

# The beginning of writing about painting in English Chaucer to Shakespeare

Marjorie Munsterberg

Considerable scholarly attention has been given to the ways in which writing about art developed in renaissance Italy, especially under the influence of humanism, and how these ideas were adopted and adapted into other European languages. Surprisingly little attention, however, has been paid to the equivalent developments in English, despite their importance for the language of art history still used today.<sup>1</sup> I would like to outline the first stages of this process in relation to painting, from the earliest descriptions written in the late 14th century until the end of the 16th century, when Richard Haydocke's translation of Gian Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* introduced the full range of contemporary Italian concepts into English. Much of this history resembles what happened on the Continent, with an uneven and sometimes awkward assimilation of words and ideas taken from classical and Italian texts. But England was different in one important respect. The Lollard and reformist controversies during this period made the appearance of religious images a matter of urgent concern. This led to the first disputes about iconoclasm in the west since the 8th and 9th centuries, and much discussion about visual works. These religious writings, which include poetry as well as prose, constitute a moment of difference between developments in English and those in other European languages at this time. Over the course of the 16th century, however, humanist ideas overwhelmed every other approach to the visual arts in England and, by the beginning of the 17th century, they had become the only acceptable source of serious analytical language. In important ways, they remain so even now.

Writing about painting in English during the 15th century, whether secular or religious, depended on concepts and conventions inherited from the classical tradition. But this tradition did not consist of authoritative texts presented in chronological order as we have them today. Rather, at least in relation to writing about art, an untidy mass of endlessly repeated phrases and anecdotes was used to support a few key ideas. Plato's definition of visual art as mimetic for example, and the implications this had for his understanding of the ideal, like Aristotle's understanding of imitation and decorum, were much better known through their influence on medieval thinkers than from their own writings.<sup>2</sup> Horace's *Ars poetica*, on the other hand, remained an important text throughout the medieval period and was published in more than 50 printed editions before 1500. Therefore his vivid formulations of inherited ideas about art remained familiar in their original form.<sup>3</sup> As widely read were the Roman rhetoricians, notably Cicero and Quintillian, who incorporated ideas from Greek thinkers into their arguments.<sup>4</sup>

But none of these writers analysed the visual arts in themselves. Instead they used them as the basis of comparison and metaphor to define qualities in verbal and, sometimes, musical works. The most famous example is the phrase 'Ut pictura poesis' which, despite its extraordinary importance in later art writing, was used by Horace in a discussion of ways that a poet could give 'profit or delight'. The possibilities that follow – about ways to see a work and the nature of its impact – are

not developed into an analysis of visual qualities, but rather concern literature.<sup>5</sup> In other cases, terms that directly relate to the visual arts became part of a standard critical vocabulary about literary works. Colour, for example, became an important idea in rhetorical analysis.<sup>6</sup> The only surviving classical text devoted to the description of specific paintings was the *Imagines* by the Sophist Philostrati, but it was not familiar to most readers in England until the later 16th century.<sup>7</sup>

More important for the development of a specific descriptive and analytical language about painting was Pliny's *Natural History*, an encyclopedic work of 37 books about the natural world. Although a complete text was not available until the late 15th century, and a reliable edition not for another 100 years after that, parts of his work had been quoted often and formed the basis of many medieval compendia.<sup>8</sup> For writing about art, the key text was the history of Greek painting in Book 35, which Pliny compiled from many different sources. His decision to order the material in terms of progressively more successful attempts to depict the physical world, and his use of anecdotes about great artists to illustrate the different stages, made his narrative easy to remember and repeat.

Following (and simplifying) Greek sources, Pliny defined the first act of painting as drawing a line around a man's shadow. This outline was improved by using a single color, which created something he called a monochrome, and enhanced with interior lines. Pictures became more complicated with the addition of other colors, light and shade, and highlights, which could be used to suggest the placement of objects in space.<sup>9</sup> The assumptions underlying this history – that the goal of art is mimesis, and that painting consists of line first and then color as its basic elements – became so fundamental to western writing about art that it is hard for us to imagine how the language might have developed in any other way. None the less, they represent choices even among his Greek sources.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, although Pliny attached the developments to the names of great Greek painters, these artists were familiar to later readers by reputation rather than by the appearance of any of their long-lost works. Thus Pliny's text floated free from the constraining presence of material examples. To be the equal of Apelles, for example, the highest praise for many centuries, indicated nothing about what the artist's pictures might look like. It was simply shorthand for being great.<sup>11</sup>

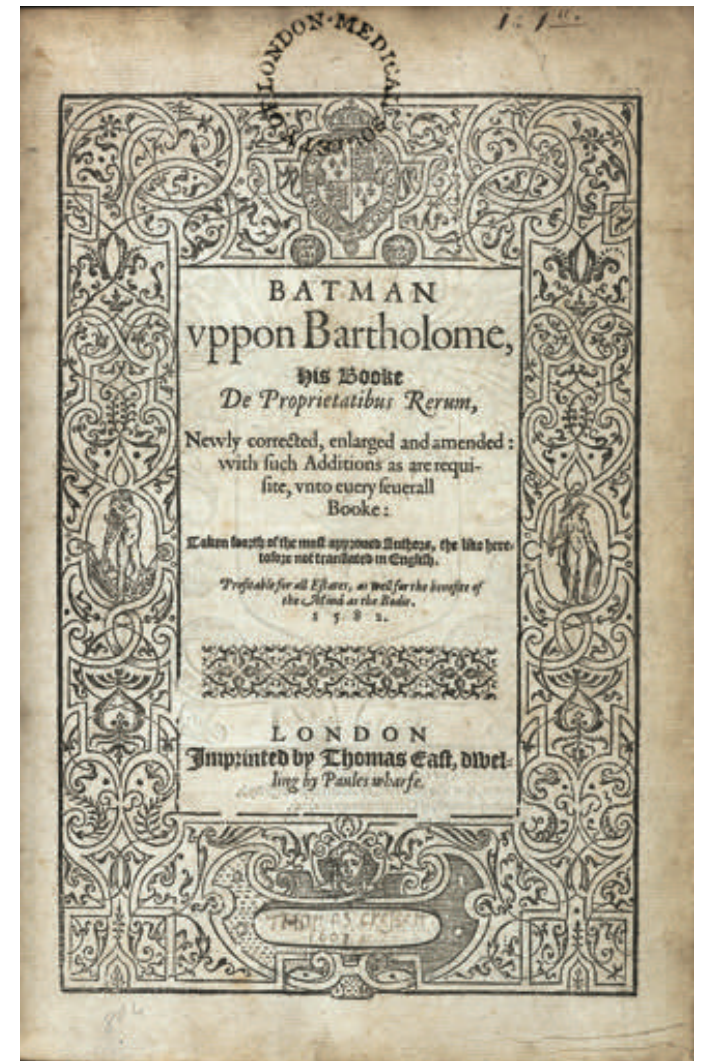
The popular mid-13th-century Latin encyclopedia *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, written by the Franciscan monk Bartholomeus Anglicus (active 13th century), shows how widely accepted Pliny's conception of painting became. The compendium concludes a long section about color with a paragraph about painting in Book XIX, noting that Pliny had written about all the things discussed. In fact, however, the text closely follows the entry 'Pictura' in the immensely important 7th-century encyclopedia *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville (c560–636), who also relied on intermediaries rather than Pliny's text for his information.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, however, the content is unmistakably Pliny's, especially the historical stages identified in the development of painting. In 1398, the encyclo-

pedia became available in an English translation by John Trevisa (1342–1402) called *On the Properties of Things*.<sup>13</sup> A major figure in the development of Middle English, Trevisa was responsible for important translations from Latin that created a new type of prose to convey scientific and historical information.<sup>14</sup> Although only a few manuscript copies of *On the Properties of Things* survive, three different printed editions appeared between 1495 and 1582. The last, a version augmented by Stephen Bateman (c1510–1584) (Pl 1) using 16th-century sources and published as *Batman uppon Bartholome his Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum*, was still being read in the 17th century.<sup>15</sup>

The section about painting in *De Proprietatibus Rerum* begins with basic definitions. In Trevisa's translation it reads: '[H]e that portrayeth ymages and liknesses of thinges ben ycleped [called] peyntours. Peynture is ycleped pictura'. The words used here show the mix of sources that was typical for Middle English and, as Trevisa often did, words are paired to clarify the meaning of one that might be unfamiliar. The verb 'portrayeth', which was derived from Latin, Old French, and Anglo-French, referred to the act of forming any image, including a mental one.<sup>16</sup> The word 'ymage', which could refer to any visual medium, painting as well as sculpture, came from the Latin 'imago' as well as the French 'image'. Its counterpart, 'liknesse', was from Old English. Finally, 'peyntour' and 'peynture' came from Old French and 'pictura' from Latin.

The account of the invention of painting that follows is Isidore's version of Pliny's story: 'The Egipcians founde first peynture. Mannes schadewe was putrayed, ytrased & ydrawe wiþ draughtes and wiþ lynes, and after peynted wiþ simple colours, and thereafter with dyuers colours'. Here 'ytrased' comes from Old French, 'drawe' and 'draughtes' from Old English, and 'lyne' from Old English, Old French, and Latin. This accords with Isidore's text but not Pliny's, which emphatically states that the Egyptians did not invent the medium. The subject is specified as a man's shadow which was traced (ie, outlined), drawn with lines, and painted, first with simple and then with many colors. Next, also like Isidore's text, comes a reference to light and shadow, but not in a way that explains much: 'So that craft encressed and fonde light and distyngued dyuers colours, and fonde the manere of peynting schadewes.' Thus the ideas of light, color, and shadow are introduced as subsequent discoveries ('encressed' and 'fonde') in the development of the medium. It ends with 'the ordre of the crafte, as Ysider seith', which Trevisa's text explains as: 'And now peyntours draweth first lynes and liknesses of the ymage that schal be peynted, and peynteth thanne with dyuers colours'. In this way, the sequence of steps Pliny used to posit a historical development became fundamental to the definition of the medium. Thus the designation of line and color as the two major components of painting and the idea that drawing precedes color in the process of making were familiar from medieval as well as classical texts.

