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Understanding the Problems and Importance of the Turin-Milan Hours: A Study of Art Historical Methods

ARACELI BREMAUNTZ

JAN VAN EYCK, an artist of legendary quality, left a small body of work, a big reputation, and a large numbers of questions for future generations of historians and art enthusiasts. Jan van Eyck was born around the 1390s—his exact birthdate is unknown—in Maaseyck, and died in Bruges in 1441. He was a court painter for John of Bavaria, and subsequently the court painter of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. Not much is known about his early life, and we can only attribute paintings to him starting in 1432. In the early Netherlands, Jan van Eyck's work seemingly inaugurated elements of visual trickery, complex detail, and construction of deep space. Furthermore, his artwork is imbued with intellectual qualities, meaning that the compositions did more than represent a scene: they worked in ways that interacted with the viewer and incited close inspection and reflection. For these reasons, Jan van Eyck has been highly celebrated and highly influential, both in his time, and throughout history. Studies on Jan van Eyck's identity are further complicated by the existence of the Turin-Milan Hours—a series of prayers, miniatures, signatures, and *bas-de-pages*. Some miniatures in the Turin-Milan Hours contain compositions that closely re-

semble Jan van Eyck's known construction of space, attention to detail, and innovation. The question remains: can art historians determine the extent to which Jan van Eyck was involved in the Turin-Milan Hours? And if so, how does the *œuvre* affect what we know of Jan van Eyck's existing works, and the development of art in the early Netherlands?

The problems raised by the Turin-Milan Hours are complex, yet scholarship pursues the topic with hopes to come to definitive identifications and explanations. This essay seeks to explore the history of scholarship pertaining to the Turin-Milan Hours through an analysis of select studies that interpret the issue in differing ways; specifically, I hope to highlight the problems in the methodology of connoisseurship, historiography, and technical analysis. In dealing with the complexity of the Turin-Milan Hours, I propose that scholarship turn away from a quest for answers, and instead seek to understand the problems as they are. The field of art history has more to gain from leaving the questions of the Turin-Milan Hours unanswered than it does by tentatively coming to certain conclusions. As suggested by the questions above, any interpretation of the Turin-Milan Hours changes the history and evolution of Netherlandish art, thus keeping possibilities open would only build upon what we know to be true.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE TURIN-MILAN HOURS

To understand the history of the interpreting the Turin-Milan Hours, it is essential to outline the history of the Hours themselves. Jean Duc de Berry—youngest brother of Charles V, King of France—commissioned an illuminated manuscript, originally referred to as the *Très Belles Heures de Notre Dame* in 1389 in Paris.¹ This collection of prayers and corresponding illustrations were unique because the highly specialized texts were specif-

1 Stephen Kemperdick, "The So-Called Turin-Milan Hours," in *The Road to Van Eyck*, ed. Stephen Kemperdick and Friso Lammerste (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 2012), 284 .

ic to Jean de Berry's taste and family history.² However, Jean de Berry's commissions of French illuminators failed to render a finished product, so he gifted the whole work to Robinet d'Etampes. Robinet divided the book in two parts and sold one part to John Duke of Bavaria—the ruler of Holland—in 1412.³

John of Bavaria took his portion to the Netherlands, where Flemish artists began working on the leaves; during this period, the miniatures that this essay concerns were created. However, this phase of the book's creation is not well documented so it is not known which artists worked on the miniatures, or when.⁴ We also do not know how many campaigns of artists worked on the leaves, or who commissioned the completion of them. We do know that the book was completed, and much later, in the eighteenth century, divided again into two pieces; one piece went to a museum in Turin, while the other went to archives in Milan.⁵ Unfortunately, the portion that was housed in Turin was destroyed in a fire in 1904, but images of it are preserved in the form of black-and-white photographs in Paul Durrieu's 1902 study.⁶ The surviving portion of the book was later moved to the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica in Turin, where it is still housed.

In essence, the Turin-Milan Hours is comprised of religious texts and images that were developed and fashioned over the span of about seventy years, in two distinct geo-political zones, for multiple commissioners.

