale reminds us of the tenuousness of a man's professional and social identity, even in a society in which individual success was exalted in every possible way. A man sheds identity with his clothing because the social man is a man in disguise.

Sercambi was clever in choosing a furrier for his character because the wearing of fur was a mark of distinction. In ordered society the naked man is considered wild or an outcast by those who wear clothes. Nudity, moreover, brings a man closer to the natural state of the savage, who lurks in darkness and in the forests of desire. At the outer limits of fable we encounter social subversion: society was a fragile thing, re-

Painting on a wedding chest.  
(Venice, Correr Museum.)



as it did on a consensus embodied in individual appearance. One of the first disciples of Francis of Assisi, Brother Genieve, son of a fabric merchant, caused a scandal when he appeared naked in the square of Viterbo.

The societies of the late Middle Ages remained loyal to the trifunctional schema but made it more complex and less legible. Urban economic growth had created innumerable new social strata between the “workers” and the “magnates.” The richest producers were in a position to wield the sword in their own defense and felt closer to the ruling powers than to the subjugated labor force. Ambition and social mobility blurred clear-cut social distinctions. Statutes governing the hierarchy of professions in different cities did not always agree. In fourteenth-century Florence the *Arti* played a key role in defining political and social status; in Venice they played no role at all. Each city’s self-image reflected the peculiarities of its history. Some flexibility was essential to the common good and was both appreciated and exploited by the ruling groups. By the end of the fourteenth century, however, the contours of the dominant classes had become fairly fixed in most self-governing European cities.

Dress was one of the necessary social proprieties. In assemblies and processions each segment of the populace had its own assigned role and place and could be identified by the nature and color of the clothing it wore. Costume therefore became a major issue as economic change found itself impeded by the established political order. In the name of the “common good,” regulations attempted to prohibit any manifestation of private arrogance. Innumerable cities passed sumptuary laws in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As long as each individual remained in the place and rank ascribed to him by Providence, the harmony of the body social was not threatened; God, the theory went, had established an intangible order of which costume was merely the expression. So much is clear from the volume published in the mid-sixteenth century along with engravings by Jost Ammann of Augsburg of the clothing worn by people in various professions—a picturesque sociology, based on appearances.

For generations the merchant had been recognized by his bearing, the Venetian senator by his black costume, the Jew by his star, and the prostitute by her yellow dress. A late-fourteenth-century Venetian court document evokes a poor girl held in a hovel who is saved from being condemned to a



Pisanello, *Saint George*. The social man is a man in costume. (London, National Gallery.)



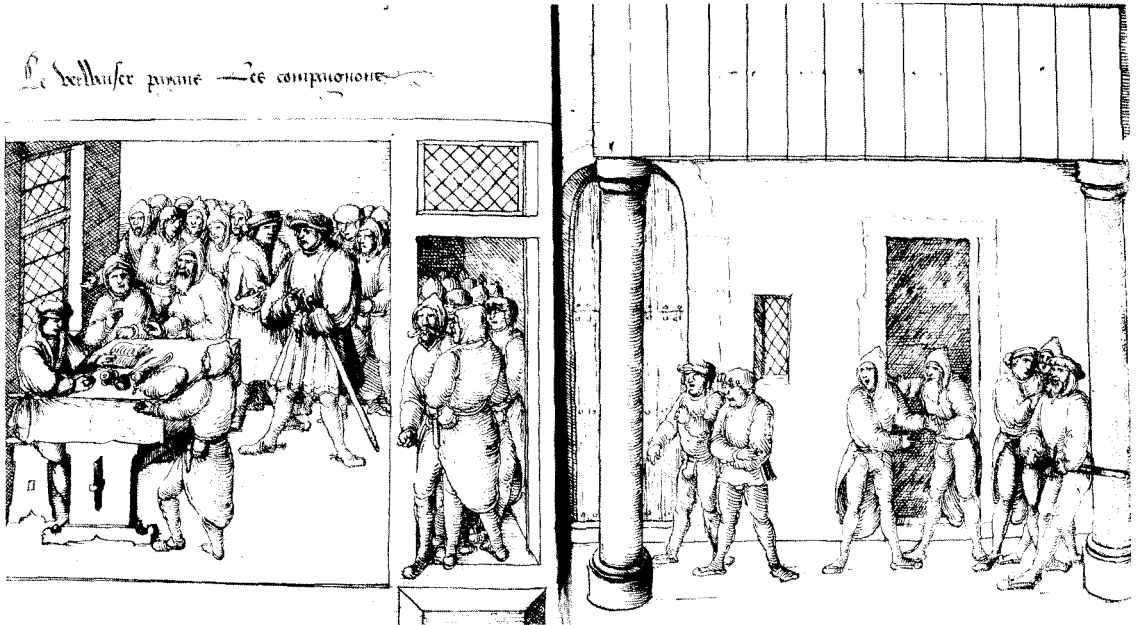
Jost Amman, engravings for *De omnibus artibus*, 1574. A portrait gallery of the various trades, with the shop as setting. The client in the spectacles shop wears clothing appropriate to his age. The maker of cuirasses and other leather goods is dressed in the style of the military men who come to call on him. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

life of prostitution because of the screams she lets out when the shameful garb of that trade is handed to her.

For both prostitutes and kings dress was little more than a sign of social function, with some variations. Was private life more than the hidden face of public appearances? Sooner or later the public man set aside his public disguise; his private life was his routine, which we glimpse only by chance. But if the poor man had only a private life, what can his clothing tell us about what it was like, since apart from holidays he wore only work clothes? Outdoor work did not lend itself to intimacy. And as for bed, both the peasant and the bourgeois slept naked.

Fortunately there is another way to look at clothing. Ignoring society's self-image as reflected in its garments, we can look directly at the contents of the wardrobe as revealed by inventories and account books. Princely wardrobes are not very informative. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between formal and everyday costumes. Here the more common items have undoubtedly disappeared, and the difference between the everyday item and the formal finery had to do less with the quality of the fabric than with the presence or absence of embroidered sleeves, pearled wimples, elaborate hairpieces, and ceremonial cloaks. But the wardrobes of the bourgeoisie and peasantry can tell us a great deal that we were unable to discern in painting or literature. The more or less worn effects of the deceased were lined up in front of the notary and succinctly described: "a pair of old shoes; two hoods, one of them old." An appraising glance quickly revealed which items were still serviceable or could be made to seem so. Private account books record not only a description of the item but also its price. With such information we can evaluate how much was spent on fabric, how much on ornament, and how much on labor, and we can trace the replacement of items as they wore out as well as estimate the proportion of the family budget spent on clothing.

Ethnographers who have studied societies in which sexual characteristics are accentuated and bodies decorated rather than covered teach us that the functional convenience of clothing is not necessarily its primary quality. Among the poor, however, items of protection against the rain and cold occupy a prominent place in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century inventories: hat and hide served their purpose.



*Peasant Costume.* Estate inventories from across Europe provide a monotonous image of the minimum peasant wardrobe. F. Piponnier has studied inventories from Burgundian villages in the second half of the fourteenth century: the basic items were a tunic, a fur-lined coat, and a hat. When one of these items was missing, it was usually because it went to pay the burial costs. There was little distinction between male and female clothing: the woman's dress was the equivalent of the man's tunic or surcoat. In Tuscany in this same period a woman's wardrobe consisted of two tunics, worn one on top of the other, and a coat. The coat was either a hide turned inside out or a corset lined with rabbit. (The wealthier peasant's coat was lined with cat fur instead of rabbit.) To complete the costume, the peasant wore a fabric hood (and men wore breeches). As for underclothing, men and women wore chemises, and men, long underpants. Undergarments were made of coarse woolen cloth, a fabric of mediocre quality but fairly warm; men's were usually natural colored or beige, women's were blue. Men's hoods were usually blue, women's, red (though sometimes blue or white). Wealth in rural society took the form of extra items of clothing and decoration, which could be obtained from itinerant merchants. (One "irregular"

Heinrich Gross, *Saint Nicholas' Mine at Croix-aux-Mines (Vosges)*, first half of the 16th century. This drawing, last of a series of twenty-five, shows the miners, dressed in work clothes with hoods and leather protectors, being paid for their services. The accountant, the judge, and the overseer stand out from the crowd of workers by their dress, bearing, and armament. (Paris, School of Fine Arts, Masson Collection.)



*The Month of July: Departure for a Hunt with Falcon* (detail). Fresco of Wenceslaus, 15th century. Plucked from the shadows by the artist is the peasant charged with making preparations for the hunt. (Trent, Good Advice Castle, Eagle Tower.)

kept five hats in her wardrobe.) Archaeological excavations at Rougiers, Dracy, and Brandes have turned up silver belt buckles and aglets, metal purse clasps, and hoods with buttons. Jewelry, apart from a few rings, is rare. Gloves created a sensation: in one fabliau a young peasant uses them as an enticement when he goes courting.

*Haves and Have-Nots.* Clothing was just as limited in the lower strata of urban society. The most systematic and sophisticated studies of clothing have focused on the slightly better-off segments of the urban population, tracing the sale of fabrics or evaluating the efficacy of sumptuary laws. In 1401 the bourgeois of Bologna were given two days to submit any gowns they possessed to a commission charged with enforcing a law regulating luxury in clothing; 210 garments were seized, and the documents that describe them permit us to judge what was considered excessive. Extreme variety of ornament was no longer tolerated: silver stars; gold fringes and chains; embroidered rays, leaves, and animals; fur collars and sleeves; bright colors that required the use of cochineal or antimony dyes; and pearls and other gemstones were prohibited. In some cases we can estimate separately the value of fabric, labor, and ornament in the price of a garment. For example, in Florence, in 1363, Simone Peruzzi gave his wife a sturdy tunic whose fabric accounted for only 30 percent of its total cost; the silver buttons, vair lining, and gold stripes cost the equivalent of one hundred and forty days of a mason's wages. Equally scandalous, assuming that the same norms apply, was the wedding gown made for a Strozzi daughter in 1447, which cost the equivalent of five hundred days of a skilled laborer's wages; a garland made of two hundred peacock tail feathers, shimmering bits of gold, and pearls, all covered with flowers and gilt leaves, cost 212 livres—one-third of the total. But at the height of their glory the Peruzzi and Strozzi were not subject to such restrictions. After all, the wardrobe of Lady Spinelli, née Gherardini, contained some twenty items valued at 500 florins in 1380, a trifle compared with the 50,000 florins left by her husband when he died—the equivalent of eight to ten years of a mason's labor.

*The Economics of Appearance.* The figures just cited give some idea of the economic dimensions of a social fact. They measure



the distance that separated the planet of the rich, about which we know a little bit, from that of the poor, about which we know even less. The significance of everyday life was different in these two worlds; in one, clothing was a work of art, in the other, an item of utility. Moreover, we cannot write the history of dress without taking account of social change. In Florence a contemporary of Dante would have invested far less in his appearance than his granddaughter would have done. Leaving aside changes in culture and attitude, the Florentine market simply did not offer the same diversity of fabrics and temptations before 1300 as it did after 1400.

Guardianship accounts from Florence from the last third of the thirteenth century reveal that the mother of the family in question dressed in gowns of inexpensive fabric, while the boys wore clothes of better-quality fabric, warm *stanfort* for winter and vermilion serge from Caen for summer. Garments were seldom replaced. In four years the mother bought only three new items—less than two complete sets of clothing.

Similar frugality is revealed in the advice contained in the *Ménagier de Paris* and in the private accounts of Venetian, Franconian, and Hanseatic bourgeois from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition to regular outlays, we read of occasional extra expenses such as marriages: the wedding ceremony, gifts, and dowries required investments in fabric, ornament, and jewelry. Lucas Rem of Augsburg carefully recorded in a special section of his *Tagebuch* the price of black cloth from Lindau along with brown velvet and gray satin, all used in his wedding suit, as well as the costs of the rubies, diamond, and sapphire that he gave his wife and the money spent on the reception.

Other expenses were incurred when a son was sent away to college or apprenticeship in a distant city. He needed clothes of good, solid material and comfortable shoes. Nothing wore out more quickly than shoes; the budget of Anton Tucher of Nuremberg from the early sixteenth century shows that new soles were needed every few months as the children grew. The commissioning of a new suit for a child of ten just starting school was an event in the life of a family, and children long remembered having to wear clothes that were too long or too short or no longer in fashion. Recollecting his past, Hans von Weinsberg of Cologne evokes the young man who left his parents' home in 1531 to go to boarding school at Emmerich: "My father had a robe made for me of gray fabric with many folds, white shorts, and high boots, and on my head someone



Vittore Carpaccio, *Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino* (detail), 1510. This is the first known Italian portrait of a man standing. This dreamy but determined young man is the nephew of Pope Julius II, whose troops he commanded in Romagna. The duke is surrounded by personal emblems and genealogical signs. The iris and the lily evoke the Virgin, whose name he bears; the leaves of the British oak or robur (*rovere*) that have sprouted behind him underscore his identity and his recapture of the duchy from Cesare Borgia. (Lugano, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.)

placed a black hat. That was what I wore as long as I remained at Emmerich, and better clothes would have been of no use to me, since the pupils there sat not on benches but on the floor. In addition, I had a few light summer garments, but eventually they became too small." Looking back, the mature adult approves his father's decision, even if the adolescent at the time gave forth a rather understandable sigh at having to dress in gray. The primary function of clothing was to keep the wearer warm. The history of everyday dress turns on this banality as well as on the careful calculation of costs and the subsequent sighs of pleasure or regret. Public dress is another story, one in which luxury, fashion, taste, and superfluity all play a role.

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### *Dress and Behavior*

Whether sumptuous or simply convenient, clothing was an intimate matter, as evidenced by the space devoted to it in the records of expenses and by the way it helped to shape the individual's self-image at the end of the Middle Ages. But we must return to the question of clothing as a sign, for it was more than simply a mark of social rank. Clothing is more than fabric and ornament; it affects behavior, determines it or shows it off. It indicates the stages of life and helps shape the personality. And it underscores the difference between the sexes.

*Ostentation.* There was little difference in dress between working men and women of the late Middle Ages. At the other extreme, the immobile silhouettes of powerful public figures were shrouded in folds of heavy fabrics lined with precious furs. In between, fashion influenced the choice of fabric and cut. Fashions became more short-lived and tyrannical owing to increased economic mobility and diminished access to privileged castes and circles at court as well as in the city. Styles became increasingly improbable. The structure of the body was revealed or emphasized by padding; the form-fitting curve was combined with folds, blouses, frills, and slashes. Nervous, violent, sophisticated fashion emphasized breasts and other features by exposing or suggesting them. Young clergymen exhibited their muscles and limbs, aiming to look like Saint George or King Arthur's knights rather than priests. It is quite possible that changes in armor, with its articulated surfaces and joints, helped disclose the structure of the male body and contributed to some of the more fantastic refinements in dress.