Trevisa's work as a translator was crucial to the development of Middle English, but it is fair to say that writing about painting began with the poetry of his almost exact contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer (c1343–1400). The poet's deep familiarity with both classical and recent French and Italian literature made him an immensely important figure in the development of English as a language of literary accomplishment. Chaucer had travelled to France, Italy, and Spain as a soldier and diplomat during the 1360s and 1370s, perhaps meeting the poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) on one of



1 Title page of Stephen Bateman/Batman, *Batman uppon Bartholome his Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum*, London 1582. Wellcome Trust

these trips. Regardless of whether they actually met, the Italian's writings were essential to Chaucer's work. Another major influence was the long 13th-century French narrative poem about courtly love, *Roman de la Rose*, part of which Chaucer translated into English.<sup>17</sup> His special attention to visual things became part of his reputation. In 1597, Francis Beaumont, the father of the playwright of the same name, wrote about Chaucer: 'one gifte hee hat aboute other Authours, and that is, by the excellencie of his descriptions to possesse his Readers with a stronger imagination of seeing that done before their eyes, which they reade, than any other'.<sup>18</sup>

In 'The Physician's Tale' in *Canterbury Tales*, perhaps written about 1390, Chaucer set out a general, and entirely classical, definition of visual art.<sup>19</sup> It is a 'counterfete' of Nature in its purpose 'to forme and peynten erthely creaturis' (21). Thus defined in terms of two different types of making, sculpting and painting, it imitates Nature in its (re)creation of things on earth. The only addition to this antique precept is one typically made by medieval authors: that Nature worked in consort with God, 'For He that is the formere principal/Hath maked me his vicaire general' (19–20). This statement appears after Chaucer's narrator announces that



the story he will tell comes from Titus Livius, or Livy – which it doesn't, but this immediately frames the narrative as classical. A knight named Virginius has a lovely daughter, who seems to have been made by Nature just to show how beautiful one of its creations could be:

For Nature hath with sovereign diligence  
Yformed hire in so greet excellence,  
As though she wolde seyn, Lo! I, Nature,  
Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature,  
Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete?  
Pigmalion noght, though he ay forge and bete,  
Or grave, or peynte; for I dar wel seyn  
Apelles, Zanzis, sholde werche in veyn  
Outher to grave, or peynte, or forge, or bete,  
If they presumed me to countrefete. (9–18)

Again, everything here comes from the classical tradition. The goal of art is the imitation of nature. Painting and sculpture ('forme', or to 'forge', 'bete', and 'grave', words that come from Old English and Old French) are the most important mediums. The artists mentioned are the Greek mythological sculptor Pygmalion and two Greek painters, Apelles and Zeuxis. The first was most familiar from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the other two from the countless sources that repeated the information in Pliny's *Natural History*. All three artists challenged nature with depictions of beautiful women in famous anecdotes, and thus are particularly appropriate figures to cite in this context.

But, as often turns out to be the case with Chaucer, he took the content of these lines from another work. In this case, the names and the specific form of this comparison of art to nature come from *Roman de la Rose*. The presentation is more diffuse in the French poem, and the list of names there much longer. First come those who could not describe nature: Plato, Aristotle, Albus, Euclid, and Ptolemy. Then come the artists who could not rival Nature: Pygmalion, Parrhasius, Apelles, Miro, Polykleitos, and Zeuxis.<sup>20</sup> Including all of those names loses the focus of Chaucer's lines as well as the particular relevance to the question of rivaling female beauty created by Nature.

In his more extended visual descriptions, Chaucer used techniques associated with the Greek rhetorical trope of ekphrasis. As defined by classical rhetoricians, ekphrasis (or enargeia) brought interest to a speech or text through a vivid evocation of visual things.<sup>21</sup> Homer's lengthy account of Achilles's shield in *The Iliad* established the model for subsequent writers, including Virgil with his description of Aeneas's shield in *The Aeneid*. That these authors wrote about imaginary objects rather than actual historical works made no difference in terms of developing a suitable language. The test was whether the audience felt persuaded by the description, not whether a corresponding physical object existed. Ekphrases also typically added elements that could not be part of a visual work. Sound was one common example, movement another. In this way, classical writers played with the limits of the verbal and visual.

One of the most famous ekphrastic passages in Chaucer's poetry appears in *Parliament of Fowls*, probably written in 1381–2. The poem describes a dream inspired by reading Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, another instance of a narrative being carefully framed as classical. In Chaucer's work, the dreamer-narrator-lover wanders through a beautiful landscape before coming upon a temple of Venus 'in a privee corner' with the goddess inside it. (260) Placed close to the middle of the poem, the 15 lines about Venus interrupt the narrative as visual details accumulate into a richer single image than appears anywhere else in the work. This attention makes sense in terms of the content, since the subject is love

and so the goddess Venus is of special interest. Venus's counterweight in the poem is the goddess of Nature, who appears some twenty lines later. She also is noble, also associated with light and seated in brightness, but there is no lengthy description of her. A Queen, an Empress, and full of grace, the personification of Nature has no clear physical form. (298–308) Venus, on the other hand, appears as a silent, still, and very striking visual presence:

Derk was that place, but afterward lightnesse  
I saw a lyte, unnethe it myghte be lesse –  
And on a bed of golde she lay to reste,  
Til that the hote sonne gan to weste.  
Hyre gilte heres with a golden thred  
Ibounden were, untressed as she lay,  
And naked from the brest unto the hed  
Men myghte hire sen; and, sothly for to say,  
The remenaunt was wel kevered to my pay,  
Ryght with a subtyl coverchef of Valence –  
Ther was no thikkere cloth of no defense. (263–73)

Nestled within layers of illusion – this is a poem about a dream inspired by reading a book being recounted by the now-awake dreamer – the nature of the illuminated figure is not clear. The presentation of her as someone 'I saw' and 'men might hir see', without her moving or making a sound, creates the sense of distance that turns the narrator (and reader) into a viewer of a visual representation. For a reader, the words come together to form a vivid mental picture of the illuminated figure lying on a golden bed, with loose golden hair, naked from head to breast, the rest of her body covered with a light cloth. The only reference to anything outside the scene is to the sinking hot sun, but this movement is only potential and so it implies nothing about the nature of this Venus.

For us, Chaucer's passage suggests a golden-haired nude in a Venetian renaissance painting, something like a *Venus* or *Danaë* by Titian. In the 1380s, however, no such pictures existed, and the awkward naked Eves found in 14th-century paintings and sculptures have none of the sensual appeal of the poem's figure. In fact, Chaucer took his description from a literary not visual tradition, closely following that of the goddess found in the Temple of Venus in Boccaccio's *Teseida* (albeit with some new visual details).<sup>22</sup> But Boccaccio would not have seen anything resembling this goddess either. Behind both poems lie classical texts written by authors who knew many such painted and sculpted nudes. The Roman poet Ovid, for example, saw Apelles's painting of Venus Anadyomene which Augustus brought from Kos to Rome. He seems to refer to it directly in *Amores* 1.14 in a passage containing some of the same elements that Chaucer used: 'In the mornings you loved to lounge on your purple-spread bed,/your hair down and still uncombed./It was lovely loose and wild... full and heavy as the hair I once saw nude Dione lift aside with dripping fingers in a painting' (1.19–21; 1.33–4).<sup>23</sup> Apelles's work has been lost for centuries, but a wall painting found in the Casa di Venus in Pompeii of a reclining Venus, her nude body presented in full to the viewer, is an example of the sort of depiction that Ovid's imagery evokes. Writers in the 13th and 14th centuries, however, for whom such pictures would have been inconceivable, developed their descriptions from words and texts.

*Parliament of Fowls* continues with an account of the paintings associated with Venus 'peynted over al' the temple, but they are only described in the poem by the names of the lovers and the fact of their deaths. Although there is no suggestion of what they look like, interior walls covered with pictorial narratives would have been very familiar to contemporary readers and so the lines would have been imaginable in a way that a female nude would not.<sup>24</sup>

... and peynted overal  
Ful many a story, of which I touche shal  
A fewe, as of Calyxe and Athalante,  
And many a mayde of which the name I wante.  
Semyramis, Candace, and Hercules,  
Biblis, Dido, Thisbe, and Piramus,  
Tristram, Isaude, Paris, and Achilles,  
Eleyne, Cleopatre, and Troylus,  
Silla, and ek the moder of Romulus:  
Alle these were peynted on that other syde,  
And al here love, and in what plyte they dyde. (284–94)

The narrator then leaves the temple and returns to the beautiful garden described earlier, in which the figure of Nature presides over the mating of the birds. An account of this activity, which gives the work its name, occupies the rest of the poem.