CONNOISSEURSHIP AND STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Assigning attributions, identifying styles and influences, and judging quality—all of these have been central to the practice of Art History from the

2 James Marrow, "Introduction," in *Heures de Turin Milan Inv. No. 47 Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Torino*, ed. Anne H. van Buren, James H. Marrow, and Silvana Pettenati (Bern: Faksimile Verlag Luzern, 1996), 224.

3 Carol Krinsky, "The Turin-Milan Hours: Revised Dating and Attribution," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 6 (2014): 2.

4 Krinsky, "The Turin-Milan Hours," 4–13.

5 Kemperdick, "The So-Called Turin-Milan Hours," 285–86.

6 Kemperdick, "The So-Called Turin-Milan Hours," 286.

Figure 1



Figure 2



beginnings of the field.⁷ Although such connoisseurship reflects in particular an Italian approach, being aware of stylistic patterns is invaluable to the field more generally, because studying an artistic identity as well as a historical identity reveals information that can better reconstruct the original context of a work.⁸ The history of studying the Turin-Milan Hours began with a heavy focus on connoisseurship, seen especially in the work of Hulin de Loo in 1911. Hulin studied the whole book in detail, identifying the work of eleven different hands and assigning them each and a letter, A through K.⁹ Hands G and H were credited with components of construction, detail, composition, and color that closely resemble works by Hubert and Jan van Eyck. In Hulin's interpretation, Hand G is identified as Hubert van Eyck, to whom he attributed a set of seven miniatures, five initials, and six *bas-de-pages* (see, for example, figure 1).¹⁰ Hand H is (according to Hulin) Jan van Eyck, who is credited with four miniatures and two *bas-de pages* (e.g., figure 2). Hulin's study also made use of external evidence—the quatrain on the Ghent Altarpiece. The quatrain lists Hubert as the superior painter, which caused Hulin to attribute the richer, more developed style of Hand G to Hubert; Jan was known as the lesser artist, so Hulin identified him as Hand H.¹¹

Subsequent scholarship continued to use connoisseurship to interpret the Turin-Milan Hours. Max J. Friedländer tackled the issue of identifying Hand G and H, critiquing Hulin and claiming that Hand G is Jan van

7 Till-Holger Borchert, "From Intuition to Intellect: Max J. Friedländer and the Verbalization of Connoisseurship," in *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (Antwerp: Antwerp Royal Museum Annual, 2004/05), 9–10.

8 Italian art culture greatly valued the study of the painter and his life, and artists' identities were seen as essential in understanding art. This is a controversial idea in the study of Netherlandish art, not least because documents preserved from this region and period seem to assign little or no value to the artist's identity.

9 Kemperdick, "The So-Called Turin-Milan Hours," 284.

10 All figures have been reproduced from Durrieu, *Heures de Turin: Quarante-cinq feuillets à peintures provenant des Très Belles Heures de Jean de France, duc de Berry* (Paris, 1902), plates XXX, XXIX, and XXXVII, respectively.

11 Kemperdick, "The So-Called Turin-Milan Hours," 234–235.

Eyck and Hand H must belong to an imitator working c. 1440.¹² Friedländer reasoned that Jan van Eyck's employment by John of Bavaria places him as the creator of *Prayer on the Shore*—a leaf by Hand G that depicts Johns of Bavaria's coat of arms (figure 3).¹³ Furthermore, Friedländer identified Jan van Eyck's style as having a specific concern for landscape painting and a detailed observation of light and mood. Friedländer found that Hand G's compositions matched these stylistic traits.¹⁴ He observed a difference in style and quality between Hands G and H, and therefore supposed that Hand H must have been a Jan van Eyck's follower.¹⁵

In 1953, Erwin Panofsky also attempted to make sense of early Netherlandish paintings through connoisseurship, and he employed an innovative method for understanding Hands G and H's styles. Panofsky presented a series of potential explanations that could identify Hands G and H, and proceeded to enumerate implications and problems that would render the hypothesis unlikely.¹⁶ Panofsky came to the conclusion that Hand G could only be Jan van Eyck, and he used the development of Albrecht Dürer to explain a pattern of stylistic evolution.¹⁷ Panofsky's comparison to the development of Dürer seems compelling, but it is flawed because Dürer was a German—unlike Jan van Eyck—who lived nearly a century after Jan van Eyck, and who worked with printmaking as opposed to illuminated manu-

12 Max J. Friedländer, "Eyckian Art in Book Illumination," in *Early Netherlandish Painting, Vol. I, The Van Eycks—Petrus Christus*, trans. Heinz Norden (Brussels: Éditions de la Connaissance, 1967), 49.