After the mid-fifteenth century engravings made known throughout Europe the image of the amorous youth who made of the conquest of a lady an enterprise as provocative as a military adventure.

In the presence of these arrogant fops, sure of their charms, whose images survive in portraits from Pisanello to Dürer, young women of good society maintained their reserve. For a long time the ideal woman had been slender, but the late Middle Ages preferred a fuller figure. Nevertheless, female fashion, which loosely followed the evolution of male dress, limited itself to indicating the waistline, more or less daringly baring the shoulders, and either hiding or revealing the hair and a hint of breast. Wimple, hennin, handkerchiefs, and lace stood as delicate and deceptive defenses between the public and the intimate. Seductive as a woman might be, she had best be discreet in her behavior, as recommended by La Tour Landry in his treatise on the education of young girls.

Travel often revealed truths that remained invisible at home. Petrarch, visiting Cologne in 1333, described the disturbing simplicity and freshness of a procession of women engaged in some incomprehensible rite along the banks of the Rhine: "What shapes!" he wrote from Lyons to his friend Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, "What poses! [*Que forma! quis habitus!*] Their heads garlanded with fragrant herbs, their sleeves raised above the elbow, they dipped their white hands and arms into the current, murmuring in their own language a sweet cantilena." Petrarch was surprised by such a harmonious sight "so far from civilization," that is, far from the sophisticated and perverse images current in the freer, more agile society of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, young Florentines were raised with the same concern for modesty and dignity as their contemporaries in France and the Empire, to judge by the tone of private correspondence or by the homilies of Saint Antonino, archbishop of Florence in the middle of the fifteenth century. Throughout Europe the dress and behavior of married and unmarried women were regulated by a similar sense of propriety.

*Sex and Age.* Sumptuary laws were directed primarily at ostentatious excess in female clothing, reflecting a deep-rooted misogyny on the part of medieval lawmakers as well as a patriarchal view of relations between the sexes. In 1416 Poggio described a group of young Swiss beauties whom he glimpsed



Albrecht Dürer, *A Peasant and His Wife* (above). Heinrich Aldegrever, *Couple* (below). Two couples from the human comedy: aristocrats and peasants. Although distinguished by their dress, the peasants are hardly wretched. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

near Zurich as ripe for marriage. A young girl was a form of capital, and as a matter of sound investment it was best to marry her to a man of settled age, perhaps even a graybeard. Regulations aimed at curtailing the display of luxury and the size of dowries were intended in part to restrain matrimonial competition, the stakes of which risked spiraling out of control.

The married bourgeois buried his bachelor life in his diary, throwing a somber cloak over the follies of his youth; needless to say, he would never tolerate a wife who dressed up or spoke up in private. According to Sassetti, the "perfect merchant" should have a face comely yet grave; he should dress in good taste and study his bearing and gestures. The "perfect courtier," precursor of the seventeenth-century *honnête homme*, composed his behavior with great care; clothing played an important role. As depicted by Baldassare Castiglione, who recorded dialogue in the entourage of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the man of taste combined respect for the proprieties with a carefully calculated elegance. As a means of social discrimination, clothing enabled individuals to appear in a manner befitting their age. Fashion was appropriate to youth, a period of flamboyance between the gray of childhood and the paler colors of maturity and old age.

During the years of youth and apprenticeship clothing

Perugino, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Bernardine* (detail), 1473. Note the contrast between the terrifying men at arms and the tranquil confidence of the handsome young men. (Perugia, National Gallery of Umbria.)



was a means of expressing personal feelings. The use of coded details of dress to indicate tastes, intentions, and desires was hardly an exclusive practice of the Middle Ages; following fashion has always been a way of conforming while at the same time distinguishing oneself from others. But several factors in the late Middle Ages reinforced the individual's need for distinction: the controlling power of the state, which turned free men into subjects; the gradual shutting off of access to institutions, forcing individuals to join private circles; and the continuing favor enjoyed by chivalric romance, which made King Arthur and his peers models for crowned heads from Charles VI to Charles VIII. For wellborn youths the invention of self involved an apprenticeship in ceremony and symbolism: under Charles VI personal fashions born at the court of France served as counterpoint to the increasingly strict rules of etiquette.

Groups of companions and allies identified themselves by means of distinctive insignia, signs of recognition derived from their military, political, and domestic counterparts: coats of arms, heraldic devices, and liveries. The genealogical researches of Tuscan notables were in some cases based on such indices, and the memoir of Georg von Ehingen, a mid-fifteenth-century Franconian knight, describes the patient reconstitution of his family's patrimony from various crosses, coats of arms, and escutcheons scattered across the countryside from the Main to the Danube. In the late Middle Ages signs proliferated as society formed itself into regiments. Rhenish, Hanseatic, and Saxon notables joined "clubs" or *Stuben*; young patricians in Italy joined companies like the Venetian *Calza*, which Carpaccio indicated by its costume; and people everywhere joined confraternities, which marched in procession wearing cowls and carrying candles of many different colors. Even at public games like the *Schembartlaufen* in Nuremberg and the *Palio* in Siena, crowds of people formed images of heraldic figures and performed codified rituals. Orders of lay knights were formed throughout Europe from the second quarter of the fourteenth century on. Members identified themselves by wearing a cross, ribbon, or cloak, indicating that they had freely taken a vow to observe the discipline of the order.

It became customary for princes to distribute uniform items of clothing every year, thereby both demonstrating their

### Signs and Codes



Albrecht Dürer, *Coats of Arms*.  
(Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)



Painted wooden table,  
15th century. (Paris,  
Cluny Museum.)

generosity and identifying their subjects by a standard set of insignia and colors. Books of uniforms issued by the houses of Saxony and Bavaria in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century have survived. Dukes were fond of showing off crowds of dependents wearing their insignia; they added new details to their liveries periodically to keep them up to date. The imperial tradition had bourgeois emulators: the House of Fugger distributed uniforms to all its personnel, red for marriages and black for funerals of heads of the firm.



*Apprenticeship in Dress.* If fashions in dress were a coded system, people had to learn to read the code in order to avoid gaffes and make allusions comprehensible. Two mid-fifteenth-century French texts in which training in the proper way to dress forms an essential part of a youth's education are the work of men of action, familiar with the strategy of signs: Jean de Bueil's *Le Jouvencel* and Antoine de La Sale's *Jehan de Saintré*. The latter describes a thirteen-year-old boy who is aided by a noble lady in inventing his own system of recognition. The atmosphere of the novel is one of education in the ways of courtesy and love, and the young man painstakingly constructs the public expression of his intimate feelings. When

ked about his accoutrements by the lady, the boy, Saintré, describes the coat of arms he has forged for himself: “And ere is one of black damask inlaid with silver thread, its field led with green, violet, and gray ostrich feathers in your colors, bordered by white ostrich feathers, and spotted with black feathers and ermine.”

Invention could not be totally unfettered, however, against a background so bristling with signs. One needed to acquire the necessary vocabulary and grammar: monograms, embroidered devices (of Charles of Orléans or Marguerite of Burgundy as well as figures of the second rank), heraldic emblems based on flora and fauna and even invented species, and a whole language of color, which combined the traditional symbolism of mystics and scholars with popular beliefs. When Charles VII jousted as the green knight, the court understood the chivalric allusion; Florentines knew since at least the beginning of the thirteenth century that “the man in red” meant the rich man; in placing a crown of roses on his gray head, Matthäus Schwarz may have been dreaming of Lancelot’s cap of roses; and Anne of Brittany, when she dressed in black to mourn Charles VIII, was making a political statement, for

Matthäus Schwarz, *Trachtenbuch*. Aged twenty-seven (facing page), the young financial director of the House of Fugger in Augsburg records for posterity a costume that he probably wore for a feast of some sort. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.) In 1549 Schwarz was fifty-two. He had survived a heart attack, and in reviewing the various outfits he had worn since childhood he included this picture (below) of a tired man being carried about in a wagon of his own design.



black was the customary color of mourning in Brittany, whereas in France it was white.

In short, by choosing to appear in a certain way an individual made a statement, which was then subject to interpretation. Some messages were perfectly clear and public; others were assertions of individual freedom in the face of institutional obligations; still others were private, comprehensible to only one other person or to the members of a select group—secrets, puzzles, riddles, laments of a broken heart, or the result of a wager between friends. In his *Trachtenbuch* Matthäus Schwarz depicts himself attending a ball with friends all dressed in the same way, with an hourglass attached to the calf. We shall never know the meaning of this singular gesture.

### *Fashion, Age, and Memory*

Several late medieval and early modern authors drew connections between their personal appearance and events in private or public life. Count von Zimmern recounts his dissatisfaction with his parents, who were insensitive to fashion and forced their adolescent son to dress in long robes when the fashion was for short. The chronicle of Limburg makes adverse comment on the clothes worn by the young in the 1360s. And the household chronicle of Konrad Pellikan of Ruffach records the unfavorable impression made by the outrageous dress of the lansquenets (1480).

The most novel commentary on late medieval and early Renaissance clothing is undoubtedly that in Matthäus Schwarz's *Trachtenbuch*, which consists of vignettes featuring his own costumes, with the author's remarks. He is not concerned with public dress, which, he charges, is nothing but costumes for carnival, but with clothing commissioned by him for various occasions: birthdays, marriages, holidays. Schwarz compares contemporary fashions with those of earlier generations; he was probably the first historian of clothing, with a keen eye for both change and cyclic repetition. He turns a simple catalog of clothing into a veritable chronicle of private life, tracing his own history back to his earliest memories—"as in a fog"—at age four and even beyond, back to his swaddling clothes, his "first clothing" in this world, and his mother's womb ("in which I lay hidden"). We are also shown the indoor dress of the elderly man struck down by a heart attack ("the hand of God") and forced to hobble about the house in a brown greatcoat with cane and bonnet.



Urs Graf, *Feathered Lansquenet*, 1523. The ultimate extravagance: the lansquenet has disappeared behind his plume of feathers. (Museum of Basel.)





All that is missing from this intimate portrait is the naked body, the one thing shared by the invalid in his sickbed, the anxious merchant, the shivering pauper, and the silk-clad prince. So in the middle of the book, and not without humor, Schwarz shows us his own body, “fat as I have become.”

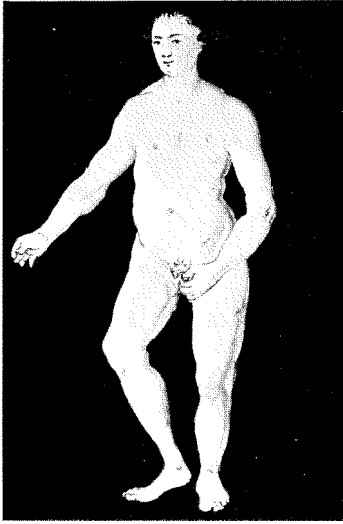
Pisanello, *Allegory of Lust*.  
(Vienna, Albertina.)

## THE NAKED BODY

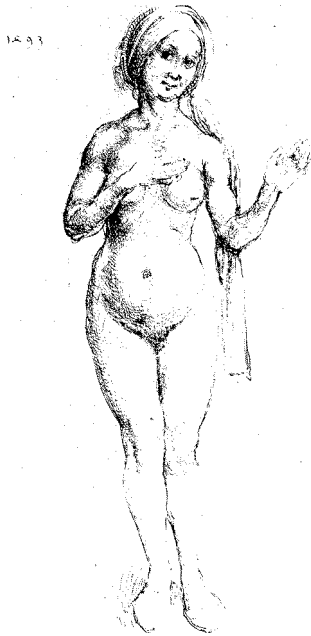
Protection or ornament, clothing was the last wrapping of social life; beyond lay the body’s smooth mysteries. Recall the furrier from Lucca in Sercambi’s tale who feared losing his identity when he removed his clothes to bathe. Centuries of Christian vigilance and moral prohibitions prevented him from recognizing himself in his naked but opaque body.

Nudity signified withdrawal from social intercourse. Even in the tympanums of cathedrals, both the elect and the damned were clothed. Female nudity as seen by Pisanello was

*Stripped Bare*



Matthäus Schwarz,  
*Trachtenbuch*. This is one of the  
earliest known portraits of a  
man posing naked. (Paris,  
Bibliothèque Nationale.)



Albrecht Dürer, *Young Woman  
Posing Naked*, 1493. (Bayonne,  
Bonnat Museum.)

lascivious, unhealthy, wild. In fiction, captive women were forced to disrobe so that the emperor could choose a wife, and naked females were shown participating in scenes of violence by torchlight. Literary representations associated male nudity with madness and savagery. The wolf-child and the deranged knight lost not only memory but also control of their gestures; they cloaked themselves in animal hides. When a savage was brought to the court of Charles VI, people saw the resulting catastrophe as punishment for the infringement of a taboo. In public executions the condemned were stripped of clothing. Pisanello's and Villon's portraits of the hanged and Andrea del Sarto's sketches of the Florentine captains executed in 1530 depict grotesque marionettes in tunics.

*Glory and Torture.* Undoubtedly these images reflect certain obsessions about the body; in all of them the condemned men are violently, scandalously, degradingly deprived of the reassuring and distinguishing protection of clothing. Other images showed nudity as an invention of Christian culture: Adam in glory and Jesus on the cross represented to the faithful the beginning and end of the history of Creation and Redemption, the splendor of the virgin body and the pain of the martyred one. In the late Middle Ages this spectacle was made flesh: in German the same word, *Fleisch*, referred to both the meat of animals and the flesh of the human body. This ambiguity is evident in the weight of humanity found in northern European painting after 1400, in the triumphant nudity of Adam and Eve and the tortured nudity of the dying Christ. Virtuoso artists infused with a morbid piety delighted in images of dead flesh. From Enguerrand Quarton's *Pietà* to the German *Vesperbilder*, Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, and Holbein's predella in the Basel Museum (in the form of a coffin for a lone cadaver), painters grimly trod the path of salvation.

But the new Adam fulfilled the promise implicit in the glorious body of the first man. In the panels of Van Eyck's *Mystical Lamb*, Adam and Eve are shown for the first time in the history of Western painting with complexion, hair, contours, and creases suggesting that they are creatures of flesh and blood. At Venice, in Rizzo's sculpture, they tremble in their exemplary nudity. Painted or engraved by Dürer, they embody all the elegance that the rediscovery of Antiquity lent to their graceful gestures. These tranquil and noble images domesticated the youthful body and expressed the beauty of a world in which man became the measure of all things.