Chaucer's longest passage involving paintings occurs in Part III of 'The Knight's Tale' in *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>25</sup> Also based on Boccaccio's *Teseida*, although with a great deal added, this section of the poem consists of a detailed account of Theseus's preparations for the coming battle between the knights. The specifics of the architectural constructions occupy much of Chaucer's attention (which is not true in Boccaccio's poem, where the structures already exist). This is not surprising since Chaucer actually had been in charge of such projects as Clerk of the King's Works (1389–91) for Richard II.<sup>26</sup> In his telling, the theater, explained in terms of its round shape and tiered seats, required the labor of every sort of skilled workman

For in the lond ther was no crafty man  
That geometrie or ars-metrike kan,  
Ne portreyour, ne kervere of ymages,  
That Theseus ne yaf him mete and wages  
The theatre for to maken and devyse. (1897–1901)

It is interesting that to 'devyse' is included. Although its meaning varied in Middle English, one sense was planning or designing, which, like geometry and arithmetic, adds an intellectual component to the requisite skills.<sup>27</sup> However, it seems that the phrase 'crafty [or highly skilled] man' does not include the painter or the carver, who are separated from the first group by the repetition of 'ne'.

The poem continues with a description of the chapels dedicated to Venus, Mars, and Diana. They 'coste largely of gold a fother' [cartload] (1908), were 'riche for to see' (1911), and 'wroght in noble wyse' (1055). Conventional though these last two remarks may seem to us, they are nonetheless the start of a vocabulary of aesthetic appreciation. The next lines promise greater elaboration about

The noble kervyng and the portreitures,  
The shap, the contenance, and the figures  
That weren in thise oratories thre. (1915–7)

Here again the word 'noble' is used as a very positive term, although without being related to any particular visual quality. The specific components of the chapels are defined in terms of medium – sculpture (kervyng) and painting (portreitures) – as well as what they look like – shape (shap) and appearance (contenance) – and, finally, the stories told (the figures).

The first temple discussed is Venus's, which has images 'Wroght on the wal, ful pitous to biholde'. Although the specific stories are not named, the effects of love on their protagonists are, including 'broken slepes', 'sikes colde', 'sacred teeris', 'waymentyng', as well as 'firy strokes of the desiryng' (1919–21). This elaboration of the emotions experienced by the painted lovers allows the reader to follow the narrator in finding the figures 'pitous'. Looking is presented as an active process of vicarious emotional response in which,

however, the reader lacks the ability to respond independently to the scenes since they are not described. Nonetheless, the passage engages with the original goal of classical ekphrasis, persuasion of the audience.

After this setting of the scene, Venus comes into view as a 'statue', 'glorious for to se'. In Middle English, the word statue most often referred to a three-dimensional representation, but it also could be a painted, woven, or embroidered image. The description of her 'fletyng in the large see', the lower half of her body covered by waves, certainly suggests something pictorial rather than sculptural.

The statue of Venus, glorious for to se,  
Was naked, fletyng in the large see,  
And fro the navel doun al covered was  
With wawes grene, and brighte as any glas.  
A citole in hir right hand hadde she,  
And on hir heed, ful semely for to se,  
A rose gerland, fressh and wel smellyng;  
Above hir heed hir dowves flikerynge. (1955–62)

Like many classical ekphrases, the description moves from the visual to evocations of other senses: she holds a zither-like musical instrument, the rose garland is 'ful semely for to se' as well as being 'wel smellyng', and doves are in movement above her head.

The modern reader probably thinks of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Uffizi), which dates from about a century later than the poem. But Chaucer's source was probably the same as Botticelli's, Pliny's mention of the famous Venus Anadyomene by Apelles (the painting which probably inspired the passage by Ovid quoted above). Again, since Chaucer had no access to such an image in any visual medium, he relied on textual traditions. Despite that, the passage explicitly makes the reader into a viewer, with 'to se' repeated twice, about Venus herself who was 'glorious' and about the rose garland on her head which was 'ful semely'. As with the presentation of the goddess in *Parliament of Fowls*, we seem to be given something to look at rather than a being with which we (potentially) can have a responsive relationship. And 'glorious' and 'semely' have been added to 'rich' and 'noble' as terms of high praise for something visual, although again without being given any particular definition.

Next comes the temple of Mars, where 'Al peynted was the wal, in lengthe and brede' (1970). The description continues with vivid details about what is shown in the pictures, much of it about horrifying acts of war and violence. This gives us, the readers, access to some of what inspires the emotional response to what Chaucer characterizes as scenes 'hidouse to biholde'. It begins with an immensely visual account of the painted landscape setting:

First on the wal was peynted a forest,  
In which ther dwelleth neither man ne best,  
With knotty, knarry, bareyne trees olde,  
Of stubbes sharpe and hidouse to biholde,  
In which ther ran a rumbel in a swough,  
As though a storm sholde bresten every bough. (1975–80)

Interspersed within the recounting of multiple scenes is the phrase 'saugh I', reminder of the presence of the narrator and the fact that he is looking at depictions. The section ends with an explicit reference to the fact that the scene was painted: 'With soutil pencil was depeynt this storie' (2049). The phrase 'soutil pencil' could mean that the brush was thin rather than anything about the quality of the depiction, as Chaucer used the word a few lines above: 'Hangyng by a soutil twynes threed'. (2030) But it also could mean something closer to our sense of the word, as he used it about King Darius's tomb in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue': 'Which that Appelles wroghte subtilly'. (505) Of course by the 18th cen-



ture, the phrase subtle brush or pencil was often used to indicate artistic mastery.

Finally the narrator arrives at the temple of Diana. It too is decorated: ‘Depeynted been the walles up and down/Of huntyng and of shamefast chastitee’. (2054-5) After several references to seeing (‘Ther saugh I’) and the fact that the stories being told are painted (‘Thus was it peynted’), comes the reminder of the maker and of the materials used. Strikingly, it comes after a scene that is structured by sound and feeling rather than physical appearance – a woman in stopped labor, who called out ‘ful pitously’ to the goddess of childbirth, Lucinda (2083–5). It is precisely the degree to which this picture convinced the viewer that demonstrates the skill of the artist:

Wel koude he peynten lifly, that it wroghte;  
With many a floryn he the hewes boghte. (2087–8)

These lines add two more terms about paintings: about what we would call style, that the artist ‘peynten lifly’, and about material, the ‘hewes’, which was the Old English word for the Latin and Old French ‘color’. The term ‘lifty’ became a very important word in Renaissance criticism in England, although here it seems to be limited to a conventional tribute to the naturalistic illusion of the pictures.<sup>28</sup> As it happens, the statues of Venus and of Mars come alive in the poem, making the classical praise of a work of art true in this telling. The reference to the price of paints reminds the reader of the physicality of the image as well as the importance of cost in choice of colors. Some were expensive enough to have to be supplied by the patron.<sup>29</sup>

Like Chaucer, the poet John Lydgate (c1370–c1451) often wrote vivid visual descriptions.<sup>30</sup> This reflects shared sources as well as the immense influence of Chaucer’s work on the younger man. *Troy Book*, written by Lydgate at the request of Henry, Prince of Wales (later Henry V) between 1412 and 1420, was a Middle English translation and enlarged version of Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae*, a lengthy prose work written in Latin in 1287.<sup>31</sup> In it, in Lydgate’s words, Priam undertakes the rebuilding of the city of Troy:

He made seke in every regioun  
For swiche werkemen as were corious,  
Of wyt inventyf, of castyng merveilous,  
Or swyche as coude crafte of gemetrye,  
Or wer sotyle in her fantasye;  
And for everyche that was good devysour,  
Mason, hewer, or crafty quareour; ... (2.490–6)

Chaucer’s workmen are ‘crafty’, but Lydgate’s masons, carvers, and quarriers are ‘corious’, ‘inventyf’, ‘merveilous’, ‘sotyle in her fantasye’, and ‘good devysour’. The word ‘curious’, which Chaucer also used, remained a common term of praise into the 18th century.<sup>32</sup> And Lydgate’s list goes on:

He sent also for euery ymagour,  
Bothe in entaille, & euery purtreyour  
That coude drawe, or with colour peynt  
With hewes fresche, that the werke nat feynt ;  
And swiche as coude with countenaunces glade  
Make an ymage that wil neuere fade:  
To counterfet in metal, tre, or stoon  
The sotil werke of Pigmaleoun,  
Or of Appollo, the whiche as bokis telle,  
In ymagerye alle other dide excelle;  
For by his crafty werkynge corious, ... (2.507–17)

This list expands greatly on Chaucer’s in ‘The Knight’s Tale’ as well as on Lydgate’s source. Here ‘ymagour’ is a general term that includes both sculpture and painting. Most striking is the addition of drawing and coloring as separate skills of a ‘purtreyour’, familiar from medieval as well as classical texts (like Trevisa’s *On the Properties of Things*, discussed above),

but not part of Guido’s poem.<sup>33</sup> The word ‘sotil’ clearly is a term of praise for Pygmalion’s work. Appollo seems to refer to the sculptor of Darius’s tomb, perhaps even taken from Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’. But it is possible that the painter Apelles is meant, paired with Pygmalion as he is in Chaucer’s ‘Physician’s Tale’ (both quoted above).

Lydgate mentioned Pygmalion again in *Troy Book*:

Pigmalyon, remembrid in the Rose,  
In his tyme hadde no konnyng  
To grave or peint so corious a thing : (4.5590–92)

The reference is to the myth as told in *Roman de la Rose*, a much more common source for it at this time than Ovid’s poem. Pygmalion here stands for the highest conceivable level of human artistic achievement, but even he could not have made something as glorious as this temple to Pallas, which ‘ne was ther noon halfe so wel ywrought’ (4.5588). This was because of heavenly intervention: ‘it was wrought with dilligent labour/By hond of aungil in the hevenly tour,Thorough Goddes myght and devyn ordinaunce’ (4.5593–5).

