

TRADITION AND INNOVATION: II

The fifteenth century in the North

We have seen that the fifteenth century brought a decisive change in the history of art because the discoveries and innovations of Brunelleschi's generation in Florence had lifted Italian art on to a new plane, and had separated it from the development of art in the rest of Europe. The aims of the northern artists of the fifteenth century did not, perhaps, differ so much from those of their Italian fellow artists as did their means and methods. The difference between the north and Italy is most clearly marked in architecture. Brunelleschi had put an end to the Gothic style in Florence by introducing the Renaissance method of using classical motifs for his buildings. It was nearly a century before the artists outside Italy followed his example. All through the fifteenth century they continued developing the Gothic style of the preceding century. But though the forms of these buildings still contained such typical elements of Gothic architecture as the pointed arch or the flying buttress, the taste of the times had greatly changed. We remember that in the fourteenth century architects liked to use graceful lacework and rich ornamentation. We remember the Decorated style, in which the window of Exeter Cathedral was designed, *page 208, figure 137*. In the fifteenth century this taste for complicated tracery and fantastic ornament went even further.

Figure 174, the Palace of Justice in Rouen, is an example of this last phase of French Gothic, sometimes referred to as the Flamboyant style. We see how the designers covered the whole building with an infinite variety of decorations, not, apparently, considering whether they performed any function in the structure. Some of these buildings have a fairy-tale quality of overwhelming wealth and invention; but one feels that in them the designers had exhausted the last possibility of Gothic building, and that a reaction was bound to set in sooner or later. There are, in fact, indications that even without the direct influence of Italy the architects of the North would have evolved a new style of greater simplicity.

It is particularly in England that we can see these tendencies at work in the last phase of the Gothic style which is known as the Perpendicular.