The first study of a nude posing for a painter is perhaps Dürer's drawing of a standing young woman, dated 1493. She has removed her dress but still wears the slippers which protect her feet from the cold tiles while she poses. This detail of private life gives additional force to a study of a body exposed without pretext or ulterior motive to a gaze that examines it as it might examine a flower or a piece of fruit. Obviously quite a distance has been traveled since the metaphysical Eve of Autun, which has left no trace of its gestation. The young German woman of 1493 is one of many possible fifteenth-century portraits of Eve and cannot be taken for its model.



Pisanello, *Hanged Men*.  
(London, Oppenheimer Collection.)



Domestic altar, 15th century.  
This retable was small enough  
to be used in a bedroom.  
(Paris, Cluny Museum.)

### Natural Functions

Although health is a crucial factor in an individual's private life, we must rely on statistics to understand it. The iconographic documentation becomes far richer and more reliable after about 1470, hence it makes sense to analyze portraits from that period statistically to see what can be determined about physical health. On the evidence of painting one would no doubt conclude that urban notables were a well-fed lot, but various details might well reveal complexions and afflictions useful for understanding the physiological history of this social group. At the very least a classification of different temperaments should prove useful, since, according to the *Calendrier des bergers*, character is revealed in the face. The complexion, believed to be the result of various internal decoctions, was such an essential element in medieval perception of a person's identity that fictional heroines simply painted their faces when they wanted to pass unnoticed. Beneath the skin, beyond the complexion, lay the skeleton. Bones too are a clue to health. How big were tombstones and graves, to say nothing of suits of armor, collections of which are scattered

Jörg Breu the Elder, *Inn*. Some guests stuff themselves, others play backgammon, while another warms himself at the tiled fireplace. (Paris, School of Fine Arts.)



all over Europe and do not give the impression that jousters of the Middle Ages were of small size? In recent years systematic exploration of village cemeteries has added to our knowledge of the largest segment of the late medieval population: the peasantry. Peasants, who lacked the leisure to reflect on temperament, no doubt had dark, weathered complexions, just as the literary texts describe them. The few portraits that represent them as persons rather than stereotypes suggest the health and vigor of the model: for instance, the smiling Slovene woman who posed for Dürer or the bearded man with sheepskin cap who was painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

Studies of skeletal remains, such as those conducted at Saint-Jean-le-Froid by F. Piponnier and R. Bucaille, have led to exciting new conclusions about the physical constitution, diet, and even blood types of rural populations. Unlike miners who suffered from lead poisoning and skeletal deformations as a result of working conditions (as in the village of Brandes in Oisans), Burgundy peasants show unmistakable signs of good health: well built, they had excellent teeth, and their bones show no signs of chronic disease. The results of such pioneering research cannot be extended automatically to all of Europe. Nevertheless, archaeological findings appear to confirm the veracity of the portrait of the peasant found in the fabliaux or the novellas of Sercambi or in miniatures like those contained in the *Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*. In the prime of life, peasants had the same innocent, raw vitality that Le Roy Ladurie noted in the population of Montaillou. They ate, drank, and made love with much gusto.

*Nourishment.* The healthy body was undoubtedly better nourished in the late Middle Ages than in earlier times. The survivors of the Black Plague and their descendants enjoyed improved living conditions, in certain regions at any rate, to judge by such indices as increased grain yield, increased consumption of meat in the cities, and a considerable increase in the consumption of wine and beer from Gascony to the Baltic and central Europe in the thirteenth to sixteenth century. Other signs, such as the real wages paid to construction workers, the meals fed to hospital patients, and the diet of the typical citizen of Arles in the fifteenth century (studied by L. Stouff), give the impression that budgets were less tight than before and that people paid more attention to the nutritional value of food.



Lucas Cranach the Elder,  
*Portrait of a Peasant.* (London,  
British Museum.)

Of course this overall impression should not be allowed to obscure the steady stream of vagabonds from fallow farm land to overpopulated cities, the innumerable victims of armed raids and guerrilla warfare, and the lack of resistance of even the best-nourished to epidemic disease. For many people good food remained an intermittent reality, and usually there was little to savor but odors and scents emanating from the kitchens of the rich. People imagined never-never lands in which everything was edible. Rabelaisian feasting belonged to a tradition of celebration in which the entire society shared, but only occasionally. Whether at home or in public inns, eating and drinking were normally done in company: indeed, drinking from a common flagon required a whole ritual of etiquette to determine who would drink first.

*Evacuation.* Bodily functions other than eating and drinking were treated with greater discretion. Even the relatively abundant documentation for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has little to say about evacuation, apart from a few hints contained in texts on medicine and surgery, whose authors as M.-C. Pouchelle has shown, were regarded by contemporaries as little better than sewer-cleaners and butchers. The surgeon Henri de Mondeville, author of the first French treatise on the body's inner organs and embalmer of Philip the Fair and Louis X (the Headstrong), did examine the body's less noble parts, those situated below the diaphragm where as the nutritive humors were cooked, waste accumulated before being purged.

Municipal governments in the late Middle Ages faced enormous problems of waste disposal. Commissions of leading citizens and master architects deliberated on the question which was no more than the public form of a problem faced by every individual and family. For privacy in evacuation every home needed privies, readily accessible outhouses and latrines. Castles and walled cities had public latrines that emptied into moats and ditches. (Such latrines are still extant in the guardroom of Ghent Castle.) In the fifteenth century in the city of Nuremberg, open sewers behind every house ran perpendicular to the river; when waste matter accumulated because the river was low, it had to be carted outside the wall and disposed of. From the records of repairs made to the castles of the dukes of Burgundy and lawsuits in the neighborhood of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris we learn about some c

the issues involved in the provision of bathroom facilities. In 1506 Dürer carefully indicated the privies on every floor in a plan he drew of the house he stayed in.

One circumstance in which modesty suffered as a result of enforced promiscuity was the long voyage by galley taken by pilgrims to Jerusalem. Men and women of all orders had no choice but to witness one another in the most intimate postures. The Dominican Felix Faber of Ulm, who traveled to the Holy Land in 1480 and again in 1483, prepared a rather crudely realistic text for the edification of subsequent travelers. After returning to his cell in a Swabian convent, he recounted his adventures and offered some advice:

“As the poet says, ‘A ripe turd is an unbearable burden’ [*ut dicitur metricè: maturum stercus est importabile pondus*]. A few words on the manner of urinating and shitting on a boat.

“Each pilgrim has near his bed a urinal—a vessel of terracotta, a small bottle—into which he urinates and vomits. But since the quarters are cramped for the number of people, and dark besides, and since there is much coming and going, it is seldom that these vessels are not overturned before dawn. Quite regularly in fact, driven by a pressing urge that obliges him to get up, some clumsy fellow will knock over five or six urinals in passing, giving rise to an intolerable stench.

“In the morning, when the pilgrims get up and their stomachs ask for grace, they climb the bridge and head for the prow, where on either side of the spit privies have been provided. Sometimes as many as thirteen people or more will line up for a turn at the seat, and when someone takes too long it is not embarrassment but irritation that is expressed [*nec est ibi verecundia sed potius iracundia*]. I would compare the wait to that which people must endure when they confess during Lent, when they are forced to stand and become irritated at the interminable confessions and await their turn in a foul mood.

“At night, it is a difficult business to approach the privies owing to the huge number of people lying or sleeping on the decks from one end of the galley to the other. Anyone who wants to go must climb over more than forty people, stepping on them as he goes; with every step he risks kicking a fellow passenger or falling on top of a sleeping body. If he bumps into someone along the way, insults fly. Those without fear or vertigo can climb up to the prow along the ship’s gunwales, pushing themselves along from rope to rope, which I often

did despite the risk and the danger. By climbing out the hatches to the oars, one can slide along in a sitting position from oar to oar, but this is not for the faint of heart, for straddling the oars is dangerous, and even the sailors do not like it.

“But the difficulties become really serious in bad weather, when the privies are constantly inundated by waves and the oars are shipped and laid across the benches. To go to the seat in the middle of a storm is thus to risk being completely soaked, so that many passengers remove their clothing and go stark naked. But in this, modesty [*verecundia*] suffers greatly, which only stirs the shameful [*verecunda*] parts even more. Those who do not wish to be seen this way go squat in other places, which they soil, causing tempers to flare and fights to break out, discrediting even honorable people. Some even fill their vessels near their beds, which is disgusting and poisons the neighbors and can be tolerated only in invalids, who cannot be blamed: a few words are not enough to recount what I was forced to endure on account of a sick bedmate.

“The pilgrim must be careful not to hold back on account of false modesty and not relieve the stomach; to do so is most harmful to the traveler. At sea it is easy to become constipated. Here is good advice for the pilgrim: go to the privies three or four times every day, even when there is no natural urge, in order to promote evacuation by discreet efforts; and do not lose hope if nothing comes on the third or fourth try. Go often, loosen your belt, untie all the knots of your clothes over chest and stomach, and evacuation will occur even if your intestines are filled with stones. This advice was given me by an old sailor once when I had been terribly constipated for several days. At sea, moreover, it is not safe to use pills or suppositories [*pilulas aut suppositoria accipere*], because to purge oneself too much can cause worse trouble than constipation.”

This text, based on personal experience, marks an important step in the description of intimate bodily functions. With wordplay, irreverent comparison, and reasoned analysis of specimen cases worthy of a *Kriegsspiel*, the robustly healthy Friar Felix, a man with an obvious zest for the pen, has left a well-turned essay on a delicate subject. Incidentally, his mention of suppositories is worth noting, as is the teaching of hygienic practices by word of mouth, in this case from man to man. The author even excuses man's uncontrollable re-



sponse to the sight of other men's sexual parts. Three centuries earlier, Guibert of Nogent had written that such responses revealed wicked thoughts, but Felix knows better: sight sets in motion a complex physiological mechanism—all bodily responses stem from the mind.

"Felix conjunctio!" (happy coupling) the *Carmina burana* exclaims. From the record of physical desire inscribed on parchment by the monks of Ottobeuren to the love songs of the Renaissance runs a tradition of physical pleasure that flourished in the late Middle Ages, less reserved than in preceding centuries. But how closely did the song resemble the act?

Though private by nature, sexual intercourse, the act upon which every family was founded, was surrounded by a series of public rituals. Newlyweds climbed into bed before the eyes of family and friends and the next day exhibited the sheets as proof that the marriage had been consummated. Yet the bride was not exposed to public view, nor was the act of possession or the pleasure it aroused. The sexual act, first or last, legitimate or furtive, demanded darkness and privacy. Propriety required that texts concerning powerful personages avoid mention of anything that might resemble the prelimi-

### Making Love



Michelangelo, *The Abduction of Ganymede*. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

*The Fables of Bidpai*, 15th century. (Chantilly, Condé Museum.)



naries to physical love. A few images have survived: of King Louis the Bavarian, for example, alone in his palace but for the necessary servants and wholly preoccupied with the preparations for receiving into his bed his second wife, Marguerite of Holland, with whom he was very much taken.

As for intercourse itself, the only permissible images were monstrous or fabulous. We see demons possess their victim, who seems to have strayed into a bestiary. Leda is vexed by her swan, Ganymede oddly troubled by Michelangelo's eagle. Between demonology and fable lies the common act of love-making, which we are never shown.

With some imagination, however, we can reconstruct what sexual behavior must have been like from conversations between lovers, descriptions of various gestures, laws, and trials in which aberrations were named, judged, and condemned. But can we really reconstruct normal sex from special cases and general rules? Saint Antonino of Florence urged mothers to bring their daughters to church, where in his sermons he lectured them about unnatural practices that they might otherwise unwittingly perform as married women; we are struck not only by the astonishing public discussion of sodomy but also by the apparent prevalence of the practice. But did the saintly archbishop launch his public appeal after hearing just a few disturbing confessions or because so many of his flock made similar revelations that he became alarmed?

In depositions made under oath, like those that have revealed so much about the parishioners of Montailou and their curate, the sexual act is treated as an elementary need of men, who one way or another find themselves a partner. Violence often plays a part; the castellan of Montailou resorts to it out of desire for the curate's cousin. Sometimes the situation is reversed. The vicar Barthélemy Amilhac reports the following conversation: "She said to me, 'Come see me tonight,' to which I responded, 'What do you want?' And she said to me, 'I love you. I want to sleep with you.' And I said, 'All right.'" *Sancta simplicitas*. In Montailou pleasure guaranteed the innocence of an affair, especially when an ambitious young man lusted after an "ill-wed" woman, that is, a woman married to a much older man. This was a favorite theme of literature in the *langue d'oc*, a good example of which is the thirteenth-century romance *Flamenca*.

The same breathless haste is evident in court documents, in which we read of violence done to helpless bodies and pleasure wrested by force. All too often, however, the partners are not equals: decent women are misled; little boys and girls fall victim to madmen. One day in 1412, while their tutor tarried over a chess game in a Venetian tavern a minute from their home, the two sons of Amado di Amadi, a wealthy silk merchant, were lured into the back room of their father's shop and raped. Severely punished in adults, homosexuality may not have been an exclusively urban phenomenon, as Jacques Fournier apparently believed when he carried out his investigation of Cathars in southern France; it seems to have flourished in all social classes but among youths of a particular age. Indiscriminate sharing of beds had inevitable consequences:

Arnaud de Verniolles, who figures in the events of Montailou, was initiated at Pamiers at age twelve by a roommate. The custom of segregating boys between the ages of ten and fifteen probably suffices to explain the frequency of more or less serious sexual play among male companions. About the behavior of young girls we have even less information than about boys. Misogynist writers were suspicious of the gynaeceum: "Women speak in an ugly way among themselves," wrote Jean Dupin in 1340. And the *Roman de la Rose* shows young damsels bathing together. In aristocratic painting of the early sixteenth century we see female friends dressing and exchanging quite sensual caresses with all the immodesty of goddesses.

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### Care of the Body

The body was freer in the late Middle Ages than it had been previously, in representation if not in real life; it was also the object of more attentive care. Various strands of knowledge and sensibility converged in a practical morality, whose purpose was to maintain the body's mechanism in the best possible condition. To be sure, new forms of devotion that developed in the fourteenth century borrowed from the ascetic tradition the need to put the body in its place. Extreme holiness implies neglect of mortal flesh, and the penitential movement trained flagellants in the mortification and humiliation of the body.

Nevertheless, the majority of the faithful were exhorted to imitate Christ, who was not a hermit, after all, but a man of the people. Saint Antonino and Geilber von Kaisersberg railed not against the body but against the excess of attention to the body that distracted people from the essential life of the spirit. In this respect their preaching did not contradict the New Aristotle, who sought to understand bodily functions better in order to help individuals achieve equilibrium: medicine and morality, together and inseparable, promoted the idea of moderation. This was the central concept of Konrad von Megenberg's great treatise, *Das Buch der Natur* (1349), which recommended a life of the flesh perfectly compatible with a spiritual inwardness. Diet, exercise, fresh air, frequent baths: *mens sana in corpore sano*. The preachers had nothing against the physical exploits of knights in tournament, which took nothing away from the spiritual achievements of the athletes of Christ, in principle all the faithful. Saint George and Saint Michael were fervently admired throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages.