A poem written by John Gower (c1330–1408) shows by comparison how visually descriptive Chaucer’s and Lydgate’s poetry is. Gower, who also was well travelled, wrote poems in Latin, French, and English. His most important work in the last, the lengthy *Confessio Amantis*, was written between about 1386 and 1392, apparently at the request of King Richard II.<sup>34</sup> Pygmalion appears here too (4.372). The only Middle English author to present the whole story rather than just refer to the artist, Gower might have known it from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* rather than from an intermediary source such as the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>35</sup> The poem makes clear how beautiful Pygmalion’s sculpture was:

He made an ymage of entaile  
Lich to a womman in semblance  
Of fecture and of contenance,  
So fair yit nevere was figure.  
Riht as a lyves creature  
Sche semeth, for of yvor whyt  
He hath hire wroght of such delit,  
That sche was rody on the cheke  
And red on bothe hire lippes eke; (4.378–86)

Thus she was ‘fair’, ‘rody on the cheke’, and ‘red on bothe hire lippes’. But these are conventional attributes, which do not provide specific visual details that allow the reader to envision her. The image created is nothing like Chaucer’s sensual Venus in *Parliament of Fowls* for example. Perhaps this makes it less surprising that the poem rejects the straightforward meaning of the classical story, about art so real that it comes to life. In Gower’s telling, the tale proves instead the triumph of words: ‘Be this ensample thou miht finde/That word mai worche above kinde’. (4.437–8) By continuing to plead his cause, Pygmalion persuaded the goddess to give him a mate.

It is clear from all of these poems that the idea of a visual object being made by someone skilled or ‘crafty’ was very familiar in England by the beginning of the fifteenth century. Richness and material splendor were valued, and sometimes related to the visual effect they had on the viewer. Lydgate’s city of Troy, for example, had alabaster white marble ‘to make more plesaunt of delyt’ and ‘to make it schewe withinne and withoute/So fresche, so riche, and so delitable’ (2.281; 2.284–5). Words like ‘riche’, ‘delitable’, ‘noble’, and ‘fair’ were used as general praise. But the greatest compliment was to describe something as ‘lifty’, taken from the classical commonplace that a work seemed so convincing it looked as if it could speak or move. Such a persuasive visual presence could provoke an emotional response, as did the painted

lovers in Venus’s temple that Chaucer described as ‘ful pitous to biholde’. However, none of these terms conveys what the things looked like. Even more important for the development of writing about painting, none suggests categories that might describe the particulars of their appearance. The infrequent references to drawing and color, for example, do not form an analytical system like that developed during the 16th- and 17th-centuries in the academies. They are conventional parts of the making of the work rather than distinguishable aspects of the finished object.<sup>36</sup>

There are two types of 15th-century English writing that do concern actual visual works. The first are work contracts, which usually specify the materials to be used and emphasize the quality of the workmanship. Sometimes they also mention the subject, although rarely explaining it in any detail. This is essentially a continuation of what had been done for centuries, albeit in the vernacular instead of Latin. The second are the writings associated with the religious reformers, who mostly wrote in English, even when addressing opponents writing in Latin. While explaining their opposition to the ways in which the traditional church used visual art, they discussed what works would be acceptable in a religious context and aspects of how they should look. Since it was, in their understanding, the response of the viewer that ultimately determined what was appropriate, looking and the one who looked received as much attention as what they looked at. This approach changed the balance of their analyses. In a way that was, arguably, not seen again in England until the late 18th century, the response of a viewer to a work became its most telling measure.

An early example of a contract written in English is from 1405, made with John Thornton of Coventry for the great East Window at York Minster. It specifies that ‘according to the best of his skill and Cunning’, he was ‘obliging himself wth his own hands to portrature the sd Window wth Historicall Images and other painted work, in the best Mannor and form that he possibly could... And [he will receive his due] if he performed his work well and truly, and perfect it according to the tenor of these covenants’.<sup>37</sup> Clearly the stress is on the quality of the work of the master himself: ‘the best of his skill and Cunning’, ‘with his own hands’, ‘the best Mannor and form that he possibly could’, ‘performed his work well and truly’. The words ‘Mannor and form’, which sound as if they might refer to visual elements of the work, in fact translate the common Latin legal phrase ‘modo et forma’, which means to cover every possible aspect of a subject. The content of the ‘Historicall Images’ in the window, which form an unusual and immensely elaborate scheme of 311 panels showing subjects from Genesis and Revelation, is not explained at all. Neither are the many issues involved in their design and arrangement.<sup>38</sup>

Contracts for the decoration of the Beauchamp Chapel, Warwick, are a little more specific. One, made with John Prudde of Westminster in 1447, was to glaze all the windows in the chapel:

... in the finest wise, with the best, cleanest, and strongest glasse of beyond the Sea that may be had in England, and of the finest colours of blew, yellow, red, purple [sic], sanguine, and violet, and of all other colours that shall be most necessary, and best to make rich and embellish the matters, Images, and stories that shall be delivered and appointed by the said Executors by patterns in paper, afterward to be newly traced and pictured by another Painter in rich colour.<sup>39</sup>

First specified are the materials, clearly expensive, needed to ‘make rich and embellish’ the windows. But this contract also reveals a little about the process of making, which is divided

into two stages: the design, which will be delivered as ‘patterns in paper’, and its translation by someone else into a colored image. The use of paper, which became more common in England during the 15th century, made it easier to communicate visual information than the older board or wooden panel.<sup>40</sup> Another contract, from 1450, concerns the painting of the Last Judgement on the west wall of the same chapel:

John Brentwood, Citizen and Steyner of London ... doth covenant to paint finely and curiously to make at Warwick, on the West wall of the new Chappell there, the Dome [ie ‘Doom’, the usual term for Last Judgement] of our Lord God Jesus, and all manner of devises and Imagery thereto belonging, of fair and sightly proportion, as the place shall serve for, with the finest colours and fine gold.<sup>41</sup>

To ‘paint finely’ and ‘curiously to make’ are close variants of ‘to the best of his skill and Cunning’ quoted above. Although the phrase ‘fair and sightly proportion’ suggests a concern for the overall composition and the relation of the parts in it, more likely it is about the fit of the pictures into the given space, or ‘as the place shall serve for’. Finally, the ‘devises and Imagery thereto belonging’ indicates that conventions in contemporary treatments of the subject determined what was to be shown. Only in those cases where there was no norm to rely on were details given in contracts, although even then many aspects were left unwritten.<sup>42</sup>

Almost the opposite in emphasis from the work contracts are the writings about visual images by religious reformers, some but not all of them followers of John Wycliffe (c1330–1384).<sup>43</sup> Instead of stressing the quality of the materials and the skill of the maker, they underlined the lifelessness of the materials and regarded the makers with suspicion. Since their major concern was that religious images would lead viewers to idolatry, anything that might increase the potential deception was mistrusted. This included the choice of subject as well as the way it was represented. But the real test of appropriateness was the response of the viewer, and so considerable attention was given to explaining proper ways of looking. Although medieval clerics also had written about this, the 15th-century texts were in English not Latin, and were aimed at a more general readership.<sup>44</sup> They included doctrinal works such as the popular early 15th-century *Dives and Pauper*, a fictional dialogue between a rich layman and a poor teacher about what to believe and how to behave, as well as religious poetry by John Lydgate among others. A very few accounts of contemporary viewing survive, of which *The Book of Margery Kempe* is especially vivid.

The reformers based their opposition to visual depictions of religious subjects on Biblical text. In Wycliffe’s translation, made during the late 14th century, the relevant passage reads: ‘Thou schalt not make to thee a grauun ymage, nethir ony licnesse of thing which is in heuene aboue, and which is in erthe bynethe, nether of tho thingis, that ben in watris vndur erthe; thou schalt not `herie [praise] tho, nether `thou schalt worschipe’ (Exodus 20.4–5 as well as Deuteronomy 5.8–9, at this time generally counted as part of the first rather than the second commandment). Sculpture, considered a ‘grauun ymage’, was much more objectionable in their estimation than two-dimensional pictures, although the latter also could present a ‘licnesse of thing’ that deceived and misled. For this reason, the ambiguity about medium inherent in the Middle English use of the word ‘ymage’ was very useful. It was not until the arrival of humanist texts in the 16th century that the differences between painting and sculpture became the subject of specific and interested debate (discussed below).



The most important justification for religious images was instruction. Using the same arguments advanced by Pope Gregory the Great (c540–604) in his often-quoted letters from about 600, the reformers conceded that pictures could serve as books for the illiterate.<sup>45</sup> In the words of *Dives and Pauper*, they are ‘a tokene and a book to the lewyd peple, that they moun redyn in ymagerye and peynture that [which] clerys redyn in boke’. One example of a visual representation that usefully informed viewers was the Crucifixion. As explained in John Mirk’s collection of homilies from about 1400: ‘mony thousaund of pepul that could not ymagen ...how Crist was don on the rood, but as thai lerne hit be sight of ymages and payntours’.<sup>46</sup> Texts such as *Dives and Pauper* as well as contemporary sermons offered explanations of common pictorial conventions, especially when they did not follow the details given in the Biblical text. The apostles, for example, were ‘peyntyd barefoot in tokene of innocence and penance’.<sup>47</sup> Depictions on public display in churches also aided worshippers by offering ‘seable rememoratif signes’ that were available at any time. ‘[T]hei schulen not fynde men so redi for to rede a dosen leeuys of a book to hem, as thei schulen fynde redy the wallis of a chirche peintid or a clooth steyned or ymagis sprad abroad in dyuerse placis of the chirche’.<sup>48</sup> Behind these writings was the belief that ‘often man is more steryd be syghte than be heryng or redyngge’.<sup>49</sup> This idea, that seeing something had a greater impact than hearing or reading about it, made visual imagery that much more important – and that much more dangerous.