13 Friedländer, "Jan van Eyck," in *From Van Eyck to Bruegel* (New York: Phaidon, 1956), 10.

14 Friedländer, "Jan van Eyck," 9.

15 Friedländer, "Jan van Eyck," 12

16 Erwin Panofsky, "Hubert and/or Jan van Eyck; The Problems of the Ghent Altarpiece and the Turin-Milan Hours," in *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 236–241.

17 Panofsky, "Hubert and/or Jan van Eyck," 244.

Figure 3



scripts.¹⁸ The differences in time, medium, and nationality indicate that the two historical figures are too dissimilar to use one as a model for the other.

In a more recent study, Albert Châtelet continued to look for stylistic evidence to identify Hand G as Jan van Eyck. Châtelet compiled evidence about earlier campaigns and historiographical evidence to trace the leaves through time; however, in the section tying Jan van Eyck to the manuscripts, Châtelet resorts primarily to stylistic comparisons. Most notably, he compares the *Mass of the Dead* to Jan van Eyck's *Saint Barbara*, and *The Baptism of Christ* to Jan van Eyck's *Rolin Virgin*.¹⁹ While Châtelet acknowledged the limitations of his approach, he saw the Hand G scenes as Jan van Eyck juvenilia and found similar realism, construction of space, and models in Jan van Eyck's later works.²⁰

Connoisseurship and stylistic analysis play a key role throughout the history of art, but, in cases where a work's origin and context are uncertain, the method seems to be unreliable. Conclusions are based on what the scholar interprets to be true, and the assertions by some historians could potentially hinder further studies. Consider Hulin's study: the validity of his division of miniatures remains unquestioned. Hulin's observations of style were made a century ago, based on early-twentieth-century preconceptions about style and artistic identity.²¹ The divisions limit the way that modern historians interpret and come to understand the body of work by imposing the concept of an artistic identity that may or may not be correct. As a further example, consider Anne van Buren's recent attempt to use the fashions worn by depicted characters to date miniatures within the Turin-Milan Hours: by using evidence from one single miniature, she has implicitly

18 Printmaking makes smaller images available to a larger audience, while the miniatures of Hand G are for an exclusive audience; Dürer's prints were mainly self-commissioned, while Hand G was clearly commissioned under noble or important patronage.

19 Albert Châtelet, *Jan van Eyck Enlumineur* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1993), 68-69.

20 Châtelet, *Jan van Eyck*, 72.

21 Hulin interpreted the visual changes of color, composition, and style to fit his own ideas of artistry, and as such he ignored the work's original order and its original historical context.

argued for a single date for the entire Hand G group, preserving Hulin's divisions.²² Yet dating one miniature clearly does not date all the miniatures within a group, and working with such variable terms is more harmful than helpful because it confuses the real issues at hand.

The unreliability of connoisseurship can also be seen in the large number of theories provided in these scholarly arguments. For example, Friedländer and Hulin both draw from the same sources and use similar methodologies to compare the works, but each end up with a different theory. Hulin comes to identify Hand G as Hubert van Eyck and Hand H as Jan van Eyck based on his own interpretation of the quatrain on the Ghent Altarpiece and his judgments about the "skill" of each artist. In the same way, Friedländer judges Hand G to be Jan van Eyck and Hand H to be a follower of Jan van Eyck. The fact that identifications come down to matters of interpretation creates an unreliable system of understanding.