*Recipes for Living.* People copied recipes for healthy living into family record books between accounts and prayers or bound them together in pamphlets. These compendiums of knowledge and experience contained some pompous and obscure nonsense along with traditional remedies and homely medications juxtaposed with the teachings of academic physicians employed by princes and municipalities. In the fifteenth century, for example, advice on childrearing was widely available. A 1495 treatise by Dr. Bartholomeus Metlinger of Augsburg contained lengthy discussions of breast-feeding and weaning, teething, cradles, fresh air, diet, and the child's first steps.

There was also plenty of advice about prophylactic measures such as fumigation, amber necklaces, and Venetian treacle, which was supposed to cure anything. Signs of preventive vigilance are apparent everywhere in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For travelers, precautions against foreign climes were advisable to reduce the risk of infectious germs or sudden attacks of pestilence. Treatises prepared for Venetian ambassadors described conditions on the roads of central Europe and the precautions to be taken while riding or stopping at inns.

Princes and collectors like the Nuremberg physician Hartmann Schedel amassed collections of medical treatises in which ancient science was combined with other sources of knowledge: information about precious stones, anatomy, the stars, the pharmacopoeia, and various propitiatory potions. For the human body was a vast subject, involving matters ranging from alembication to the zodiac. Various formulas were said to protect against sudden illness when used as directed. Someone in the entourage of Emperor Maximilian compiled an anthology of formulas *contra pestilenciam*, supposed to prevent disease: "No instance is known of death by poisoning or serious attack by pestilence among those who have drunk this *aqua vita* every morning and night. Whoever adopts this habit will eliminate any poison that might attack him." People actively sought immunity from disease.

*Illness Lurks Abroad.* But the enemy was formidable, and while the doctors analyzed the symptoms, contagion did its work. When a person was stricken, it was essential that he rally his strength in order to put his worldly affairs in order and prevent the demon from gaining a victory. Private life ended in a public battle in which supernatural forces played a prominent

role. Codicils to wills were taken down in feverish haste, and final letters were written to close relatives if death came far from home. Even the most robust died quickly; there was nothing to be done. Accounts of the final moments, while the body still sustains the life of the spirit, are particularly moving. A few examples will help us to imagine the deaths of private individuals.

In 1478 a pestilence overtook Venice. Heinrich von den Chaldenherbergen, an important northern merchant, realized that he was done for. Bedridden in a room in the Fondaco, the German section of the city, he summoned his business associates for help in bringing order to his complex affairs, which had changed considerably since he drafted a will in Rome in 1476. We have the following account:

“I, Heinrich Kufuss of Antwerp, attest upon my soul and conscience that Heinrich von den Chaldenherbergen, agent of Sir Andolph von Burg, asked me to come to his room. I went and saw that he was very ill. And said Heinrich asked me to go to the Soranzo Bank and have a bill drawn to the credit of Sire Piero Grimani, which I did in his name. I further told him that he ought to confess and prepare his will and continue to live as a Christian, and that he would not on that account die more quickly. And he answered that it would indeed be

Benedetto San Moro, *The Romance of Troy and Other Stories*. Venetian manuscript, 15th century. Physician administering treatment. (Venice, Marcienne Library.)



good for him to do so and that he wanted to do it. And I answered him and said: 'When you were in Rome around two years ago, to my knowledge you made a will and dispositions,' and I said to him: 'Do you want the will that you made in Rome to stand?' And I said: 'Who are your executors?' And he answered that there was indeed a will, but for the rest he was no longer sure."

That same year a noble lady, Anna von Zimmern, fell ill, collapsed, wrote her will, and died:

"While she was holding a bunch of grapes in her hand without paying particular attention, a tiny yellow worm, similar to a small earthworm, emerged from the fruit, climbed up her little finger—the one called the 'gold finger'—of her left hand, rolled itself up, and attached itself to the skin. When she noticed it, she called Sixt von Hausen to remove the worm from her finger. But shortly thereafter she felt ill, left the table, and was carried to bed by the young women and others of the company. On her orders someone was sent in all haste to Zurich, not more than a German mile away, to find a doctor.

"Whereupon she hastily set about writing her son, Sire Johann Wernher, and his wife a missive, the content of which was as follows: 'My maternal affection and my fondest regards, dearest son and daughter: A tiny worm that came from a bunch of grapes has contaminated one of my fingers, and my condition has worsened to the point where I am now bedridden, quite ill, and very weak, just barely able to write to make this request. Dearest children, do not fail to send a messenger without delay to let me know how my beloved children are doing, the little ones, for I miss you all terribly, both them and you. But do not be alarmed, and above all give me news of the little ones. Done at Baden, on the night of the Nativity of Our Lady 1478.'

"I cannot prevent myself from inserting here a second letter, the content of which was as follows: 'Dearest son, my condition has worsened to the point where I no longer have much hope but to commend myself to Almighty God. I am now prisoner of His will, and He will treat me according to His divine wish. All the sacraments were performed in a Christian manner in great haste prior to this night, for I do not know how things will stand with me tomorrow. Therefore do not abandon your occupations, but send me immediately my letter of indulgence, so that I may have it with me.



John Ardenne of Nawark.  
*De arte phisicali et de cirurgia.*  
 English manuscript, 1412.  
 A sick woman. (Stockholm,  
 Royal Library.)

Do me this favor, and as long as I am alive and after my death show me all the affection of which you are capable. Dearest son, the letter of indulgence is in the armoire, the keys to which are in the drawer. Dictated on the day of the Nativity of Our Lady, in the year 1478.' But before this letter reached Mösskirch, she was dead."

In one of two surviving fragments of his diary for 1503, Dürer recounts the suffering and death first of his father, then of his mother. Awakened too late to help his father, who broke out in a terrible sweat before expiring, the artist recalled his mother's terrible agony: "She experienced a cruel death, and I saw that she was staring at something frightful to behold. She yielded up her soul in great pain." Her agony prefigured Dürer's own, as his body failed him. He was well aware that his disease was incurable, for in the painting of himself naked, he points to a spot on his failing body, and the inscription reads: "That is where I hurt" (*Do ist mir weh*).

If the final agony is always a lonely battle, the public personage owed it to himself and to those around him to set an example of impassive dignity. Margaret of Austria wrote to her dear nephew Emperor Charles V the following letter, which places a seal upon her life as though it were an official act:

"Malines, the last day of November, 1530.

"To Charles V.

"My Lord,

"The hour has come when I can no longer write you in my own hand, for I feel so ill that I believe I have but a short time left to live. Tranquil in my thoughts and resolved to accept whatever God gives me, without pain other than that of being deprived of your presence, of not seeing you or being able to speak to you before my demise, I feel that I must make up for the words I cannot speak with this letter, which I fear will be the last you will receive from me.

"I have made you my residuary legatee, and I leave you your Estates, which during your absence I not only preserved as they were when you entrusted them to me prior to your departure but also augmented considerably; I return to you dominion over them in such wise that I believe I have deserved not only your satisfaction, My Lord, but also the gratitude of your subjects and the reward of Heaven. Above all things, peace is what I recommend to you, and I beg you, My Lord, in the name of the love that you shall bestow upon this poor



body, to keep also the memory of my soul. I commend to your grace my poor servants and maids, and address you a final salutation, begging God that he may offer you, My Lord, happiness and long life.

“Your very devoted Aunt Margaret”

Youth was exalted for its very vulnerability. Giuliano de' Medici's blond good looks rallied the citizens of Florence in the festival glorifying the city's renewal. Old age, Petrarch explained in a letter to Guido Sette, was the physical equivalent of a shipwreck, unworthy of much attention. Geiler von Kaisersberg ridiculed from the pulpit the wrinkled old woman of Strasbourg who went for a facelift (*ausputzen*) and emerged uglier than ever. There was a suitable age for beautifying oneself; youth, with nothing to restore, could be forgiven for wanting to flaunt its natural qualities, as long as it remained within reason. Cosmetic care was believed to have therapeutic virtues, and chapters on the maintenance of beauty adorn the most austere medical treatises.

*Parasites.* Cleanliness was important, but before the body could be cleaned it had to be rid of parasites. To remove lice, a person turned to the people he or she loved. In Montaillou the chore was performed in the sunlight, on rooftops or doorsteps, by wives and mistresses. Pierre Clergue chatted with *l'éatrice de Planissoles* as she combed him for lice. Or consider once more that extraordinary microcosm, the galley of pilgrims. Friar Felix Faber is, as usual, most informative. Parasites, he says, will flourish unless one takes precautions. “On board, too many people travel without a change of clothing; they live in sweat and foul odors, in which vermin thrive, not only in clothing but also in beards and hair. Therefore the pilgrim must not be lax; he must cleanse himself daily. A person who has not a single louse right now can have thousands an hour from now if he has the slightest contact with an infested pilgrim or sailor. Take care of the beard and hair every day, for if the lice proliferate you will be obliged to shave your beard and thus lose your dignity, for it is scandalous not to wear a beard at sea. On the other hand, it is pointless to keep a long head of hair, as do some nobles unwilling to make the sacrifice. I have seen them so covered with lice that they gave them to all their friends and troubled all their neigh-

### Purification



Sebastian Brant, *Stultifera navis Parisiis* (Ship of Fools), 1498. A man turns to the woman he loves to remove his lice. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

Jost Amman, 1574. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)



M. Albir, *Tractatus de pestilentia*, 15th century. In the 16th century the barber and the master of the baths numbered among health professionals. The barber washed his clients' heads, cut their hair and beard, and prepared plasters and dressings. The master of the bath applied bleeding cups, massaged his patients, and treated their sprains. A century earlier the boundary between the two professions was even less clearly defined. Pleasure, grooming, and health care were intertwined. (Prague, National Library of the University.)



bors. A pilgrim should not be ashamed to ask others to scour his beard for lice."

Filth, which carried with it epidemic disease, somehow had to be eliminated; on this point common sense and the general interest were in accord. Caring for the body not only preserved health but was also a pleasure. Heroes and heroines with fine hair and white or rosy complexions spent a good deal of time on their toilettes. Men and women of the late Middle Ages washed and had themselves massaged more frequently than their offspring, or so it seems, to judge by the abundance of sources dealing with the beautification and care of the body.



Johannes de Cuba, *Hortus sanitatis*, 1491. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

*Beautification.* For men beauty care was limited to athletic exertions followed by ablutions and massage; the comb and scissors served head and beard according to the canons of fashion, which, to judge by surviving portraits, changed as often as fashions in clothing. These attentions, coupled with various lotions for the body, were all that virility would tolerate. Ovid, who remained the fifteenth century's arbiter of elegance, had long ago pointed out that men's bodies do not require much attention; the curled dandies of Venice and Florence, Bruges and Paris, carried things too far. Women took greater pains to make themselves seductive. Since Hippocrates insisted that a good physician should be able to answer any question about the body, treatises on surgery included various methods of beautification, including cosmetics, depilatories, breast creams, hair dyes, and even pommades compounded of ground glass, astringents, and dyes that enabled a woman to simulate virginity.

Thus, far from the world of sturdy peasant women depicted in the *Très riches heures*, from the spinners and spoolers of the fabric-making towns, from the Vosges mines of Heinrich Gross and the Bohemian mines of Mathias Illuminator, where women were employed as washers and sorters—far from such places an artificial ideal of womanhood took shape in spite of criticism from the Church. This ideal was embodied in the pale complexion and plucked eyebrows of Agnès Sorel as she dared to pose, bare-breasted, for a portrait of the Virgin with Child, or, later, at the time of the Peasants' War, in the stonishing doll-like girl painted by Baldung Grien, pasty white beneath her large black hat.

Long hair connoted mourning, and in a mood of black

melancholy Charles the Bold allowed his nails to grow unchecked. Normally, however, people sought to restrain and curtail nature's exuberance. A construct of culture, a woman had to be smooth in order to be agreeable. Medical treatises explained that hair was the condensation of crude vapors and that excess feminine moisture which did not flow naturally was transformed into moss that should be trimmed. To remove hair women used strips of fabric dipped in pitch or destroyed hair follicles with hot needles; powerful depilatories were also used. In a mystery play critical of Parisian debauchery, Mary Magdalene has the following dialogue with her faithful servant Pasiphaë:

Here are rich ointments to keep your skin  
beautiful and fresh.

“Do I shine enough as I am?” the beauty responds  
after a second or two.

More brilliant than a picture.



Pisanello, *Young Man Undressing*. (Paris, Louvre, Rothschild Collection.)

*Bathing.* Clean, smooth, brilliant skin was the result of repeated baths and much diligent care, capped by the application of creams. By the late Middle Ages monastic moralists had ceased to warn about the dangers of bathing. Bathing and steaming were so widespread at all levels of society that it no longer seemed appropriate to question the practice of washing the body frequently from head to toe. As we saw, the Dominican Felix Faber enthusiastically approved of bodily cleanliness and stressed the importance of regular changes of body linen. In the minds of many people frequent washing may have assumed the same spiritual value as frequent confession.

There were two ways of bathing: in bathtub or steam room, alone or with others. Baths at home were prepared in the bedroom, near the fire which was used to heat the water. Providing a bath for one's guests was one of the first duties of hospitality. When Lord Barnabà Visconti in Pietro Azaric's tale keeps the promises he has made, incognito, to the peasant who helps him find his way, he offers him first a hot bath and then the most sumptuous bed the poor wretch has ever laid eyes on.

The wealthy bourgeois typically disrobed and bathed at home, in private. In the home of Anton Tucher of Nuremberg (ca. 1500), the master of the house undressed in a small room off his bedroom, where a tub was placed next to a brazen cauldron on a tiled floor covered with wooden latticework.



G. D. Platzi, *The Witch*, 16th century. Whatever the theme of this painting may be, the mirror, basins, fountain, and flowers strewn about the floor suggest that this young woman in sandals had plenty of time to attend to her body. (Museum of Leipzig.)

Fragrant herbs were allowed to steep in the bath water. Galen recommended strewing rose petals over the bather: "So many were heaped upon me," recounts the hero of an Austrian courtly epic composed in the late thirteenth century by Ulrich von Lichtenstein, "that it was impossible to see the bath water."