The emphasis on instruction influenced the choice of subject for visual works. Narratives, which could teach moral values, were less objectionable than single figures, which seemed more likely to encourage idolatrous feelings in viewers. This led to the popularity of depicting Biblical stories. Thus a representation of the Crucifixion, a single event described in the Gospels, had a very different standing from one of the Trinity, a grouping that had no similar textual source. Because it had never existed in this world, any visual representation was fundamentally fraudulent.<sup>50</sup> By definition, therefore, such a depiction had to be a scene from a human imagination. As Thomas Bilson (1547–1616), Bishop of Winchester, explained: ‘The forme is nothing but the skill and draught of the craftsman, proportioning a shape not like unto Christ whom he never sawe, but [where] his own fancie leadeth him... and in that case you worshippe not the similitude of our saviour but the conceite of this maker’.<sup>51</sup> Of course by the time this statement was made in the early 17th century, many in England were happy to praise the ‘conceite’ and ‘fancie’ of the maker, at least if the subject of the work was not religious.

The presence of the maker was stressed in the reformers’ texts since an important part of their argument was that the works were human, emphatically not divine, creations. In 1407, during the examination of the Lollard priest William Thorpe, both Thorpe and his questioner Archbishop Thomas Arundel defined the images in terms of specific acts of making: ‘an image-maker shall carve, cast in mould, or paint’. In their defense, the Archbishop said it was ‘a great moving of devotion to men, to have and behold... images... carved, cast, and painted’. For Thorpe though, ‘nobody should trust that there were any virtue in imagery made with man’s hand; and therefore nobody should vow to them, nor seek them, nor kneel to them, nor bow to them, nor pray to them, nor offer any thing to them, nor kiss them, nor incense them’.<sup>52</sup>

At risk was understanding that ‘ech lyuyng man is verier and perfiter and fuller and better representing ymage of Crist and of ech Seint, than is eny vnquyk stok or stoon graued and ourned with gold and othere gay peinturis’.<sup>53</sup> This led to consideration of the spiritual status of the person engaged in ‘the sinful and vain craft of painting, carving, or casting’. By 1549, the *Book of Common Prayer* was clear: ‘Cursed is the man that maketh any carued or molten image... the worke of the handes of the craftesmanne’.<sup>54</sup>

But the essential issue was the degree to which the image might deceive the viewer, and anything that increased this possibility suspect. The *Lantern of Light*, published in 1415, explains: ‘The peyntour makith an ymage forgid with diverse colours til it seme in foolis iyen as a lyveli creature’.<sup>55</sup> This quite likely refers to the painting of a statue, but the particulars were not of great concern to the author, whose attention was on the convincing illusion rather than the medium. Colour was especially troubling, because it made the verisimilitude more complete. As the matter was explained in a sermon: ‘A peyntur penteth now is ymage with white colours, now with blake, now with red colours, now with mydle colour after that it be-commes yre ymage’.<sup>56</sup> It also attracted attention, as John Capgrave’s St Katherine said about the proposed statue of her: ‘for though it were to the sight/fful delectable, with colouris shynynge bryght’.<sup>57</sup> Kathleen L Scott has argued that these concerns about illusionistic techniques favoured the emphatic black outlines and intense colours characteristic of British manuscript illumination at this time. Certainly they resulted in Lollard manuscripts having no illustrations at all.<sup>58</sup> A variety of scholars have suggested that ‘simple’ styles might have been used in both England and the Continent to diminish the likeness of the representation.<sup>59</sup>

Of course, regardless of its appearance, there could be no direct engagement with any religious representation. In an especially detailed list from 1538, Nicholas Shaxton, Bishop of Salisbury, instructed that there was to be no ‘decking of images with gold, silver, clothes, lights, or herbs; nor the people kneel to them, nor worship them, nor offer candles, oats, cake-bread, cheese, wool, or any other such things to them; ... only to behold, or look upon them, as one looketh upon a book’.<sup>60</sup> The list makes clear the immensity of the transformation that the reformers demanded – from an active, responsive relationship into passive looking. And offerings, even if not idolatrous, offended in another respect as well: ‘riche men clothen dede stockis & stonys with precious clothis, with gold & siluer & perlis & gaynesse to the world, & suffren pore men goo sore a cold & at moche meschefe’.<sup>61</sup>

In the end though, what mattered most was a proper understanding of what was seen. Contemporary texts offered explicit guidance for viewers. The traditional idea was that the priest provided the correct model of response. As explained in *Dives and Pauper*, ‘He knelyat, he staryat, he loyat on his book, he heldyat up hese hondys and for devocioun in caas he wepyat and makyat devowte preyerys’. But he spoke ‘nought to the ymage that the carpenteer hat mad and the peyntour peynted... for that stok or stoon was neuere king’. So too, the worshipper should ‘Make thin preyere afor the ymage but nought to the ymage, for it seeth the nought, it heryght the nought, it vnderstandyght the nought’. The stress on the deadness of the image is typical, and of course central to the argument of the reformers. The Pauper also offers a step-by-step guide for how a viewer should look at various key subjects. In a passage about the Crucifixion, for example, each of the details that should be

studied is introduced with the phrase ‘Take heid’: of the ‘garlond of thornys’, the nature of the injuries to the arms, hands, side, and feet. These are not the things needed to envision ‘how Crist was don on the rood’, although they are that too, but rather the details that will inspire a more intense affective experience. In this sort of reading, attention to the physical object is not just irrelevant but a possible act of idolatry. As a conduit to the spiritual, the work only matters for its significant parts.<sup>62</sup>

Other writings present the same sort of programmatic guide to looking found in *Dives and Pauper*. A number of John Lydgate’s religious poems offer such instruction.<sup>63</sup> ‘Image of Our Lady’, for example, describes how to look at a copy of the so-called *Madonna del Popolo* in Rome. It begins

Beholde and se this glorious figure,  
Whiche Sent Luke of our lady lyvyng  
After her lyknes made in picture,  
Lo here she is after the same wyrkyng  
As in Rome is had of Saynt Lukes payntyng,  
In erthe as she was and her sone also. (1–6; p290)

The first line echoes the one by Chaucer that led to a description of the ‘glorious for to se’ image of Venus in ‘The Knight’s Tale’. But here, instead of suggesting what the figure looks like, the narrator moves at once to justify the depiction by associating it with St Luke’s original painting in Rome. Made by the saint in the presence of ‘our lady lyvyng’, the painting showed Mary ‘In erthe as she was and her sone also’. Thus the paintings, both the copy and what it copied, offered an image of a historical scene rather than an imagined one. The poem then explains the role visiting the painting in Rome plays in receiving a penance.

In ‘The Fifteen Joys and Sorrows of Mary’, Lydgate outlined the elements to be looked at in a pieta, a very popular image type in England at the time. A vivid setting of the scene encourages the reader of the poem to identify fully with the narrator’s surprise discovery of the image of the ‘pyte’ in a book:

(1) Atween mydnayht and the fresch morwe gray  
Nat yore ago, in herte ful pensiff, ...  
Of fortune turnyng the book, I fond  
A meditacious which first came to myn hond,  
(2) Tofor which was sett out in picture  
Of Marie an ymage ful notable,  
Lyke a pyte depeynt was the figure  
With weepyng eyen, and cheer most lamentable:  
Thouh the proporcioun by craft was agreable,  
Hir look down cast with teerys al bereyned, –  
Of hertly sorwe so soore she was constreyned.  
(1–2, 6–14; p268)

It is striking how decisively the narrator sets aside the agreeably crafted ‘porporcioun’ (which Lydgate often discussed in his secular poetry) and makes clear that the proper focus is on the weeping eyes and downcast look, details which reveal her ‘hertly sorwe’. A ‘diligent and cleer inspeccioun’ led to the conclusion that ‘To beholde it did myn herte good’ (17; 31). Again, it was certain details of the ‘ymage ful notable’ that inspired meditation on Mary’s life – as well as the writing of this poem. By following the same path, the reader could achieve the same comfort.<sup>64</sup>

More complicated is Lydgate’s account in *The Testament* of the spiritual inspiration that resulted from him seeing a crucifixion painted on a cloister wall. First, perhaps in a gesture of caution because of the reformers, the image is put very much at a remove, seen in memory only, carefully located in another place and time. Furthermore, as the poetic narrator explains, unlike Pygmalion’s statue which ‘shewed lifly and was made but of ston’, this Crucifixion did not fool the viewer with verisimilitude. (Stanza 92; p355) Finally, the

poem makes clear that it was the word ‘Vide’ written beside the picture more than the figure itself that directed the narrator’s thoughts. Upon remembering this experience, he decides to write ‘on this word, “vide”, ... this litel dite, this compilacioun’. (Stanza 100; p357) But then, in a dramatic turn, the statue becomes ‘lifly’, and Christ himself speaks for the rest of the poem. This final section, entitled ‘Vide’, begins: ‘Beholde, o man! lyft vp thyn eye, and see’ (Stanza 99; p356). Then follows a series of Beholds that, like ‘Take heid’ in *Dives and Pauper*, directs the reader to the significant visual details of a crucifixion and indicate the correct response to them. In this way, the poem provides a map of how to look and how to feel. After Lydgate’s death, the first stanza in the sequence was written in large gold letters on a black plaque that hung over the altar at Holy Trinity church, Long Melford. Isolated from the rest of the poem (most of which hung elsewhere in the church), the words would have captured and controlled the sight of the crucifixion, still a focus of the church architecture and ritual.<sup>65</sup>