While Panofsky's acknowledgment of the issues at hand is commendable, most of his "trial-by-elimination" is based on conjecture and speculation. Furthermore, Panofsky's likening of Jan van Eyck to Albrecht Dürer is symptomatic of a basic problem: scholars have interpreted and incorporated evidence that has little to do with the history and context of the Turin-Milan Hours. By coming to these conclusions, scholars inadvertently impede understanding of the artwork.

Another problem with connoisseurship lies in the fact that an artist neither has one "canonical style" nor a certain pattern of development in the way that Panofsky tries to assert. There is no clear way to recognize similarities that indicate authorship, nor is there a clear way to account for differences. Consider Châtelet's identification of Hand G as Jan van Eyck. Châtelet comes to his conclusion on the basis that Hand G and Jan van Eyck share similar themes, but if Hand G was Jan van Eyck's mentor, then it is probable that they would also share modes of representation, themes, and

22 Anne H van Buren, "Jan van Eyck in the Hours of Turin-Milan: Approached Through Fashion in Dress," in *Masters and Miniatures: Proceedings of the Congress on Medieval Manuscript Illumination in the Northern Netherlands*, ed. Koert van der Horst and Johann-Christian Klamt (Doornspijk: Davaco Publishers, 1991), 225–232.

construction of space. Such similarities do not necessarily mean that the same artist was involved each time; to deny this would be to deny the process of artistic influence and the complexities of teacher-pupil relationships. At the same time, an artist's depiction of space, color, and clothing changes through time, depends on the medium, and involves personal choice. For the most part, tracing Jan van Eyck's style and development is inherently flawed because not enough is known about his origins, his methodology, or his overall body of work to prove any of those claims.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND CONTEXTUAL EVIDENCE

In light of the difficulties of studies based heavily on style, art historians have turned to research-based, historiographical evidence to support their claims. The majority of the arguments attempting to define the Turin-Milan Hours incorporate some visual evidence, but as opposed to the previous selection of arguments, the studies discussed here base their arguments on external evidence relating to the historical context of the Turin-Milan Hours.

As already mentioned, Anne van Buren undertook the problem of dating the Netherlandish Hands of the Turin-Milan Hours by interpreting and analyzing dress to date the style and region that the robes represented. By comparing the miniatures and *bas-de-pages* to other prayer books, she found Hand G's style to be of Germanic aesthetic. Van Buren also found that Hand G's patron was definitely John of Bavaria, and that the robes in the *Mass of the Dead* were slightly old-fashioned but nevertheless datable to the 1420s.²³ As regard Jan van Eyck's relationship to Hand G, van Buren finds that her evidence directly points to Jan van Eyck as the painter in question.²⁴

James Marrow takes an innovative approach to the problem by focusing on the intended audience of the Turin-Milan Hours. Marrow looks at the *Très Belles Heures* as a comparison, and he finds that the work of Hand G constructs a different relationship to the viewer. Hand G's compositional

23 Van Buren, "Jan van Eyck in the Hours," 225, 227, 230, and 232.

24 Van Buren, "Jan van Eyck in the Hours," 232–240.

arrangement creates a space that actively engages the viewer, as opposed to a composition that features contrived schema of representation.²⁵ Marrow continues his search for understanding by logically connecting what we know of Jan van Eyck's patterns of composition to those of Hand G.²⁶ He departs from previous scholarship by studying Hand G's style in isolation, without directly comparing it to Jan van Eyck's work. According to Marrow, the Turin-Milan Hours depart from typical conventions of illuminated manuscripts in the same way that Jan van Eyck's works depart from typical conventions of panel painting.²⁷ The implications of these conjectures could change the way we understand Netherlandish art: if Marrow's argument is correct, it has repercussions about the different mediums serving different means.

Carol Krinsky tackles the issue of dating by calling into question the history of the campaigns, asserting that John of Bavaria was not a commissioner for any campaign.²⁸ Krinsky questions John of Bavaria's rule over Hainaut, which results in the hypothesis that Van Borsselen commissioned the completion of the work in one large campaign.²⁹ Krinsky's argument is particularly alarming because it calls into question what the majority of scholars have taken as fact. As Krinsky points out, if John of Bavaria did not commission a campaign, there is no evidence that ties Jan van Eyck to being illuminator of the *œuvre*.³⁰ If this were true, it would negate most of the arguments discussed previously, and it would force scholars to rethink all of the implications of the Turin-Milan Hours.