In the country bathing was no less common than in the city, to judge by the fabliaux. Either inside the house or out, the bather crouched in a tub of hot water underneath a cover of taut fabric that kept in the steam. Sometimes two or more people bathed together in rituals of hospitality or sociability:



Woman in a Tub. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

for example, the bath after the grape harvest, or the baths that bride and groom took separately on the eve of the wedding, he with the friends of his youth, she with hers.

Both rural and urban areas contained public baths, sometimes administered by the community. Some were for therapeutic purposes as well as washing; the ancient tradition of bathing in hot springs survived in places noted for their healing virtues. In the fifteenth century thermal cures became fashionable, for example, at Bad Teinach in the Black Forest, where the *Wildbad* (or wild bath, meaning natural spring) attracted Duke William of Saxony accompanied by his physician in 1476, or at Hall in the Tyrol, where Ambassador Agostino Patrizi, on his way to Ratisbon in 1471, paused to describe the sophisticated installations.

Watery pleasures were widely shared in the late Middle Ages. North of the Alps the steam bath had long been in wide use. *De ornatu*, an Italian treatise on female beauty care, indicates that the *stuphis*, the steam bath, is a German invention (*sic faciunt mulieres ultramontaneae*). The sauna, one of the earliest descriptions of which is found in the writings of the geographer and diplomat Ibrahim ben Yacub, who visited Saxony and Bohemia in 973, was very common in Slavic and Germanic regions. In most villages the steam bath operated several days a week; its location was marked by a sign depicting a bundle of leafy branches.

A late-thirteenth-century epic poem attributed to Siegrid Helbling describes with a wealth of detail all the phases of a steam bath shared by a knight, his valet, and various others. No sooner had the master of the bath sounded his trumpet than people flocked in, barefoot and beltless, carrying chemises or robes folded over their arms. They lay down on wooden benches in thick mists of steam that rose from heated stones upon which water was sprinkled regularly; the back, arms, and legs were kneaded by masseuses, and sweat was made to flow by flagellating the skin with branches. The body was rubbed with ashes and soap. Then a barber trimmed the hair and beard. Finally, the bathers donned their robes and went to rest in an adjoining room.

This description accords well with the illustrations in the Bible of King Wenceslaus of Bohemia and in the *Shepherds' Calendar* for 1491. The bath and steam room were places of relaxation, where people went not only to cleanse their bodies but also to talk, rest, and amuse themselves. What better place for amorous encounters of every kind? Some baths had such

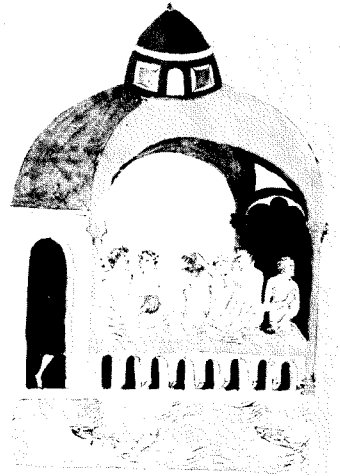
bad reputations that it was generally considered disreputable to work in a bathhouse or as a masseuse. The erotic connotations of water color the descriptions of furtive encounters at the baths of Bourbon-l'Archambault in *Flamenca*, an Occitanian poem of guilty love. The immodest and the innocent met in the baths; bathers were scrutinized, judged, desired, seduced. The exchanges of glances that must have taken place are not hard to imagine. We can go even further in our quest for the intimate with the help of a text that gives a contemporary view of bathhouse behavior. The fresh eyes of a foreigner, in this case Poggio visiting Switzerland, correct our preconceptions.

*Bathing for Pleasure and Salvation.* In 1414 Pope John XXIII took with him to the Council of Constance in the capacity of apostolic secretary the fashionable writer Poggio, friend of the leading Florentine humanists and well-known collector of ancient manuscripts. But when his patron Baldassare Cossa was suddenly deposed, Poggio found himself without a job. Thereupon he traveled as an idle spectator to the baths at Baden, not far from Zurich, where he was surprised by what he saw:

“Baden—the name means ‘baths’ in German—is a rather flourishing city, situated in a valley dominated by very high mountains close to a great, fast-running river that joins the Rhine six thousand paces from town. Not far from the city, four stadia away, is a superb bathing establishment, built along the river’s bank. Around an enormous central square stand magnificent buildings capable of receiving large crowds of people. Inside each of these buildings are baths; to which only certain people are admitted. Some of these baths are public, others private; there are some thirty in all.

“Two of the baths are public, accessible from either side of the central square; these are for the common folk, men, women, youths, and maidens of no particular quality, theregs of the populace, who come here in large numbers.

“In these pools a sort of stockade has been constructed even though these people are at peace; it separates the men from the women. It is truly laughable to see decrepit old women bathing alongside young beauties, entering the water stark naked while men look on, staring at their natural parts and their buttocks. I often laughed at picturesque spectacles of this sort, contrasting them with floral games, and in my



Piero of Eboli, *Baths of the Pouzzoles*, 14th century. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

Johannes Stumpf, *Schweizer Chronik*, 1586. Different ways of bathing: in a large tub with several other people over supper; in the famous baths at Baden, near Zurich, where young and old, men and women, sick and healthy all swim together in the public pool, as spectators look on; and in a swimming hole in the country—the natural form of the thermal cure (*wildbad*). (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)







heart of hearts I admired the innocence of these people, who do not fix their eyes on such details and who think and speak no evil.

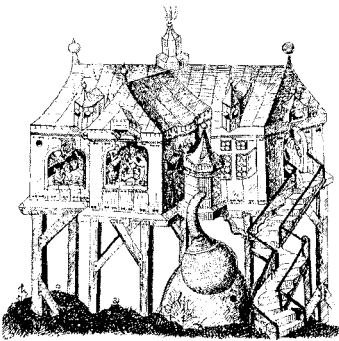
“Baths in private homes are quite stylish and also shared by men and women. Simple grills separate the sexes, and in them numerous windows have been cut so that people can drink and converse together and look at one another and even touch, as is the custom. Above the pools are galleries where the men sit, watching and conversing. For everyone is allowed to go to other people’s baths, to contemplate, chat, gamble, and unburden the mind, and they stay while the women enter and leave the water, their full nakedness exposed to everyone’s view. No guard observes who enters, no gate prevents one from entering, and there is no hint of lewdness. In most cases men and women use the same entrance, and the men encounter half-naked women while the women encounter naked men. Men wear a sort of bathing suit at most, while women wear tunics which are open on top or along the side and do not cover the neck, the breasts, the arms, or the shoulders. People often take meals in the water, for which they pay with their entry token; tables are set on the water, and onlookers often share meals with the bathers . . .

“As for myself, I watched from the gallery, devouring with my eyes the customs, habits, amenities, and freedom, not to say licentiousness of this way of life. It is truly aston-

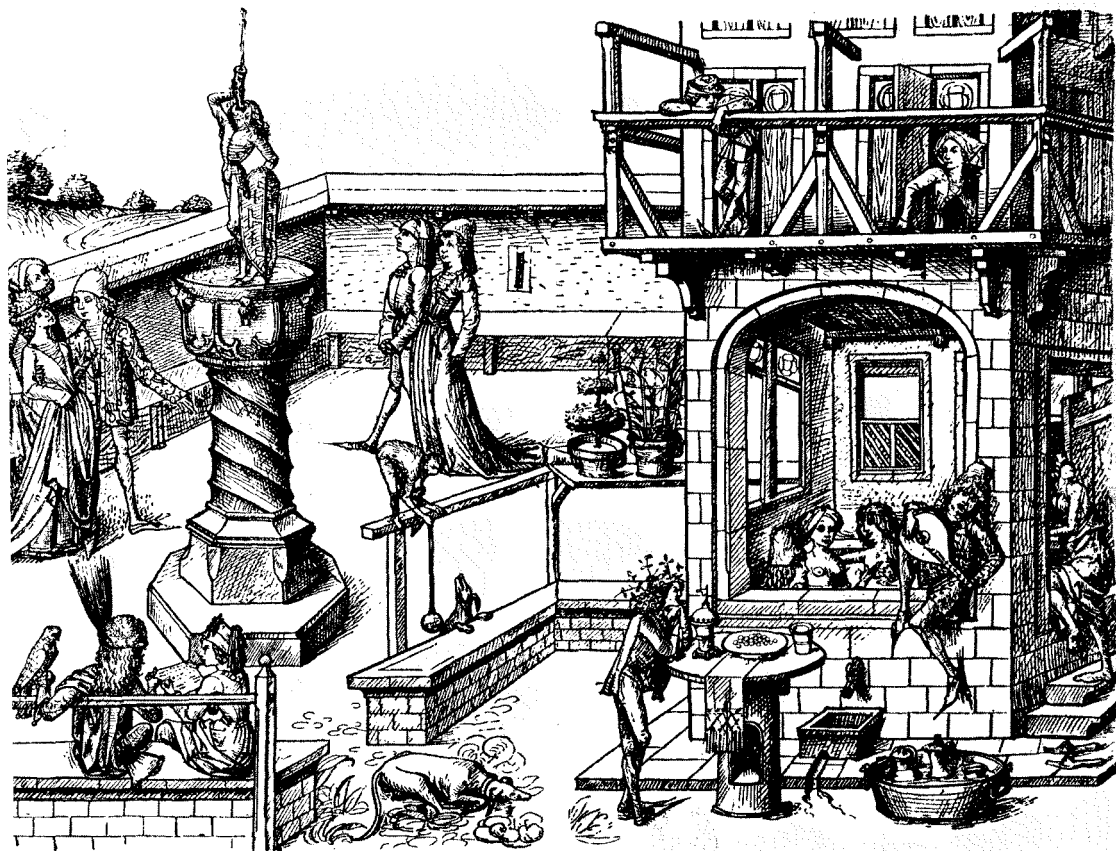
ishing to see the innocence, the truth, with which they live. Husbands watched as their wives were touched by strangers and did not take offense, did not even pay attention, interpreting everything in the best light. Even the most delicate things become easy thanks to their customs. They could easily have accommodated themselves to Plato's *Politics*, sharing everything in common, for without knowing his theories they instinctively number among his supporters. In some baths the males mingle directly with women to whom they are related by blood or close in other ways. Every day they go to bathe three or four times, spending the greater part of the day singing, drinking, and dancing. They sing in the water, in fact, to the sound of the cithara, crouching down slightly. And it is charming to see young girls, already ripe for marriage, in the fullness of their nubile forms, their faces striking with nobility, standing and moving like goddesses. As they sing, their garments form a floating train on the surface of the waters, so that they might easily be mistaken for winged Venuses."

Later, describing games held in a large, tree-filled field along the river, in particular javelin-throwing and a dance display, Poggio has this to say: "Truly I believe that the first man was born in these places, these places that the Jews call Eden; for it is indeed that, the garden of delights. If pleasure can make life happy, I do not see that anything is lacking here for achieving consummate perfection."

Could the body be both exposed and pure? As if in a daydream, the man of culture, the man of the world, loses all his bearings—literary, national, moral. His sense of propriety is profoundly upset by this joyous spectacle in which old and young, male and female, mingle indiscriminately. The decrepit old woman does not hide her withered figure yet occasions no hilarity. Nearly naked youths look at one another, yet their eyes are not inflamed with desire. The dividing line between good and evil has mysteriously disappeared; bodies touch and women hide neither necks nor breasts nor shoulders (*neque . . . neque . . . neque*). It is Poggio who undresses them with his eyes, Poggio who has lascivious thoughts. The scene breathes simplicity and sanity; impropriety exists only in the lexicon of the humanist. He has only to disrobe himself, to bathe his spirit in the fountain of youth. Is he afraid of exposing himself? Fine talk is his profession. Can an intellectual sit beside ladies at the bath without seeking to dazzle them?



Konrad Kyser, *Bellifortis*, Göttingen manuscript, 1405. A hot bath, designed by a celebrated inventor of machinery. Here there are two bathing rooms, one for men, the other for women. The water is heated in the large spherical object visible in the picture. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)



but he knows no German. Never mind; he transforms himself into a voyeur before this harmonious community of flesh, joyous and desireless because it wants for nothing. But he is pained by the feeling that he is an outsider to this spectacle of satisfaction.

Poggio's uneasiness is further compounded by the fact that this garden of pleasures, this Eden, is north of the Alps. Poggio's City seems to have come to life in a new social contract, in harmony, without violence or jealousy: there are no guards at the gates, no jealous husbands as in Italy. Yet Zurich lies beyond the northern frontier of Poggio's civilization. He is body and soul a child of the Mediterranean. For him the north is a place from which to retrieve ancient manuscripts, which he brings back by the cartload from places like Cluny, Cologne, and Saint-Gall: some were totally unknown in his native

*Das Mittelalterliche Hausbuch*, a late-15th-century manuscript. In this pen-and-ink drawing all the ingredients of pleasure are assembled around the intimate bath: music, wine, and an animal-filled garden in which couples can walk. (Collection of the princes of Waldburg-Wolfegg.)

Italy, including thirteen new discourses by Cicero, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, and all of Lucretius. Ancient culture was his true fatherland, and what could an afflicting glimpse of a hyperborean paradise weigh against it? Poggio's brief moment of wonderment may have been the result of a momentary interruption of his career. In any case, he soon got control of himself, enigmatically ending the episode of the joyous bathers, an anticipation of the Renaissance, of Michelangelo's muscular Virgin attended by athletic young men and of unclad merrymaking from Primaticcio to Cranach.

The body in its bath had other connotations in the late Middle Ages. Renaissance meant not only felicity in the world but also progress in the spirit, not only a fountain of youth but also a fountain of eternal life. Illuminated by the pleasure of the senses, the body also inspired spiritual reform. The water of salvation was the inspiration for the Strasbourg poet Thomas Murner's *Badenfahrt* (Cleansing Journey) (1514), an allegory of conversion in which Christ borrows the trumpet of a bathhouse attendant:

Thereupon God, taking pity on us  
 Began to teach us  
 How we ought to bathe,  
 Wash, and purify ourselves, abandoning our shame  
 To the strength and might of His holy name.  
 This he did so publicly  
 That the whole world saw him.  
 No one could truthfully say  
 Or complain  
 Of not having known  
 How to bathe and purify himself,  
 How to purify himself anew in God,  
 How to rise like a new Adam,  
 Reborn in baptism.  
 For God gives us in His grace  
 The power to overcome original sin.  
 This He did so openly  
 That the whole world saw Him.  
 It was God himself who called us to the bath at the sound  
 of His trumpet.

The poem was illustrated by admirable woodcuts representing commonplace scenes at the bath, as if the divine word grew out of the simplest gestures. The life of the body and the life of the spirit were perfectly congruent, the former providing concrete illustration of the latter. Conversion was



no exotic quest, no pilgrimage to the ends of the earth, but a routine practice in which the senses showed the way. Every time a person performed some specific act, he knew that Christ had come that much closer. Accept the invitation to bathe, shed your vices, rid yourself of your sins, reawaken your ardor to do good, and give thanks to the bathhouse attendant.