Unscripted looking at religious works was discouraged, at least for the uneducated. The *Tale of Beryn*, a popular work that purported to be part of *Canterbury Tales* (but was not written by Chaucer), describes one such scene in the Cathedral.<sup>66</sup> Going to make their devotions at the shrine of St Thomas Becket, the Pardoner, the Miller, and ‘other lewd sotes’ attempt to identify a figure on one of the stained glass windows:

Pyred fast and poured highe oppon the glase,  
Counterfeting gentilmen, the armes for to blase,  
Diskyveryng fast the peyntour, and for the story mourned  
And ared also – right as rammes horned!  
‘He bereth a balstaff,’ quod the toon, ‘and els a rakes ende.’  
‘Thow failest,’ quod the Miller, ‘thowe hast nat wel thy mynde.  
It is a spere, yf thowe canst se, with a prik tofore  
To bussh adown his enmy and thurh the sholder bore.’  
‘Pese!’ quod the Hoost of Southwork. ‘Let stond the wyndow glased.  
Goth up and doth your offerynge.’ (149–158)

In other words, the act of interpreting in itself is regarded as ‘counterfeting gentilmen’, an inappropriate activity for ‘lewd sotes’. What they were supposed to do instead was very different: ‘Sith the holy reliques ech man with his mowth/Kissed, as a goodly monke the names told and taught’. (166–167)

The most famous 15th-century account of what purports to be an actual response to a specific religious image was written by Margery Kempe (c1373–1438). Like the narrator in Lydgate’s poem, she saw a pieta – this one in a church in Norwich – and was swept into an emotional experience: ‘[S]he went to the church... [and] sey a fayr ymage of owr Lady clepyd a pyté. And thowr the beholding of that peté hir mende was al holy occupyed in the Passyon of owr Lord Jhesu Crist and in the compassyon of owr Lady, Seynt Mary, be wech sche was compellyd to cryn ful lowde and wepyn ful sor, as thei sche schulde a deyd’. When a priest in the church objects to her loud cries, remarking that ‘Jhesu is ded long sithyn’, she replies: ‘Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyd this same day’. As she explained, it was the act of ‘beholding’ that inspired her to be ‘holy occupyed in the Passyon’.<sup>67</sup> She only needed to see the details that identified the subject for her to experience the historical event as if it was in the present. The physical presence of the work, although alluded to with the phrase ‘fayr image’, was a means, a link, for her, and not something that had any independent importance.

Major change in the ways painting was written about in English did not come until the 16th century and it developed from familiarity with texts rather than the challenge of new



objects. Specifically, it was knowledge of Italian renaissance writings. Over the next two centuries, extensive contact with Italian humanism brought new kinds of visual description and analysis to England. Some of the writers most influential in the development of writing about painting, such as Sir Thomas Elyot (1490–1546) and Sir Thomas Hoby (1530–1566), were also major figures in the development of English as a modern language. This is not surprising, since being able to discuss the visual arts had become a necessary part of a liberal education and the ability to do so in English was proof of the viability of the language as a means of serious expression. Sometimes the type of description was ill-suited to the visual work being discussed, but that didn't matter. The discourse itself became a measure of the work, and its mastery the measure of the speaker or writer. The fluency with which writers – Shakespeare among many others – used these humanist conventions indicated how familiar they had become by the end of the century.

The first important book to arrive was Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, which firmly placed acquaintance with the visual arts among the requisites of a courtier and gentleman. Published in Italy in 1528, the book reflected the ideas about art current in Italy at the time, including the popular comparison of painting to sculpture. Using the classical form of the dialogue, Castiglione demonstrated new ways of description and analysis by means of lively discussions set in the court of Urbino. Copies appeared in London within a year or two, a speed that reveals the many connections between the two countries as well as the immense popularity of *Il Cortegiano* throughout the continent.<sup>68</sup> The first English translation, which appeared in 1561, was by Sir Thomas Hoby, a diplomat with wide-ranging contacts in Italy. His *Courtier* (Pl 2) came to be regarded as a model of English prose, recommended by no less an authority than Roger Ascham.<sup>69</sup> It remained the standard English edition until the twentieth century. Castiglione's book was just one of many Italian as well as Greek and Roman texts that appeared in English translations under humanist influence during the second half of the 16th century. But Castiglione's book was the one that established the importance of being able to discuss art, and so was an essential first step.

Evidence of the influence of *Il Cortegiano* in England appeared almost immediately in Sir Thomas Elyot's *Boke called the Gouernour*, published in 1531. An exposition of the education appropriate for gentlemen, especially those who wished to serve the state, it was a Tudor version of the courtesy book.<sup>70</sup> Elyot, a diplomat, scholar, and writer, who was passionate about developing English as a modern language, presented knowledge of visual art as desirable in just the way that Castiglione had. Bolstered by quotations from classical writers and references to Phidias, Lysippus, and Vitruvius, Elyot suggested that 'in vacant tymes from other more serious lernynge, he shulde be, in the moste pure wise, enstructed in painting or keruinge'. (p43) Repeating arguments found in Castiglione's book as well as classical texts, he wrote that knowing about art could be useful in court, in war, and for study of all kinds. Using the same Aristotelian conception of sight that had appeared a century before in *Dives and Pauper*, Elyot stressed that it was more effective than reading or hearing: '[W]here the liuely spirite, and that which is called the grace of the thyng, is perfectly expressed, that thinge more persuadeth and stereth the beholder, and soner istructeth hym, than the declaration in writynge or speakynge doth the reder or

hearer'. (p45) Visual renditions even offered a way to inspire virtue: 'And he that is perfectly instructed in portrayture, and hapneth to rede any noble and excellent historie, wherby his courage is inflamed to the imitation of vertue, he forth with taketh his penne or pensill, and with a graue and substanciall studie, gatherynge to him all partes of imagination, endeouureth him selfe to expresse liuely, and (as I mought say) actually, in portrayture'. (p46) But, indicating how novel these ideas still were in England, Elyot hastened to add that he did not intend to 'make of a prince or noble mannes sonne, a commune painter or keruer, whiche shall present him selfe openly stained or embrued with sondry colours, or powdered with the duste of stones that he cutteth, or perfumed with tedious sauours of the metalles by him yoten'. (p48) This distinction, between someone who made art with physical labor and someone who didn't, remained an important issue for centuries.

By the time Hoby's translation of *Il Cortegiano* appeared 30 years later, Castiglione's recommendation that the aspiring courtier be 'cunning in drawyng, and the knowledge in the very arte of peincting' would not have seemed surprising.<sup>71</sup> (p91) But its presentation of distinctively Italian concepts of painting in English was new. The very first reference to the medium makes this clear. The author is no Raphael or Michelangelo, Castiglione wrote in the preface, but (in Hoby's words) an 'unknownen peincter', who can do no more than 'draw the principall lines, without setting furth the truth with beawtifull coulours, or makinge it appeere by the art of Prospective [ie, perspective] that [ie, what] it is not'. (p17) To use two of the most famous artists of the time (familiar at least by name in England) as the measure raises the stakes for the writer, not to mention emphasizes the centrality of contemporary visual artists in this view of things. But it is the description of the task of a painter that is so different. To define the medium in terms of drawing and color would have been familiar, but including perspective as the third element makes the sentence distinctively modern. Lydgate's lines, for example, which are more specific than most other mentions in the 15th century, sound formulaic by comparison: 'euery purtreyour/That coude drawe, or with colour peynt/With hewes fresche, that the werke nat feynt'. The use of perspective, which had been seen as an essential element of painting in Italy since Alberti's *Della Pictura*, still was associated with the science of optics at this time in England.<sup>72</sup>

The speakers in Castiglione's dialogues discuss painting at several points in Book I. The most extended exchange, with multiple voices contributing to it, appears in a comparison of painting to sculpture. Popular as a topic in Italy, what later came to be called the paragone had not reached England, where interest in shared qualities of depiction made the ambiguous 'ymage' almost always an appropriate term. For Castiglione, by contrast, the differences were essential to understanding each medium, which he defined in ways that would have been familiar to Italian readers from Petrarch, Alberti, Ghiberti, and others. This particular discussion probably reflects Leonardo's thoughts on the subject, which Castiglione may have heard from the painter himself.<sup>73</sup> The premise of the comparison, in Hoby's translation, is that 'both arise of one self fountayne (namelye) of a good patterne'. (p92)

Hoby's choice of the English word 'patterne' to translate 'disegno', the former usually referring to a design used as a template, emphasizes the dependence of the representation on the pre-existing object being represented. It does