Researching external evidence seems like the logical step towards concrete answers; however, most existing evidence is not as concrete or definitive as scholars would hope, and the new findings also require interpre-

25 James Marrow, "History, Historiography, and Pictorial Invention in the Turin-Milan Hours," in *In Detail: New Studies of Northern Renaissance Art in Honor of Walter S. Gibson*, ed. Laurinda S. Dixon (Turnhout: Brepolis, 1998), 3, 7, and 8.

26 Marrow, "History, Historiography, and Pictorial Invention," 9–11.

27 Marrow, "History, Historiography, and Pictorial Invention," 11.

28 Krinsky, "Turin-Milan Hours," 1–2.

29 Krinsky, "Turin-Milan Hours," 6–7 and 9–11.

30 Krinsky, "Turin-Milan Hours," 9.

tation. To take any theory as fact would be to deny the complexity of the problems and to overlook distinctions between history and a modern scholar's interpretation of it. The variables and flexibility of these studies help to bring new information to light, but might not give us definitive answers. Still, this method seems to be the best way to get closer to understanding the Turin-Milan Hours.

In Van Buren's study, fashion becomes a new facet of Netherlandish culture and a context within which we can understand the Hours. However, she admits that dating clothing is particularly difficult because fashion could be represented as purposefully archaic, and it could be idealized in order to serve the aesthetics of the artist, commissioner, or accompanying text.³¹ Even if one cannot date or attribute the miniatures, van Buren's approach makes us more aware of the social implications of court fashion from this epoch, and more aware, too, of the role of fashion from an artistic perspective. The fact that clothing can be purposefully depicted as archaic, or that it could be indicative of the artist's age, furthers our understanding of the culture that created the Turin-Milan Hours.

Similarly, Marrow interprets Jan van Eyck's mature panel paintings—mainly meant for larger audiences—as containing an interest in engaging the viewer actively; throughout his argument, Marrow asserts that the Turin-Milan Hours create innovative qualities that interact with the viewer in the same ways that made Jan van Eyck famous. Marrow's conclusions aside, being aware of this development from canonical forms of representation to interactive and intellectual compositions—both in panel and parchment compositions—provides more context, and signifies the importance of understanding Hand G's identity.

Krinsky interprets history in a similar way, changing much of what we know about the Turin Milan hours and the development of Netherlandish art. While historiographical arguments contain their share of interpretations and speculations, I do not seek to disprove them in the same way I countered connoisseurship. The conclusions of these arguments may or may not be "correct," but they contribute new auxiliary evidence, and they

31 Krinsky, "Turin-Milan Hours," 222.

help to augment what we know of the Netherlandish cultural context. Furthermore, these arguments imply much more than just identifications. In van Buren's article, the issue of dates is foregrounded; in Marrow's argument, the issue of complex compositions comes to light; in Krinsky's argument, the Turin-Milan's commissioners come into question. In bringing up these issues, and looking at them from new perspectives, we can increase our understanding of the context of the Turin-Milan Hours, and thus better equip ourselves to tackle the problems and questions.

TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

In search of new evidence, historians and researchers have also applied a series of scientific techniques to early Netherlandish art in the hopes of unveiling more about artistic practices, dating, and materials. In the case of the Turin-Milan Hours, the only technical study conducted was an infrared reflectography examination, carried out by Marigene Butler and J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer. The technique manipulates infrared wavelengths to see beneath layers of paint in the hopes of uncovering underdrawings and plans for the composition. The study found a significant number of underdrawings in general, but only three among the leaves specifically associated with Hands G and H.³² In particular, the *Gethsemane*, the *Crucifixion*, and the *Birth of Saint John* were the only leaves to show underdrawings; the *Birth of Saint John* showed minimal tracery in the room and bed, the crucifixion only shows underdrawings in the *bas-de-page*, but the *Gethsemane* miniature shows a more complete schema, including a complete underdrawing of the rocks, and plans for the folds of drapery that are similar to under drawings of Jan van Eyck's *Rolin Virgin*.³³ According to the report, the findings underneath the *Gethsemane* miniature serve as definitive proof of Jan van