Thomas Murner, *Die Badenfahrt*, 1514. Three moments in the life of a Christian. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

### The Bath of the Soul

<i>lie badecur</i>	thermal cure	purification
<i>'n das bad laden</i>	invitation to bathe	revelation
<i>sich selbst unrein</i>	recognize one's	confession
<i>erkennen</i>	uncleanliness	
<i>sich abziehen</i>	disrobe	shed one's vices
<i>vor Gott nackt</i>	appear naked before	shame
<i>stehen</i>	God	
<i>lie füs waschen</i>	wash the feet	humility
<i>den leib reiben</i>	rub the body	make confession
<i>lie haut kratzen</i>	scrape the skin	penitence
<i>n bad lecken</i>	flagellate oneself	reawaken ardor
	with branches	
<i>der badmantel</i>	the bathrobe	shroud
<i>das ölbad</i>	the oil bath	baptism and
		extreme
		unction
<i>das täglich bad</i>	the daily bath	mass
<i>das wildbad</i>	the thermal bath	conversion prior
		to death
<i>'em bader dancken</i>	thank the bathhouse	thanksgiving
	attendant	

Sacred love, profane love: body and water are symbol and receptacle of the spirit. What is humanism if not the desire to reconcile appearance with the innermost being?

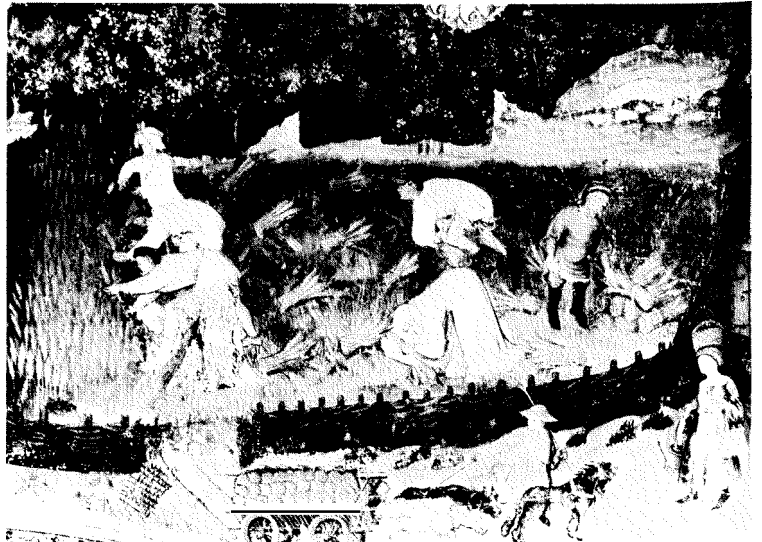
### SENSATIONS AND FEELINGS

In studying the intimate we must depend on means of expression. Though nothing would seem more constant than man's perceptual faculties, our ability to record sensation does change with time, hence so does our picture of ways of living, feeling, and thinking. In order to gauge the inner life of the past, or at any rate the difficulty of grasping what it was like, we must emphasize its differences with the present.

#### Sight

More than smell or taste, sight has implicitly been recognized as the sense most indispensable to the historical record. To measure space in order to use it, man used what he saw closest to hand, namely, the parts of his body: the palm, the armspan, the foot. Even such measures as the league and the bolt have a direct relation to man's body, to man as sower, maker, soldier. Beyond the familiar field of vision—wheat cut high with the reaper, the edge of the forest, the stockade, the moat, and the wall—stretched spaces difficult for man to master: deserts, mountains, swamps. Since defects of vision were not commonly corrected by eyeglasses, it is hardly surprising

*The Harvest*, fresco of Venceslas, 15th century. (Trent, Good Advice Castle, Eagle Tower.)

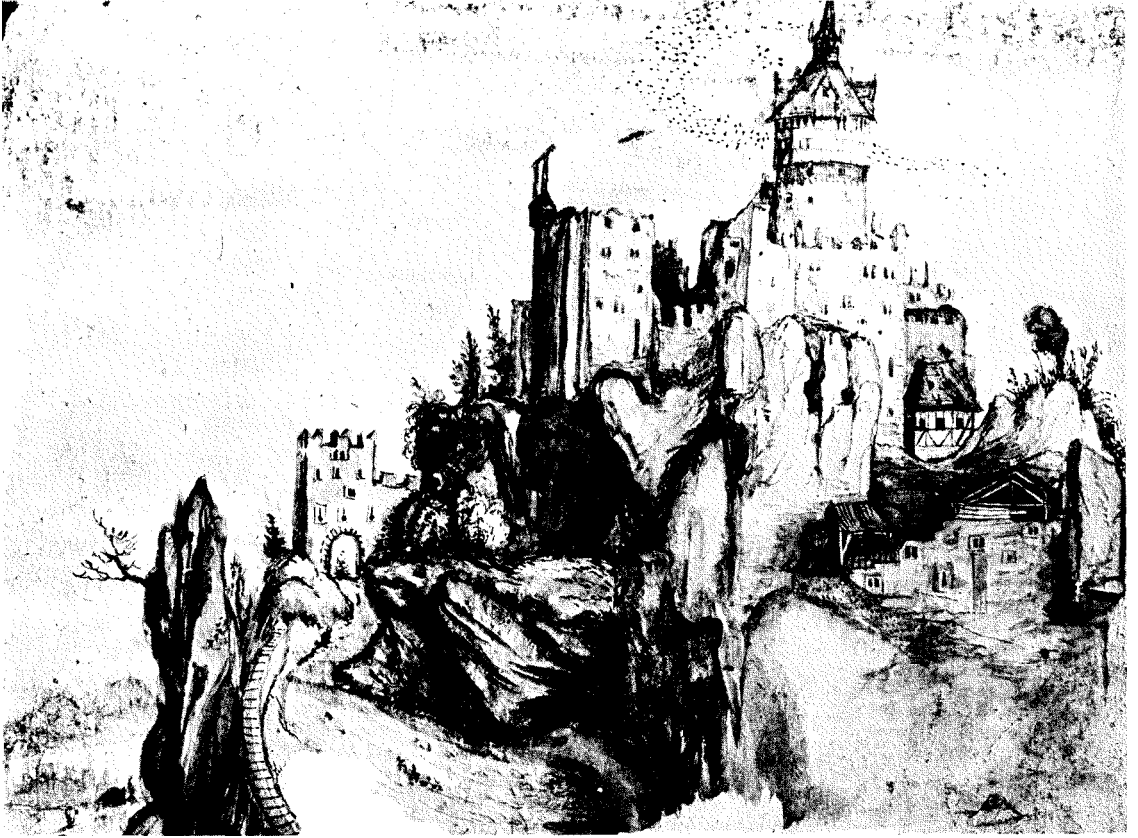




Albrecht Altdorfer, *Landscape*.  
An elegant simulation of  
reality. (Munich, Pinachotek.)

hat the panoramic landscape does not appear in descriptive literature until quite late, and then only symbolically. Man's nearsightedness accorded quite well with the priority given to symbolic representation; it also led to a lasting discordance between realism in the plastic arts and realistic description in writing.

Consider space. Illustrated Christian primers gave wide currency to signs whose wealth of meaning was accessible to all; no logical organization of space was assumed. With the aid of imagination and memory, most of the faithful could make sense of the elements of a painted or sculpted scene. Starting in the fourteenth century, however, another type of figurative representation took hold; it became possible to suggest the movement of figures in space, as perspective created new symbolic forms. What we tend to regard as an evolution toward realism in the late Middle Ages was in fact an elegant



Albrecht Dürer, *Fortified Castle*. This watercolor was painted in the Trentino, in 1495, during the artist's first visit to Italy. (Paris, Louvre.)

simulation of reality, which satisfied a clientele for whom wealth lay in objects and whose thought was invested in the space that joined objects together. The truly devout felt a continued attachment to tangible images, whose symbolic power was reinforced by contemplation. This was the crux of the Renaissance debate over the sacred and the profane image, which turned on physical and cultural characteristics of perception.

The vocabulary of color, like that of measurement, relied in large part on intimate metaphors. To judge by heraldry, fashion, and interior painting, the fifteenth century's sense of color seems at first sight to have been similar to our own. But color had symbolic as well as aesthetic value, which added to the charm of works whose intentions, today hidden, were obvious to the artist's contemporaries. Also worth noting is the disparity between the apparent realism of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painting and sculpture and the poverty of



the descriptive vocabulary in literary works from the same period.

When Froissart, while residing at the court of Gaston Phébus, count of Foix, described the countryside of Ariège, he spoke of “agreeable” hillsides and “clear” rivers; the chronicler’s concern was to depict not the picturesque or the natural but the power and wealth of his host. By contrast, when he describes Queen Isabeau of Bavaria’s entry into Paris, he pauses with the royal cortege before each station of honor, and his quill brims with red, blue, and gold. But the colors are mentioned only as symbols of the homage paid by the Parisian bourgeoisie to the monarchy.

We could scour the late medieval historical literature for a very long time indeed without encountering any description comparable to Dürer’s Alpine watercolors, the first landscapes in the history of Western art without utilitarian or allegorical significance. Conventional symbolism is displaced by lived reality only in a few emotional essays in which nature serves as a setting for a remembered adventure of some kind: the dark waters of the fountain of Vaucluse seen at night exert a troubling fascination on Petrarch; Charles IV fails to lose himself and his army in the isolated and wild woods of Cadore; and the monk Felix Faber nearly dies in the Sinai Desert, tempted by its measureless wastes.

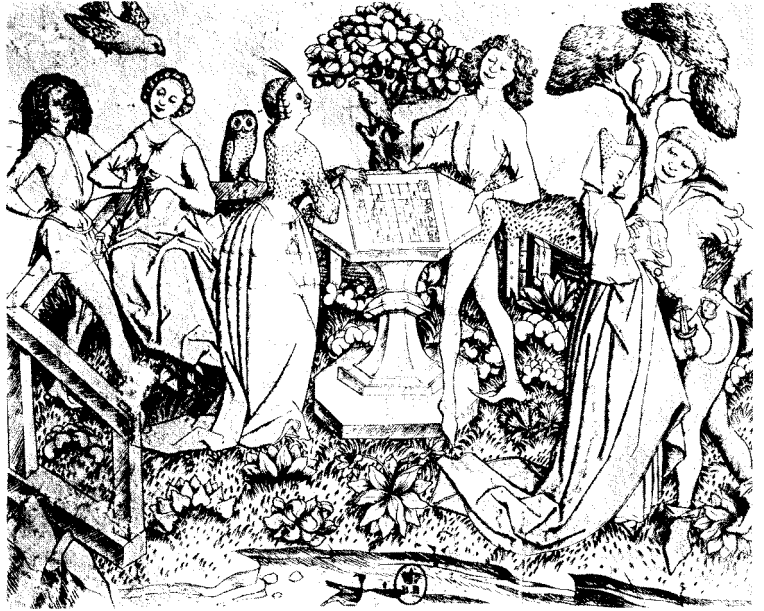
All we have, then, are a few nocturnal scenes, a few incidents distressing enough to merit a brief sketch. There is nothing that can compare with the travel diaries of the nineteenth century. Even pilgrims to the Near East, those most alert to the impressions of the exotic, upon arriving—in some cases in tears—at biblical sites so often visited in imagination, confine themselves to assuring their readers of the veracity of the information available to them before they left home. Not that they were insensitive to the local color; they simply lacked the vocabulary necessary to describe it. Of the five senses, sight may not be the most sensitive.

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The same tourists’ accounts linger over the gardens of the Holy Land, which Europeans saw as gardens of earthly delight, antechambers of paradise. The birds’ songs, the sound of fountains, and the fragrances of the plants enchanted the knights, bourgeois, and clerics who came to sample the delights of the Orient. Even in Europe, the walled garden offered a feast of the senses to powerful personages, lovers, and so-

*The Other Senses*

Master E.S., *Garden of Love with Chess Players*, 15th century. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)



phisticates, a pleasure comparable to that of polyphonic music or the mélange of bitter and sweet tastes at the dinner table. The less fortunate had their pleasures too: spices of many varieties, cut flowers, birds in cages. In a world less antiseptic and uniform than our own, the senses of smell, hearing, and taste must have played an essential role in the definition of pleasure both in reality and in the imagination. Descriptions and paintings of felicity rely more on harmonious sounds and subtle fragrances than on seraphic visions to connote a state of grace. When the mystic Margaretha Ebner describes her ineffable rapture, the presence of God in the choir of her church is indicated by gentle breezes and a wonderful fragrance.

Conversely, unbearable odors define the limits of civilization and give grounds for xenophobia. Stench was indelibly associated with certain professions and certain parts of cities; whole segments of the population were made pariahs by their smell. The monk Felix Faber, who suffered from having to mingle indiscriminately with sailors and other pilgrims aboard the galley to the Holy Land, claims that Muslims and Jews can be distinguished by their odor in the baths at Gaza; Christians, he says, do not smell as bad. Italians commonly accused Germans, whatever their status, of carrying the evil odors of the Empire wherever they went. Campano, a humanist sent

on a mission to the Reichstag at Ratisbon in 1471, speaks of a persistent, fetid odor; he says that when the foreign visitor returns home he must wash himself five, six, or even seven times to get rid of it. Allowing for polemical exaggeration, it is quite possible that different diets did yield a variety of odors, which defined cultural frontiers. André Siegfried's "geography of odors" was not the frivolous invention of an otherwise serious economist.

To a monk accustomed to the silence of his convent, it is not surprising that the cacophony of shipboard sounds should have seemed intolerable. Felix Faber gave careful consideration to each unpleasantness of the pilgrim's voyage, and noise was one of them. Violent natural sounds accompanied events of evil augur, such as the death of a tyrant or the coming of the devil. According to the Florentine historian Goro Dati, on the night Gian Galeazzo Visconti died, a hurricane and water-spouts indicated that his soul had descended to Hell. In accounts of descents into the pit of Saint Patrick, supposed to be a mouth of Hell in the middle of the Irish landscape, we are told that the valiant knights who ventured into the bowels of the earth had to endure lashing winds, abominable cries, and a devilish din so loud that "all the rivers of the world could not have made more noise."

Thus, the external world affected all the senses. It was a world in which ghosts hovered around every living soul, in which red and blue angels flanked Madonna and Child in Fouquet's painting, and in which the deserts themselves were infested with demons in search of prey.

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Confronting reality, the individual needed to master his emotions. Educators, chansons de geste, and "mirrors of princes" prescribed what was appropriate for public display and what should be expressed only in private.