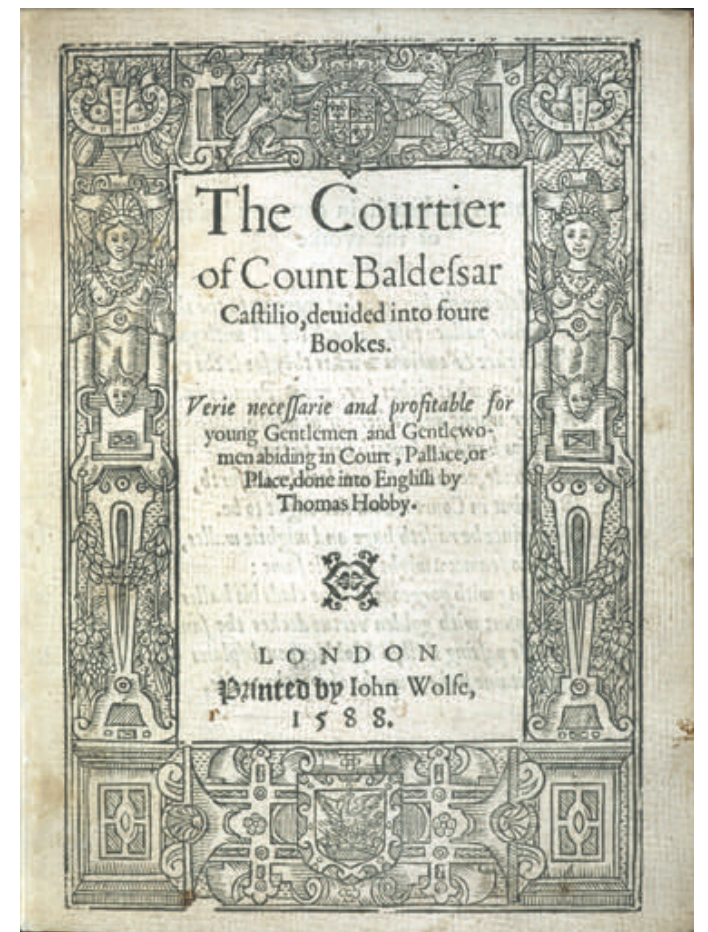
not, however, convey the other meanings of disegno in Italian.<sup>74</sup> Then the conversation turns to the differences, with the work of Raphael and Michelangelo cited as proofs of points of view. Again, the shared qualities are agreed upon: both sorts of depictions are made 'to set out a thing', and thus (as another remarks) are 'an artificiall following of nature'. In something carved though, the parts are 'all round, proporcioned and measured as nature her self shapeth them', while painting offers only the 'outwarde syght and those coulours that deceive the eyes : and... being, is not higher unto the trueth then seeming'. (p93) But, another speaker adds, it is not true that 'peinting appeareth and carving is : for although images [ie, carving] are all round like the lively patterne [ie, the subject in the world], and peinctyng is onely seene in the outward apparence', painting can include visual information that sculpture does not. The painter can distinguish among 'lightes and shadowes, for fleshe geveth one light, and Marble an other', and use 'cleare and darke'. 'Cleare and Darke' was an uncertain translation of the Italian 'chiaroscuro', a term still described as unfamiliar in early 17th-century England. Furthermore, although a painting is not round, 'he maketh the muscles and the members in round wise, so that they go to meete with the partes not seen' in a way that demonstrates the painter's knowledge. Finally, the painter relies upon 'an other crafte': 'they may seeme short and diminishe accordinge to the proportion of the sight by the way of perspective, ... by force of measured lines, coulours, lightes and shadowes' (p94). This was a distinctively Italian way to create a pictorial illusion of space.

In the midst of this animated discussion about the qualities of painting and sculpture comes a paen to what painting can capture:

Think you it agayn a triflynge matter to counterfeyt naturall coulours, flesh, clothe, and all other couloured thinges? This can not now the graver in marble do, ne yet express the grace of the sight that is in the black eyes or in azure with the shininge of those amorous beames. He can not show the coulour of yelow hear, not the glistring of armour, not a darke nyght, nor a Sea tempest, not those twincklinges and sperkeles, nor the burninge of a Citye, nor the rising of the mornyng in the coulour of roses with those beames of purple and gold. Finallye he can not show the skye, the sea, the earth, hilles, woddes, medowes, gardeines, rivers, Cityes, nor houses. (p94)

This impressive list is like an ekphrastic exercise in proving the splendor of the medium in part by attributing to it impossible qualities, including action and change through time. But the passage also itemizes specific visual things by which a work could be judged, including color, texture, light on a reflective surface, and various natural phenomena. The primary inspiration for Castiglione was most likely a type of ekphrastic writing that had been popular in the previous century, especially suited to the work of painters such as Pisanello, although he also may have been influenced by a similar list in the Philostrati's *Imagines*.<sup>75</sup>

Castiglione's discussions of painting contain one specific term that goes beyond the generalizations of classical commonplace. This is *sprezzatura*, which Hoby translated as recklessness, or 'to cover art withall, and seeme whatsoever he doth and sayeth to do it wythout pain, and (as it were) not mynding it'. (p59) Although mentioned by classical writers including Pliny, the idea had not been developed in the same way. Castiglione discussed it specifically in terms of the arts, first dancing, then music, and finally painting. About the last, he quoted Pliny that 'To mucche diligence is hurtfull, and that Apelles found fault with Protogenes because he could not keepe his handes from the table [ie, the picture]'. In



2 Title page of Thomas Hoby, *The Courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio*, London 1588, translation of Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, Venice 1528

other words, 'Protogenes knew not when it was well, which was nothyng els but to reprehend hys curyousnesse ... Recklesness ... is the true fountain from the whych all grace spryngeth' (p61). Furthermore, 'whoso can so sleightly do well, hath a great deale more knowledge than indeede he hath: and if he wyll apply hys study and dilygence to that he doeth, he might do it much better'. In the case of painting, Castiglione tied *sprezzatura* to a more particular characteristic: 'one lyne not studied upon, one draught with the pensel slightly drawn, so it appeareth the hand without the guiding of any study or art, tendeth to his mark, according to the peincters purpose, doth evidently discover the excellency of the workman, ...' (p62) This was a completely different way of looking at a drawn line, as a measure of artistic talent rather than as part of the process of making a finished work. Castiglione added that the ways in which painters work need not be the same. Leonardo, Mantegna, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Giorgione 'are all most excellent doers, yet they are working unlike, but in any of them a man woud not judge that there wanted ought in his kind of trade: for every one is knowen to be of most perfection after his maner'. (p75) Not defined, however, are the qualities that might make up this 'maner'.

It is hard for a modern reader to understand how remarkable Castiglione's analyses of painting would have seemed to a 16th-century English reader because his terms are those we still use today. Yet, in fact, as Michael Baxandall showed in



detail, they represent a specific development over more than a century of ideas inherited from the classical world, as well as tendentious choices of Italian words for Latin and Greek terms.<sup>76</sup> Castiglione's book, which reflects the vigorous discussions about the visual arts that had taken place over the previous 100 years, demonstrates the authority this language had in Italy by the early 16th century. There had been no comparable evolution in English, however, and the impact of Castiglione's book was immense. In England as in Europe, it resulted in a fundamental reshaping of the image of the gentleman. The tentative statements found in Elyot's guide from 30 years earlier were swept aside by the imposing figure of the courtier. For writing about art, it not only introduced a particular analytical model, but it made clear why this knowledge mattered. The idea of the merit of this skill even extended to women. Nicholas White, an envoy of Queen Elizabeth, visited Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1569 while she was imprisoned at Tutbury Castle. He reported that she 'entered into a prety disputable comparison betwene karving, painting and working with the needil, affirming painting in her owne opinion for the most commendable qualitie'.<sup>77</sup> This conversation would have been unthinkable in England much earlier.

Contemporary literature shows how familiar these sorts of discussions about the visual arts had become by the last decades of the 16th century. In 1584, for example, John Lyly's play *Campaspe*, a dramatization of Pliny's story about Apelles's love for Alexander's mistress, was staged for Queen Elizabeth.<sup>78</sup> The story was popular in England.<sup>79</sup> Not only is one of the protagonists a great painter, in itself a novelty, but much of the dialogue concerns specific aspects of representation, color, and other artistic issues. An extended conversation between Apelles and Alexander (III.iv, pp339–40) about painting alludes to various classical authors in the ekphrastic comparison of painting to smell, the question of what moral inspiration painting can offer, and the particulars of procedure as told by Pliny.

*Alex.* ... Apelles, were you as cunning as report saith you are, you may paint flowers as well as sweete smells, as fresh colours, observing in your mixture such things as should draw neere to their sauours.

*Apel.* Your maiestie must know, it is no lesse harde to paint sauors, then vertues; colour can neither speake nor think.

*Alex.* Where doe you first begin, when you drawe any picture?

*Apel.* The proposition of the face in iust compasse, as I can.

*Alex.* I would begin with the eie, as a light to all the rest.

*Apel.* If you will paint, as you are a king, your Maiestie may beginne where you please; but as you wold be a painter, you must begin with the face...

*Alex.* Me thinketh 4. colours are sufficient to shadow any countenance, so it was in the time of Phydias.

*Apel.* Then had men fewer fancies, and women not so many faours... For as in garden knottes diuersitie of odours make a more sweet saour, as in musicke diuers strings cause a more delicate consent, so in painting, the more colours, the better counterfeite, observing blacke for a ground, and the rest for grace.

*Alex.* Lend me thy pensil Apelles, I will paint, & thou shalt judge... so many rules and regards, that ones hand, ones eie, ones minde must all draw together, I had rather bee setting of a battell then blotting of a boord.