32 Marigene Butler and J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer, "The Examination of the Milan-Turin Hours with Infrared Reflectography: A Preliminary Report," in *Géographie et Chronologie du Dessin Sous-Jacent: Le Dessin Sous-Jacent dans la Peinture, Colloque VII*, ed. R. van Schoute and H. Verougstraete-Marcq, (Louvain-la-Neuve: Collège Erasme, 1987), 72.

33 Butler and de Boer, "Infrared Reflectography," 75.

Eyck's involvement in the Turin-Milan Hours.

The discovery of the underdrawings initially seemed like a breakthrough that would help solve all problems, but in reality they simply complicate the issue further. Katherine Crawford sees the findings in terms of the changes the final painting shows, with the changed fence and the lowered horizon as an indication of the painter's struggle with the depiction of space.³⁴ Crawford interprets the changes between underdrawing and final work to mean that Hand H had a close connection to Jan van Eyck. Her claim emphasizes the final composition, while Butler and Boer see the underdrawing as a definite sign of Jan Eyck's direct involvement. The underdrawings raise the questions: who drew the underdrawing, when, and why some parts were parts adjusted—the horizon and fence—while other parts were unchanged—the rocks and drapery folds. It could be said that Jan van Eyck himself created the underdrawing of *Gethsemane* as Hand G, and was unable to complete it, so Hand H finished it in a subsequent campaign. It could also be said that Hand H was a pupil of Jan van Eyck, and therefore had similar styles of under drawings. In addition, it could be supposed that Hand H is Jan van Eyck, that he was always really adept at drawing rocks, and that the underdrawing is proof that Jan van Eyck is actually Hand H, during a phase in which he was learning perspective from his teacher, Hand G—potentially Hubert van Eyck. There is simply not enough evidence to disprove any of these theses. What we do know is that the *Gethsemane* miniature ended up the way it did because of a series of artistic choices that preserved a part of the original plan and modified another. The reason why—or the reason why this leaf revealed more planning than any other leaf in the Eyckian section of the Turin-Milan Hours—remains matter for speculation.

THE PROBLEMS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The problem with style-based studies is that historians do not know enough

34 Katherine Crawford, "Recognizing Van Eyck: Magical Realism in Landscape Painting," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 91 (1998): 13–14.

about the individual artist nor the culture of art in this era to be able accurately to map stylistic evolution or to account for slight changes in style. The problem with historiographical research on the subject is that not enough evidence exists to make definitive claims about the time, place, or people involved in the creation of the Turin-Milan Hours. The most significant issue with technical analysis is that the information gained raises a whole new set of questions that the field does not know how to answer. In sum, the major underlying problem is that we do not know nearly enough to recreate the historical-artistic context that created Hand G, so all discussions of identity, meaning, and implications turn out to be merely speculative. While the field of art history traditionally seeks to find solutions and interpretations to artworks and art objects, the Turin-Milan Hours are too complicated and too lost in time to be able to draw accurate conclusions and interpretations with what we currently know. As negative as all this seems, however, I do believe that through further studies and analysis we will be able better to understand the œuvre and its epoch. To this end, I suggest a new and potentially counterintuitive approach, namely that we stop looking for definitive answers. As I have highlighted throughout this essay, conclusive evidence is elusive, and most assertions can be disputed and disproved. Instead, continuing auxiliary research, mindful of its problems and the complexity of its implications, will provide a better understanding and a deeper knowledge of the Turin-Milan Hours and early Netherlandish Art.

Araceli Bremauntz is a junior majoring in Art History and French, with a minor in English. She prepared this essay as part of Dr. Douglas Brine's seminar on Jan van Eyck and His Legacy (Art History 3446, Fall 2015).