Modesty forbade immoderate discussion of happiness or grief. Louis of Diesbach notes that when his wife was dying, he sent the servants away so that he could undress and watch over the body alone. Anne of Brittany, upon learning at eleven o'clock at night of the death at Amboise of Charles VIII, withdrew into her private apartments and refused all company. The next day, she received the condolences of Cardinal Briçonnet, made no answer, and remained by herself for almost twenty-four hours. Obviously we cannot say to what degree she was occupied by grief and to what degree by political

*The Expression of Sentiments*



Mathis Grünewald, *The Retable of Issenheim* (detail), 1511–1516. Mary Magdalene in extreme distress. (Colmar, Unterlinden Museum.)

calculation, but she clearly felt a need to be alone with herself and perhaps with her God.

Some fathers recorded their devastation upon the death of a son. Lucas Rem of Augsburg described in his diary the appearance of children he lost at an early age. One black-eyed boy lay ill for twenty weeks before expiring, “the saddest thing I ever saw in my life.” Giovanni Conversini of Ravenna maintained that pride “prevents me from showing the pain that is in my heart.” More prolix and very moving are the words of Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli of Florence, who wrote about the death of his son Alberto, adding: “Months have passed since his death, but neither I nor his mother can forget him. His image is constantly before our eyes, reminding us of all his ways and habits, his words and his gestures. We see him day and night, lurching, dining, inside the house and out, sleeping and awake, in our villa or in Florence. Whatever we do, it is like a knife that tears into our hearts . . . For more than a year I have not been able to enter his room, for no reason other than my extreme grief.”

## ALONE

### Retreat

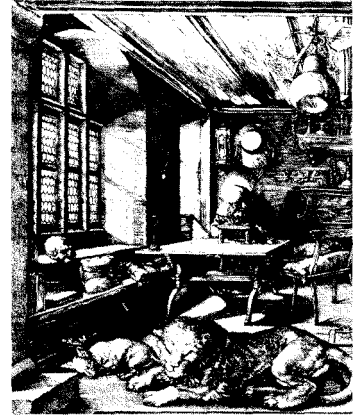
Retreat and voluntary seclusion were practiced not only in Carthusian monasteries but also by ordinary citizens, who when they wanted to be alone repaired to their “thinking rooms.” Montaigne’s “back-shop” belonged to a tradition of private rooms used by late medieval poets, humanists, and divines. Ghirlandaio and Dürer painted Saint Jerome engaged in solitary, intimate pursuits in a room specially adapted for work and meditation in the manner of the Italian *studiolo*. The Italian custom was soon adopted north of the Alps. The word *studiolo* was even used to denote the locked game room in which Conrad von Weinsberg of Cologne transported his treasures and presided as priest over an altar of fortune.

According to the *Vita nuova*, Dante closeted himself in his private room so that he could shed tears without being seen. Petrarch became so involved in Saint Augustine’s tribulations that he cried, struck his forehead, and wrung his hands as he read the *Confessions* in his private chamber; naturally he was not keen to have witnesses to his emotion. Spiritual retreat was aided by the silence of an out-of-the-way place. The constitution of the Brothers of the Common Life, the canons

of Windesheim, recommended “abandoning the world in order to turn one’s heart with greater intensity toward God.”

*Retreat* referred to both a place of solitude and a desire to renounce the world. Unlike Datini, the Prato merchant who hesitated to accede to the demands of wife and friends that he turn his thoughts to his soul, the “perfect merchant” envisioned by Benedetto Cortugli in his treatise on practical morality closed his account books and retired to his country house, where he spent the remainder of his life preparing for salvation.

In the spiritual sense *retreat* referred to an ascensional movement culminating in an intimate and symbolic place of

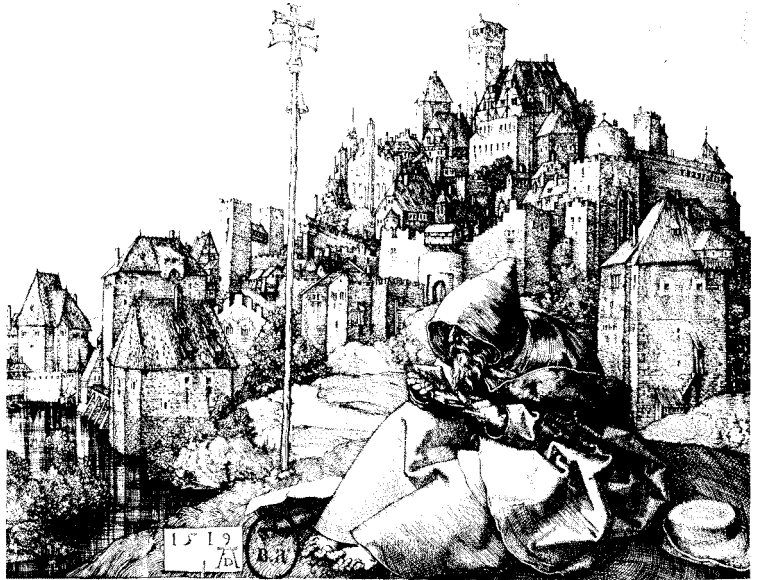


Albrecht Dürer, *Saint Jerome*, 1514. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Saint Jerome in His Study*, 1480. (Florence, Ognissanti.)

These paintings of Saint Jerome give a detailed picture of a scholar’s study and items of Christian iconography (more clearly depicted by Dürer): the lion, the hat, and the crucifix. Ghirlandaio’s learned doctor interrupts his work of translating the Bible to stare at the painter and the indiscreet spectators who peer over his shoulder. Some commentators on Dürer’s painting have put forward a cosmogonic interpretation: the dog is Sirius, the lion Leo, and the tendrils the Little Bear, suggesting that Jerome is meditating upon heaven’s infinite vault.

Albrecht Dürer, *Saint Anthony Reading*, 1519. Penitential silence in the heart of the city. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)



elevation. Climbing to the summit of Mont Ventoux, Petrarch was struck by the exemplary nature of the ascent, which enabled him to contemplate the panorama of his past while drawing nearer to the essence of life. Ludolph von Sudheim wrote: “By ascending through the airs, man changes truly.” Retreat was a “fortress of silence,” from which man eliminated everything else in order to receive Jesus Christ. Among the many definitions of the soul given in the *Sermons* of Meister Eckhart, one of the most striking envisions the soul as a fortified castle: “So high above the world and so mighty, this little castle is impregnable to all but the gaze of the Almighty. And because He is One and Simple, He enters in His oneness what I am calling the fortress of the soul.”

In the ultimate retreat man did not go to an ideal room but turned inward, delved within himself. To ascend inwardly, to shut out the world, was to create, in the words of the mystic Mechtilde of Magdeburg, an “intimate silence of the soul.” With such a retreat, “whether awake or asleep, seated, eating, or drinking, one can be alone even in the midst of others, alone with Christ” (J. Mombaer).

Surely this higher form of retreat was not within reach of everyone in the fifteenth century or any other time. Charles of Orleans, who possessed a vast philosophical and theological library, was given to melancholy musings in his “thinking

room"; yet he never took the fateful step of embarking on inward exploration. But many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors did set an example of introspection, even if limited to testamentary formulas. They looked to the future with sincere and fervent anxiety. Indications of this can be seen in the revival of ascetic orders, the success of devotional confraternities, in some of the more spectacular aspects of the Mendicants' preaching, and above all in innumerable manifestations of personal piety.

Such dispositions of mind obviously were fortified by training in self-control. Discipline began in the schools, where pupils were taught to remain silent, for silence was considered as important a part of education as the alphabet. In recounting his childhood memories, one early-sixteenth-century Franconian goldsmith brackets together *stille sitzen* (sitting quietly) and *buchstabieren* (learning the letters of the alphabet). If silence makes room for the operation of memory (trained by visual techniques and implicit in habits of recapitulation), it can actually shape the structure of thought.

Examples abound of the power and precision of memory in the Middle Ages, when a scarcity of books made imagery, particularly religious imagery, a crucial reference. This was true not only in cultivated circles, where the memory was sharpened by long training, but also among the common people, as is shown by court testimony. The most personal aspects of private life drew on memories that combined the fruits of study and experience with the oral traditions of the social group.

Family memory seems not to have exceeded three generations; beyond that span of time, the histories of great personages were obliged to rely on archives, traditions, and legends. Yet individual memory is capable of bringing to life with astonishing vividness the events and even words of a good quarter of a century. Petrarch, in the daily record of his work that goes by the name *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, noted: "on Friday, 19 May 1368, unable to sleep, I suddenly sat bolt upright, for there came to me a memory of something that happened more than twenty-five years earlier." Even more remarkable is the testimony of Béatrice de Planissoles, châteline of Montailou, before the inquisitor, in which she mentions an event that took place twenty-six years earlier, or the poor Douai worker who, after the death of the powerful and

*The Discipline of Memory*

much-feared fabric merchant Jehan Boinebroke, is able to recall the businessman's mocking words to his mother, uttered thirty years before.

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*The World of the Mind*

A trained memory was a necessity in a society in which writing remained the prerogative of an elite blessed with power and/or knowledge. From the early fourteenth century on, printing techniques made it possible to give wide currency to images, often accompanied by text, which served as aids to memory. Pictures aided people in the chore of memorization, and the Church was quick to avail itself of this useful educational tool.

*Devotional Methods.* In cherished books Petrarch made marginal notations to jog his memory and remind him of his suffering and tears. Such notes typify a common medieval habit of mind. For example, a page printed in Italy in the

Hugo van der Goes, *The Death of Mary*. Emotion is contained and focused by gestures and meditation. In the foreground are the two customary objects of medieval piety, a book of hours and a rosary. (Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz.)

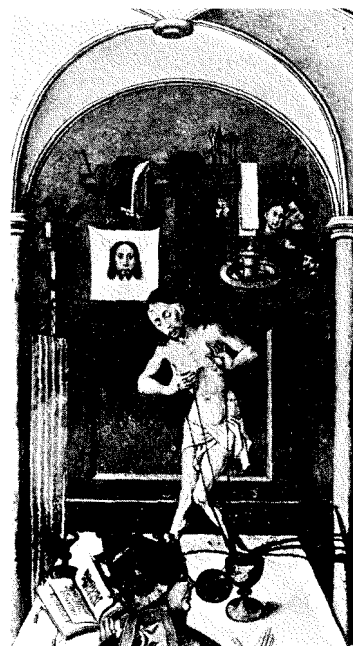




fourteenth century shows the Virgin, after the Ascension, meditating upon the mysteries of the salvation she has just experienced. Around the doleful Virgin the artist has recapitulated the episodes of the story in chronological order, using signs reminiscent of ideograms or rebuses, accompanied by brief captions: the manger is indicated by an ass and an ox; the garden of Gethsemane, by a sword and a lance among the trees; the Ascension, by two footprints on a hill. Worshipers meditated on the life of Christ, emulating Mary, who "kept all these words, pondering them in her heart," remembering in the order indicated by the graphic notes certain well-known episodes of the New Testament and thereby evoking pious sentiments.

Intimate feelings were further stimulated by the intoxicating monotone of murmured prayers and confessions, the "voice of the soul" recommended by the Lateran Council of 1214, as well as by the various forms of repetition that numbered among the most ancient of religious practices. (The string of pearls, ancestor of the rosary, is attested as early as the fourth century.) The recital of a *Pater Noster* after ten *Ave Marias* was the early-fifteenth-century invention of a Carthusian monk at Cologne and marked a stage in the complex process that established a close connection between the Ave Maria and the fifteen mysteries of salvation. Condensed formulas, *clausulae*, concentrated meditation within a circle of pearls rather than allowing the mind to wander, perhaps to stray. The pious of the late Middle Ages kept strict account of their prayers, and if the mechanical nature of the procedure has often been ridiculed, its ascetic intent has just as often been overlooked. Such methods were not mere ritualistic excess, comparable to the practice of ordering thousands of masses in one's will. When a person counted off the 5,500 wounds of Christ or the 1,000 bloody steps along the way to Calvary, he or she was in fact reexperiencing the measureless time of offering and penetrating the mysteries of the Passion.

Just as late medieval chroniclers often associated personal feelings with specific places, so the mendicant orders emphasized in their religious teachings such mediating objects as the rosary (popularized by the success throughout Europe of a confraternity established in Cologne in 1474); relics (of which private collections proliferated at times to an incredible degree); pious images (which one contemplated in private); and written prayers (which people carried with them as they went about their daily business). In this connection, the archaeolog-



Master of Westphalia, *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, ca. 1473. The Passion is symbolized by objects of meditation. (Soest, Church of Saint Mary in the Fields.)

ical discoveries made beneath the woodwork in the choir of Wienhausen, a Cistercian church in the state of Luneburg, enlighten us about private devotional practices in the late thirteenth century. Along with pins, knives, and glasses with wood or leather frames, investigators have found beneath the canons' stalls pictures that must have fallen from missals or clothing, colored engravings on wood, paper embossed in lead molds, and small packets of bone and pieces of silk that suggest the use of hidden relics. To this class of objects belonged the schematic crucifixion drawn with pen and ink that Dürer carried on his person and that had no pretensions to being a work of art.

What signs and images were most often reproduced? In the late Middle Ages representations of or allusions to Christ's humanity and suffering were more common than images of His divine royalty. Christ's suffering was evoked by symbols such as the whip and the torches of the Mount of Olives. In a society very much aware of heraldic arms and devices, His five wounds served as the mystical escutcheon of the Son of Man. Amid objects at once commonplace and holy, such as clubs, nails, sponge, and ladder, the faithful contemplated Christ's gaping wound, which stood out like a mandorla.

The "immense appetite for the divine," to which both Lucien Febvre and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have called attention, is summed up rather starkly by one writer: "They loved Christ bleeding." Physical realism was essential to the Imitation of Christ. Imitation did not mean vaguely emulating an ideal model of behavior. For the most fervent Christians, whether gathered in pious confraternities or confined to private spiritual exercises, it meant reliving each episode of the Passion in a manner most trying to body and spirit. For the devout Christian the Passion should be "kept constantly in mind" (*frequenter in mente*, in the words of G. Groote). He should prepare himself "by pious effusions" (*per pias affectiones*, according to the chapter on mass in the constitution of the Brothers of the Christian Life). Or he should contemplate the Passion "slowly and with tears" (according to Saint Bonaventure's treatise on the instruction of novices).