A conversation about painting between an artist and the ruler recalls the discussion Nicholas Hilliard reported he had with Queen Elizabeth, perhaps about the time of the performance of this play before her.<sup>80</sup> Whether or not that encounter is directly relevant, the ease and sophistication with which classical topoi about painting have been woven into the

exchange probably reflects actual Court practices. The distance from Elyot's gentleman of only 50 years earlier is immense.

Given the degree to which Lyly's dialogue plays with these conventions of humanist discourse, it is not surprising that a comparison of painting and sculpture follows. Apelles's love of Campaspe leads him to think of Pygmalion, and then the two mediums: 'Could Pigmalion entreate by prayer to haue his Iuroy turned into flesh? and cannot Apelles obtaine by plaints to haue the picture of his loue chaunged to life? Is painting so farre inferious to caruing? or dost thou Venus, more delight to be hewed with Chizels, then shadowed with colours? what Pigmalyon, or what Pyrgoteles, or what Lysippus is hee, that euer made thy face so fayre, or spread thy fame so farre as I?' (III.v, p342) But then, in a sort of reversal of the Pygmalion model, it is the artist who becomes the painting. Using a conceit common in Elizabethan love sonnets, Apelles says to himself: 'O Campaspe, I haue painted thee in my heart : painted? nay, contrarye to myne arte, imprinted, and that in suche deepe Characters, that nothing can rase it out, vnlesse it rubbe my heart out'. (VII, p352) This confusion of maker and made seems to be in the nature of creative process, for 'commonly we see it incident in artificers to be inamoured of their own workes, ... as Pigmalyon of his iuorie Image ... especially painters, who playing with their own conceits, now coueting to draw a glauncing eie, then a rolling, now a wincking, stil mending it, neuer ending it, til they be caught with it; and then poore soules they kisse the colours with their lippes, with which before they were loth to taint their fingers'. (Viv, p354)

Shakespeare, as he does with so many other subjects, explores the whole range of approaches available for writing about painting in English at this time.<sup>81</sup> He only referred to an actual artist once, in *The Winter's Tale* (1610), where 'that rare Italian master, Julio Romano' is mentioned as a measure of perfect artistic verisimilitude (V, ii) The story is a version of the Pygmalion myth, except that the statue is the actual Queen Hermione, who plays a statue that comes alive. This allows Shakespeare to use all the topoi about art that seems to be alive.<sup>82</sup> Another variant of the Pygmalion myth, this like the one found in Lyly's play, is the basis of *Sonnet XXIV*, where the lover is a painter who inscribes the image of his beloved in or on his heart, creating a model of viewing as total emotional absorption. This striking image is made especially relevant by the intimacy with which miniatures were viewed.<sup>83</sup> More varied in its references is the long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593). The words of Lollard protests suggest Adonis's lack of response to Venus:

Fie, lifeless picture, cold and senseless stone,  
Well-painted idol, image dun and dead,  
Statue contenting but the eye alone,  
Thing like a man, but of no woman bred! (211–4)

The classical trope of the contest between nature and art appears 70 lines later. The passage plays with verbal and visual imitations, since the horse is not a representation by the painter but by Shakespeare, as well as mixing visual qualities (shape, colour, bone) with non-visual (courage, pace) in the way of ekphrastic descriptions:

Look, when a painter would surpass the life,  
In limning out a well-proportion'd steed,  
His art with nature's workmanship at strife,  
As if the dead the living should exceed;  
So did this horse excel a common one  
In shape, in courage, colour, pace and bone. (289–94)

And the birds deceived by Zeuxis's painted grapes are used to describe Venus's lack of satisfaction with Adonis:

Even as poor birds, deceived with painted grapes,  
Do surfeit by the eye and pine the maw,  
Even so she languisheth in her mishaps,  
As those poor birds that helpless berries saw. (601–4)

The difference from earlier English works is striking. Even when the specific images are the same, the combination of playfulness with confidence that his audience would understand them suggests how familiar they had become. In the last, for example, the name Zeuxis is not mentioned, although the passage gains a great deal from understanding that it is his grapes to which the poem alludes.

Shakespeare's longest description of a picture appears in the narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), which plays off the venerable literary tradition of a single viewer looking at depictions of Troy.<sup>84</sup> In another version of intense and emotionally absorbing looking, the raped and dishonored Lucrece seeks emotional solace, or at least distraction, in the imagery woven into a wall hanging. Through her words, the viewer is able to view it vicariously. One particular passage describes how the organization of pictorial elements creates a sense of space. Language like that found in the *Imagines*, which Shakespeare apparently knew, allows the reader to experience the painting as Lucrece does. In an account of the depiction of soldiers in the siege of Thebes in the Greek work (1.4), the partial views are explicitly described in terms of the spatial arrangement of the soldiers, one in front of another.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Shakespeare's words trace the path taken by Lucrece's eye through the crowd of soldiers, also shown in a perspectival arrangement:

Some high, some low, the painter was so nice;  
The scalps of many, almost hid behind,  
To jump up higher seem'd, to mock the mind.

Here one man's hand lean'd on another's head,  
His nose being shadow'd by his neighbour's ear;

...  
For much imaginary work was there;  
Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,  
That for Achilles' image stood his spear,  
Griped in an armed hand; himself, behind,  
Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind:  
A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head,  
Stood for the whole to be imagined. (1466–79)

Philostratus's text also refers to a person visible only by the tip of his spear, but Shakespeare's use makes it more vivid as well as more complicated by making that person Achilles himself. This too plays with illusion – the poem imagining a presence imagined in the picture rather than explicitly represented. After much looking, Lucrece finds what she seeks, a figure with whom she can identify:

To this well-painted piece is Lucrece come,  
To find a face where all distress is stell'd.  
Many she sees where cares have carved some,  
But none where all distress and dolour dwell'd,  
Till she despairing Hecuba beheld,  
...  
On this sad shadow Lucrece spends her eyes,  
And shapes her sorrow to the beldam's woes. (1443–58)

In speaking for the characters and telling their stories, she finds some solace:

So Lucrece, set a-work, sad tales doth tell  
To pencill'd pensiveness and colour'd sorrow;  
She lends them words, and she their looks doth borrow. (1496–8)

Of course she also lends words to the reader as well as the ability to follow her gaze as her eyes move around the painting. In this way, the goal of persuasion in an ekphrastic passage has been achieved.

The ubiquity of these renaissance topoi about painting in literature was matched by a growing interest in acquiring

actual pictures. As Susan Foister showed in her careful study of English inventories, images of secular subjects became increasingly popular with collectors during the 16th century.<sup>86</sup> This also is reflected in contemporary literature. One account of a private collection appears in the popular novel *Jack of Newbery* (1597) by Thomas Deloney (1543–1600).<sup>87</sup> The hero, who rose from being an apprentice to a master weaver and a man of great wealth, owns a grand house. Here, 'in a faire large parlour which was wainscotted round about, Jacke of Newberie had fiteene faire pictures hanging, which were covered with curtaines of greene silke fringed with gold, which he would often shew to his friends and servants'. (p74) Their proud owner explains how these pictures, all portraits, offer moral inspiration to viewers: '[S]eeing then, ... that these men have beene advanced to high estate and princely dignities, by wisdom, learning, and diligence, I would wish you to imitate the like vertues, that you might attaine the like honors'. (p78) In the way that these pictures are meant to signal the wealth and social standing of their owner, they are like the paintings to be put around Sly in the mock rich man's house in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* ('Induction'). Although also meant to inspire, those are 'wanton pictures' and so the imitation of 'like vertues' in the hopes it will lead to 'like honors' results in something very different. None the less, both authors clearly expect their audiences to be able to envision such scenes.

However rich their literary applications might be, these discussions about painting were of limited usefulness when it came to analyzing specific aspects of particular visual works. It was not until 1598, with the publication of Richard Haydocke's translation of Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura*, that adequate means for visual analysis existed in English. Published in Milan in 1584, the book reflected a variety of sources, especially 16th-century Italian developments of Alberti's and Leonardo's writings as well as Albrecht Dürer's observations on proportion. None of this material had appeared in English (and wouldn't for years), and so *A Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge, Buildinge, written first in Italian by Jo: Paul Lomatius painter of Milan* represents the first appearance of many Renaissance ideas about painting. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this book in the development of writing of art in England. Whatever Haydocke's inadequacies as a translator, they mattered much less than the many things he explained in English words. No matter how familiar the material might have been to some, there was no substitute for an accessible text discussing contemporary ideas in detail. But it also marks the victory of the Italian Renaissance tradition of writing about art over all other approaches. For the next two centuries, writing about painting in England would follow developments on the Continent.



This article, part of a book-length study about the history of writing about painting in English, touches upon many subjects that have been studied extensively. My notes are not guides to this immense scholarly literature, but rather specific in citing sources for information. Two historians whose publications have been very important for my thinking but are not in these notes are Mary Carruthers, Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Literature and Professor of English, Emerita, New York University, and David Freedberg, Pierre Matisse Professor of the History of Art and Director of The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University and Director of the Warburg Institute, University of London. Their studies of responses to art in medieval and early modern Europe respectively, and the place of visual imagery in the process of thinking, have been essential to my understanding of my topic. I would like to thank Professor Ching-Jung Chen, Associate Professor and Digital Scholarship Librarian, The City College of New York, CUNY, New York, for her helpful comments on a draft of this article.

NB In multiple quotations from the same author, the full citation is given in the notes for the first use, and references for all subsequent mentions are in parentheses in the text.

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