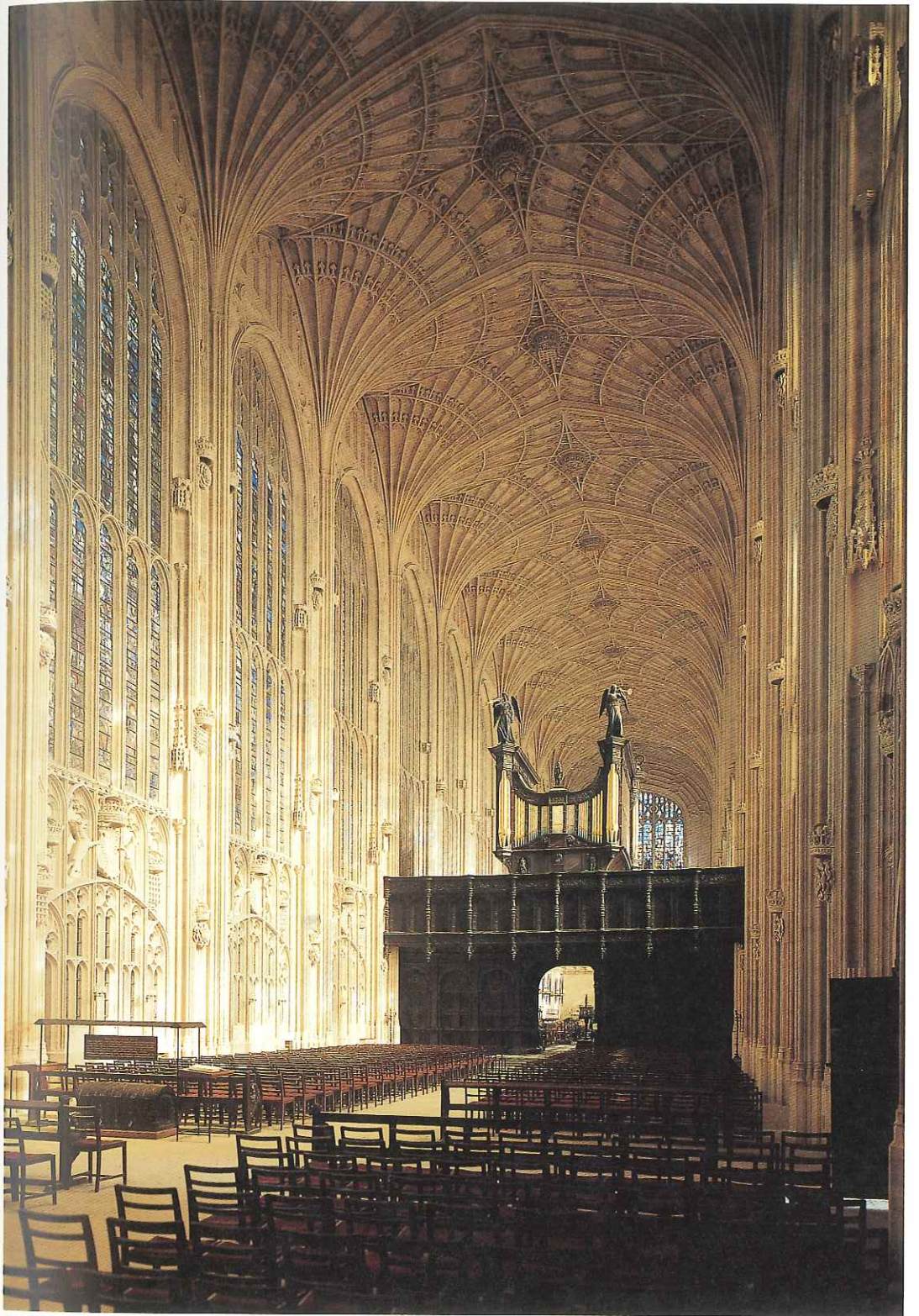


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Courtyard of the Palace of Justice (formerly Treasury), Rouen, 1482
 The Flamboyant Gothic style

This name was invented to convey the character of later fourteenth- and fifteenth-century buildings in England because in their decorations straight lines are more frequent than the curves and arches of earlier 'decorated' tracery. The most famous example of this style is the wonderful chapel of King's College in Cambridge, *figure 175*, which was begun in 1446. The shape of this church is much more simple than those of earlier Gothic interiors – there are no side-aisles, and therefore no pillars and no steep arches. The whole makes the impression of a lofty hall rather than of a medieval church. But while the general structure is thus sober and perhaps more worldly than that of the great cathedrals, the imagination of the Gothic craftsmen is given free rein in the details, particularly in the form of the vault ('fan-vault'), with its fantastic lacework of curves and lines recalling the miracles of Celtic and Northumbrian manuscripts, *page 161, figure 103*.

The development of painting and sculpture in the countries outside Italy runs to a certain extent parallel with this development of architecture. In other words, while the Renaissance had been victorious in Italy along the whole front, the North in the fifteenth century remained still faithful to the Gothic tradition. Despite the great innovations of the Van Eyck

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King's College Chapel, Cambridge, begun in 1446
 The Perpendicular style





brothers, the practice of art continued to be a matter of custom and usage rather than of science. The mathematical rules of perspective, the secrets of scientific anatomy, the study of Roman monuments did not yet trouble the peace of mind of the northern masters. For this reason we may say that they were still 'medieval artists', while their colleagues across the Alps already belonged to the 'modern era'. But the problems facing the artists on both sides of the Alps were nevertheless strikingly similar. Jan van Eyck had taught them how to make the picture a mirror of nature by carefully adding detail upon detail until the whole frame was filled with painstaking observation, *page 238, figure 157, page 241, figure 158*. But just as Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli in the south, *page 253, figure 165, page 257, figure 168*, had used Masaccio's innovations in the spirit of the fourteenth century, so there were artists in the north who applied Van Eyck's discoveries to more traditional themes. The German painter Stefan Lochner (1410?–51), for instance, who worked in Cologne in the middle of the fifteenth century, was somewhat like a northern Fra Angelico. His charming picture of the Virgin in a rose-bower, *figure 176*, surrounded by little angels who make music, scatter flowers, or offer fruit to the Christ Child, shows that the master was aware of the new methods of Van Eyck, just as Fra Angelico was aware of the discoveries of Masaccio. And yet his picture is nearer in spirit to the Gothic Wilton Diptych, *pages 216–17, figure 143*, than it is to Van Eyck. It may be interesting to look back at the earlier example and compare the two works. We see at once that the later master had learned one thing which had presented difficulties to the earlier painter. Lochner could suggest the space in which the Virgin is enthroned on the grass bank. Compared with his figures, those of the Wilton Diptych look a little flat. Lochner's Holy Virgin still sits enthroned before a background of gold, but in front of it there is a real stage. He has even added two charming angels holding back the curtain, which seems to hang from the frame. It was paintings like those by Lochner and Fra Angelico which first captured the imagination of the romantic critics of the nineteenth century, men such as Ruskin and the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They saw in them all the charm of simple devotion and a childlike heart. In a way they were right. These works are perhaps so fascinating because for us, used to real space in pictures, and more or less correct drawing, they are easier to understand than the works of the earlier medieval masters, whose spirit they nevertheless preserved.