Bonaventure gives the following advice: "Contemplate the drops of blood, the blows in the face, the persistence of the whip, the crown of thorns, the derision and spitting, the hammering of the nails into the palms and the feet, the raising of the cross, the twisted face, the discolored mouth, the bitterness of the sponge, the head hanging with all its weight,



Bicci di Lorenzo, *Annunciation*, a major theme of late medieval painting. (Paris, Louvre.)



the atrocious death.” The worshiper is exhorted to note every detail of the torture, to scrutinize as if in slow motion the signs and effects of the execution, and to relive in thought and in the flesh the abject agony inflicted upon the Savior of the world.

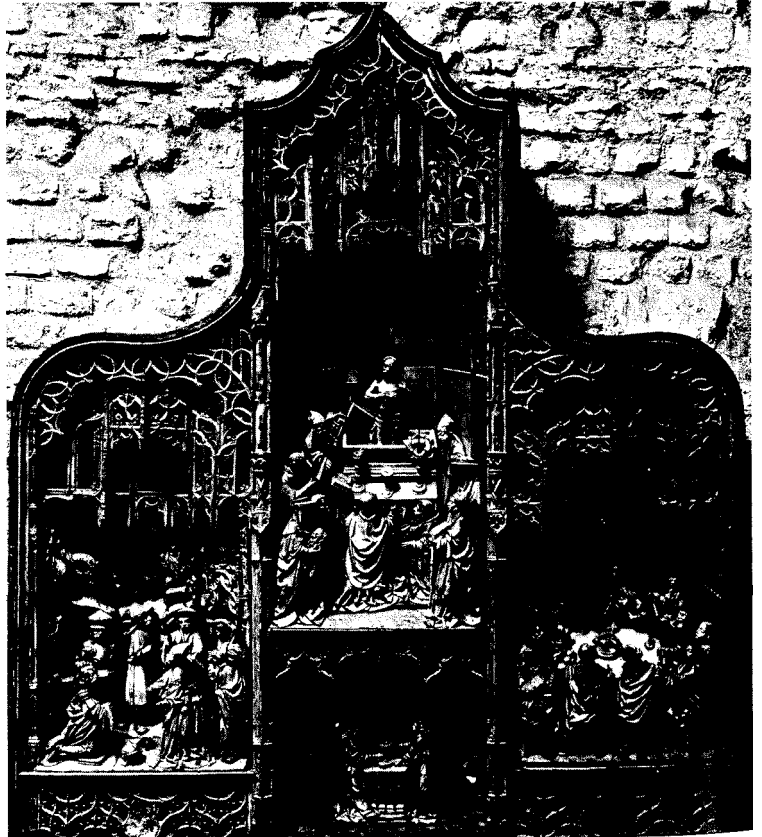
Trained in the use of such mnemonic and emotive techniques, contemporaries who looked at fifteenth-century religious works saw more than just superb painting. For example, Roger van der Weyden’s *Deposition from the Cross*, painted for the constables of Louvain, who placed the canvas on the altar of their confraternity, focuses on a particular moment in the Passion, indicated by the attitudes of the figures. This sumptuously painted episode contains the same two signs found in the humble printed sheets used by more private worshipers: Christ’s pallid corpse and the swooning Virgin. An even more subtle example is Giovanni Bellini’s *Madonna in the Accademia* at Venice, in which the adoring Virgin is fully aware of the destiny of her child, whose arm hangs stiffly as if in death. These examples show that the altar image and the image of private piety were not necessarily different species, that the

Sano di Pietro, *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* (detail), 15th century. Seeing is believing, or believing is seeing? (Siena, Pinacoteca.)

liturgical and the intimate were not necessarily opposed. The greatest inwardness was not incompatible with public display of piety.

*Prayer.* According to the mystical theology of Chancellor Jean Gerson, “everything is prayer” when the humblest of believers, the simplest of spirits (*etiamsi sit muliercula vel ydiota*), practices the most exalted spirituality without thinking about it. Whatever the Christian sees becomes material for his prayers. Rooted in constant humility, personal devotion means readiness to receive the Holy Spirit. Prayer, Gerson writes, is “the chain that allows the ship to approach the coast without bringing the coast to the ship.” Meditation led to contemplation. Judging by the thousands of handwritten prayers of all kinds preserved in archives across Europe, some of them touching in their spontaneity, it would seem that the habit of

Retable from Everborn Abbey, 15th century. Private devotion led to commissions for works of art. Research has been done on the importance of workshops in Flanders and Brabant in the market for pious objects in 15th-century Europe. Painted and sculpted retables were produced in great numbers. (Paris, Cluny Museum.)



prayer, that is, of intimate conversation with a superior being, profoundly influenced the most secret aspects of private life in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

As with holy images, there was no sharp contrast between official, liturgical prayer and personal, intimate prayer. Nevertheless, in addition to the great psalms and well-known prayers attributed to various Church Fathers and reproduced in innumerable handwritten and printed copies, vast numbers of prayers were offered up in all the circumstances of daily life, written down, and collected in anthologies. Many of these prayers were to Mary. There were fashions in prayer, and from generation to generation and region to region we see different intercessors being invoked with identical words. Nevertheless, the prayers that have survived—written for holidays, weekdays, moments of decision, or in thanksgiving after a time of tribulation—often give vent to spontaneous personal feelings. We find prayers not only in the “books of hours,” consulted every day, and anthologies of manuscripts, in which prayers are found next to recipes and formulas, but also in parchment scrolls, sewn into clothing, and locked in tiny boxes—evidence of the prophylactic powers ascribed to these material tokens of man’s links to an invisible world.

*Ecstasy.* Meditation was not clearly differentiated from prayer. Both were means of access to a reality vaster, higher, and more luminous than that of this world: the world of spirit offered glimpses of the world of spirits by way of visions. Mysticism, even if it was nothing more than an extreme manifestation of the spiritual, enjoyed such resounding success in the late Middle Ages that it ceased to be a marginal phenomenon. If we define mysticism as the annihilation of self in order to make room for God on earth, we often read of mystical encounters with the other world in autobiographical and other accounts of revelations vouchsafed to individuals favored with experiences of the ineffable. In her dialogues with Christ, Margaretha Ebner claims to have received many responses, “impossible to transcribe according to the truth of this world, for the more abundant grace is, the less possible it is to express in thought.”

In thirteenth-century German the term *kunst* (art) was used to denote such ecstatic experiences, which suggests that they were considered an art, a matter of technique and preparedness, rather than a state. They have since been subjected



*Virgin with Child*, early 14th century. (Orvieto, Museum of the Opera del Duomo.)

to psychological, psychoanalytic, and clinical scrutiny, which has called attention to the somatic manifestations of these spiritual events. But no reductive interpretation of the inner upheavals described by the mystics can detract from the pure and painful reality of a love which they understood to be divine.

Margaretha Ebner was a nun at Medingen who died in 1351, after long years of suffering. Her visions were accompanied by hypersensitivity and paralysis. In her hypersensitive state she heard music, saw luminous shapes, and stammered in an unknown language: "When I began my *Pater*, my heart was seized by grace and I knew not where it carried me. Sometimes, incapable of prayer, I remained in the grip of a divine joy from matins until Prime. Sometimes a path opened before my eyes and speech (*Rede*) came to me. And sometimes I was uplifted to the point where I was no longer in contact with the earth."

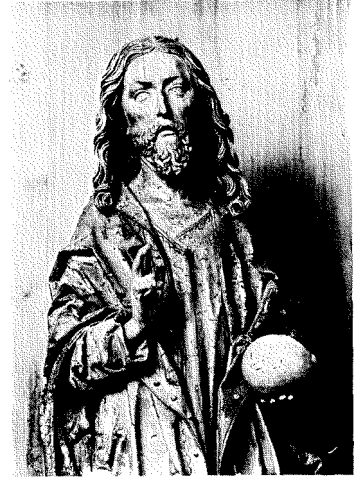
Her paralysis was brought on originally by descriptions of Christ's suffering and later by the mere mention of Jesus' name. At shorter and shorter intervals she lost all use of her limbs and her tongue, falling into a cataleptic state that she called *swige*, silence. In her case we glimpse one of the extreme forms of religious devotion, described with admirable persistence by a subject eager to note the progress of the flames that devoured her. In all the literature of the emotions and love written by medieval women, we owe the moments of freest expression and most surprising revelation to an intense desire to record such all-consuming mystical episodes.

For example, Christ frequently appeared to late-fourteenth-century nuns. "Who is your father," they would ask upon seeing a child in the cloister. "*Pater noster!*" the child would answer and then disappear. At Adelshausen one nun moaned day and night for years, inconsolable because she could no longer see the divine child. The more fortunate Umiliana dei Cerchi cherished her memories of the visit of the *bambino*. A violent Agnes of Montepulciano refused to return to the Virgin the baby that had been entrusted to her for an hour; from her experience she retained a small cross, which the child had worn around its neck. Women lavished devoted attention on wood or plaster images of the Virgin and dreamed of giving birth to Christ; such identification stemmed from religious instruction based on immersion in Bible stories. Familiarity with holy images shaped the imagination and transformed the frustrations of young nuns. In her

room Margaretha Ebner kept a cradle in which she rocked a Baby Jesus who refused to sleep so that she would take him in her arms.

Christ appeared even more frequently in the role of divine bridegroom. Adele of Brisach spoke of a "union with God that culminated in a kiss." Christina Ebner pressed herself against the body of Christ as tightly "as the seal presses against the wax." Adele Langmann saw Christ enter her cell and give her a piece of flesh to eat: "This is my body." Margaretha Ebner saw Jesus reach down from the cross to embrace her; she lay on his bosom like the apostle John and took nourishment from him. Such ardent scenes are a far cry from Raphael's or Perugino's elegant and chaste paintings of Saint Catherine's mystical marriage, done for a public that would not have tolerated more disturbing images.

The origins of such mystical visions did not go unquestioned. Margaretha Ebner was well aware that the devil commonly appeared as an angel of light: "Suddenly," she writes, "everything in me turned dark, to the point where I came to doubt, and against my will to believe." It took renewal of her physical suffering to restore her certainty of salvation. For Robert of Uzès, doubt was impossible; at dawn, however, he experienced an attack of melancholy: "Satan wanted to deceive me by appearing to me in the form of Our Lord Jesus Christ." The rarefied atmosphere in which the mystics moved gave palpable presence to the divine and enabled them to detect intimate signs that confirmed the veracity of their visions.



Tilman Riemenschneider (1460-1531), *Christ*. (Heidelberg, Windsheim Triptych.)

Other people, some famous, some anonymous, have left a record of their intermittent ability to see the invisible in a variety of forms: in somber or luminous dreams, nightmares, enigmatic encounters, and brief contacts with phantoms and ghosts.

Some visions derive from the ancient tradition of prophetic dreams; their literary or political character saps their value as evidence of intimate feelings. Nevertheless, they are full of information about how people conceived of spirits. The future emperor Charles IV, awakened in the middle of the night in his tent near Parma by an angel of God, was in no doubt about the identity of the envoy, whom he addressed as "lord" (*Herr*). With this spirit he flew over great distances, hanging by his hair; he awoke physically exhausted.

According to a pious legend recorded in the family chron-

*Seeing the Invisible*

icle, Count von Zimmern took part in a fantastic scene. Lost in a forest, the count sees a silent human figure loom up before his eyes, sent to him for the purpose of making a revelation. "Since he spoke of God, the count agreed to ride along behind him." He then sees an enchanted castle whose inhabitants silently mime an endless feast—a bravura passage in the literature of enchantment. But then the scene dissolves and the figure disappears, and amid sulfurous odors and loud cries the count is shown a vision of Hell. Frightened by the sight of his uncle being subjected to eternal punishment, he decides to found an expiatory chapel on the spot; his friends hardly

*The Triumph of Death* (detail), 15th century. A world replete with dreams and visions. (Palermo, Sclafani Palace.)





recognize him, for "his hair and beard have turned so white."

A tale from the autobiography of Burkard Zink of Augsburg describes a similar fright, but it is even more unusual because it serves no moral or literary purpose. After following two horsemen whom he does not know through a Hungarian forest, the author suddenly finds himself alone at dusk, threatened by boars before a mournful castle. He calls upon God for help, whereupon the castle vanishes and a path appears, enabling him to escape from danger: "I saw then that I had been deceived and that I had followed two phantoms on my ride through the forest . . . When I begged God and made the sign of the cross, all illusion vanished before my very eyes."

The Enemy made his appearance even in the most closely guarded places, as evidenced by an unusual anecdote in Charles V's account of his youth. An evil spirit made its presence known by throwing a wine goblet on the floor, after which the sound of footsteps could be heard. At dawn the glass was found where the spirit had thrown it. The story belongs to the genre of unexplained terrors. The devil, never named, revealed his presence in a sudden blush or a panicked beating of the heart.

Diffuse anxiety, which occasionally turned to fear, was the basis of the medieval devil's dual image. Those who had not met him were unrealistically precise about his appearance, whereas those whom he afflicted were troubled by the ambiguity of his presence. When we examine accounts of his intervention in daily life, we find that whenever the demon is recognized (which is to say, after he has disappeared), his appearance is quite commonplace and the physical alterations (such as premature aging, lethargy, and hysteria) caused by his presence are quite real. There can be no doubt that a subjective experience of the presence of evil did exist; but, as has often been observed, the most frightening demons are those within.

*The True and the Real.* Surrounded by celestial and infernal presences, called upon until the moment of final agony to choose between the armies of good and evil that besieged the earthbed, late medieval men and women confronted the invisible with open eyes. From the learned cleric to the illiterate peasant, who shared nothing except their anxiety; from the noble warrior to the village laborer, who succumbed with equal ease to cackling Death's embrace; the men and women

of the late Middle Ages lived in a world still filled with spirits. Even the finest spectacles could not clarify the dividing line between the true and the real.

Armande Rives of Montailou was convinced, on the basis of experience, that "souls have flesh, bones, and all their limbs." A few generations later, George the Hungarian, a knight, asked the angel showing him Purgatory whether the saints he saw there had bodies. The invisible itself was rooted in the corporeal, and the community of the dead and of spirits prolonged its earthly existence by at times mingling with the living. One day all the elect would be reunited in the immutable glory of their Father's house, the spiritual *domus* of Heaven, in which the hierarchical structure of human societies was reproduced.

But as early as the fourteenth century a new age was dawning, as individuals began to feel the need to perpetuate their image and memory in this world. In the cities of the West a great movement began, which pushed back the limits of the known world and the pillars of Heaven. Around the figure of man an intangible, geometrical space was created, as tears, credulity, and amazement were abandoned to the humble.

Let us cast a final glance upon a most palpable pile of objects: documents and pictures, letters and chronicles, images humble and sublime, well-thumbed books of hours, notarized records cut short by death, shreds of clothing—fragile, uncertain traces, left without commentary. No final interpretation, no irrefutable, definitive conclusion emerges. The search for the remains of intimacy is far from complete.

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