Other painters in the North correspond rather to Benozzo Gozzoli, whose frescoes in the Palazzo Medici in Florence reflect the gay pageantry of the elegant world, in the traditional spirit of the International style. This applies particularly to the painters who designed tapestries, and to those who decorated the pages of precious manuscripts. The page

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Stefan Lochner
*The Virgin in the rose-
 bower, c. 1440*

Oil on wood, 51 × 40 cm,
 20 × 15½ in; Walraf-
 Richartz-Museum,
 Cologne



burghers. We see the stalls and booths inside and in front of the city gate, with the merchants displaying their goods and the buyers inspecting them. It is a lifelike picture of a medieval city of the time. Nothing like it could have been done a hundred years earlier, or, indeed, at any earlier time. We have to go back to ancient Egyptian art to find pictures which portray the daily life of the people as faithfully as this; and even the Egyptians did not look at their own world with so much accuracy and humour. It is the spirit of the drollery of which we saw an example in 'Queen Mary's Psalter', page 211, figure 140, that came to fruition in these charming portrayals of daily life. Northern art, which was less preoccupied with attaining ideal harmony and beauty than Italian art, was to favour this type of representation to an increasing extent.

Nothing, however, would be more wrong than to imagine that these two 'schools' developed in watertight compartments. Of the leading French artist of the period, Jean Fouquet (1420?–80?), we know, in fact, that he visited Italy in his youth. He went to Rome, where he painted the Pope in 1447. Figure 178 shows a donor's portrait which he probably made a few years after his return. As in the Wilton Diptych, pages 216–17, figure 143, the saint protects the kneeling and praying figure of the donor. As the donor's name was Estienne (which is old French for Stephen), the saint by his side is his patron, St Stephen, who, as the first deacon of the Church, wears a deacon's robe. He carries a book and on it is a large sharp stone, for, according to the Bible, St Stephen was stoned. If we look back to the Wilton Diptych, we see once more what strides had been made by art in the representation of nature in half a century. The saints and donor

illustrated in figure 177 was painted about the middle of the fifteenth century, as were Gozzoli's frescoes. In the background is the traditional scene showing the author handing the finished book to his noble patron who had ordered it. But the painter found this theme rather dull by itself. He therefore gave it the setting of an entrance hall, and showed us the happenings all around. Behind the city gate there is a party apparently making ready for the chase – at least there is one rather dandyish figure carrying a falcon on his fist, while others stand around like pompous

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Jean le Tavernier
 Dedication page to
 'The Conquests of
 Charlemagne', c. 1460
 Bibliothèque Royale,
 Brussels

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Jean Fouquet
 Estienne Chevalier,
 Treasurer of Charles
 VII of France, with
 St Stephen, c. 1450

Panel from an altarpiece;
 oil on wood, 96 × 88 cm,
 37½ × 34½ in;
 Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche
 Museen, Berlin



of the Wilton Diptych look as though they were cut out of paper and placed upon the picture; those of Jean Fouquet look as if they had been modelled. In the earlier picture there is no trace of light and shade; Fouquet uses light almost as Piero della Francesca did, *page 261, figure 170*. The way in which these calm and statuesque figures stand as in real space shows that Fouquet had been deeply impressed by what he had seen in Italy. And yet, his manner of painting is different from that of the Italians. The interest he takes in the texture and surface of things – the fur, the stone, the cloth and the marble – shows that his art remains indebted to the northern tradition of Jan van Eyck.

Another great northern artist who went to Rome (for a pilgrimage in 1450) was Rogier van der Weyden (1400?–64). Very little is known about this master except that he enjoyed great fame and lived in the southern Netherlands, where Jan van Eyck had also worked. *Figure 179* shows a large altar-painting which represents the Descent from the Cross. We see that Rogier, like Van Eyck, could faithfully reproduce every detail, every hair and every stitch. Nevertheless, his picture does not represent a real scene. He has placed his figures on a kind of shallow stage against a neutral background. Remembering Pollaiuolo's problems, *page 263, figure 171*, we can appreciate the wisdom of Rogier's decision. He, too, had to make a large altar-painting to be seen from afar, and had to display the sacred theme to the faithful in the church. It had to be clear in outline, and satisfying as a pattern. Rogier's picture fulfils these requirements without looking forced and self-conscious as does Pollaiuolo's. The body of Christ, which is turned full face towards the beholder, forms the centre of the composition. The weeping women frame it on both sides. St John, bending forward, like St Mary Magdalene on the other side, tries in vain to support the fainting Virgin, whose movement corresponds to that of Christ's descending body. The calm bearing of the old men forms an effective foil to the expressive gestures of the principal actors. For they really seem like actors in a mystery play or in a *tableau vivant* grouped or posed by an inspired producer who had studied the great works of the medieval past and wanted to imitate them in his own medium. In this way, by translating the main ideas of Gothic art into the new, lifelike style, Rogier did a great service to northern art. He saved much of the tradition of lucid design that might otherwise have been lost under the impact of Jan van Eyck's discoveries. Henceforward northern artists tried, each in his own way, to reconcile the new demands on art with its old religious purpose.

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Rogier van
der Weyden
*The Descent from the
Cross*, c. 1435

Altar-painting; oil on
wood, 220 × 262 cm,
86½ × 103½ in; Prado,
Madrid







We can study these efforts in a work of one of the greatest Flemish painters of the second half of the fifteenth century, Hugo van der Goes (died 1482). He is one of the few northern masters of this early period of whom we know some personal details. We hear that he spent the last years of his life in voluntary retirement in a monastery and that he was haunted by feelings of guilt and attacks of melancholy. There is indeed something tense and serious in his art that makes it very different from the placid moods of Jan van Eyck. *Figure 180* shows his painting of the 'Death of the Virgin'. What strikes us first is the admirable way in which the artist has represented the varying reactions of the twelve apostles to the event they are witnessing – the range of expression from quiet brooding to passionate sympathy and almost indiscreet gaping. We can best gain a measure of Van der Goes's achievement if we turn back to the illustration of the same scene over the porch of Strasbourg Cathedral, *page 193, figure 129*. Compared to the painter's many types, the apostles of the sculpture look very much alike. And how easy it was for the earlier artist to arrange his figures in a clear design! He did not have to wrestle with foreshortening and the illusion of space as was expected of Van der Goes. We can feel the efforts of the painter to conjure up a real scene before our eyes and yet to leave no part of the panel's surface empty and meaningless. The two apostles in the foreground and the apparition over the bed show most clearly how he strove to spread his figures out and display them before us. But this visible strain which makes the movements look somewhat contorted also adds to the feeling of tense excitement that surrounds the calm figure of the dying Virgin who, alone in the crowded room, is granted the vision of her Son, who is opening His arms to receive her.

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Hugo van der Goes
*The Death of the
Virgin*, c. 1480

Altar-painting; oil on
wood, 146.7 × 121.1 cm,
57¾ × 47¾ in;
Groeningemuseum,
Bruges

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Detail of figure 180







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Veit Stoss
Head of an apostle
Detail of figure 182

182
Veit Stoss
*Altar of the church of
Our Lady, Cracow,*
1477–89
Painted wood, height 43ft,
13.1m

For the sculptors and woodcarvers the survival of Gothic tradition in the new form which Rogier had given to it proved of particular importance. *Figure 182* shows a carved altar which was commissioned for the Polish city of Cracow in 1477 (two years after Pollaiuolo's altar-painting, *page 263, figure 171*). Its master was Veit Stoss, who lived for the greater part of his life in Nuremberg in Germany and died there at a very advanced age in 1533. Even on the small illustration we can see the value of a lucid design. For like the members of the congregation who stood far away we are able to read off the meaning of the main scenes

without difficulty. The shrine in the centre shows again the death of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by the twelve apostles, though this time she is not represented lying on a bed but kneeling in prayer. Farther up we see her soul being received into a radiant Heaven by Christ, and at the top we watch her being crowned by God the Father and His Son. Both wings of the altar represent important moments in the life of the Virgin, which (together with her crowning) are known as the Seven Joys of Mary. The cycle begins in the left top square with the Annunciation; it continues farther down with the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi. In the right-hand wing we find the remaining three joyous moments after so much sorrow – the Resurrection of Christ, His Ascension and the Outpouring of the Holy Ghost at Whitsun. All these stories the faithful could contemplate when they were assembled in church on a feast day of the Virgin (the other sides of the wings were adapted to other feast days). But only if they could approach close to the shrine could they admire the truthfulness and expressiveness of Veit Stoss's art in the wonderful heads and hands of his apostles, *figure 183*.

In the middle of the fifteenth century a decisive technical invention had been made in Germany, which had a tremendous effect on the future development of art, and not of art alone – the invention of printing. The printing of pictures had preceded the printing of books by several decades. Small leaflets, with images of saints and the text of prayers, had been printed for distribution among pilgrims and for private

devotion. The method of printing these images was simple enough. It was the same as was later developed for the printing of letters. You took a wood-block and cut away with a knife everything that should *not* appear on the print. In other words, everything that was to look white in the final product was to be cut hollow and everything that was to look black was left standing in narrow ridges. The result looked like any rubber stamp we use today, and the principle of printing it on to paper was practically the same: you covered the surface with printer's ink made of oil and soot and pressed it on to the leaflet. You could make a good many impressions from one block before it wore out. This simple technique of printing pictures is called woodcut. It was a very cheap method and soon became popular. Several wood-blocks together could be used for a little series of pictures printed together as a book; these books printed from whole blocks are called block-books. Woodcuts and block-books were soon on sale at popular fairs; playing-cards were made in this way; there were humorous pictures and prints for devotional use. *Figure 184* shows a page from one of these early block-books, which was used by the Church as a picture-sermon. Its purpose was to remind the faithful of the hour of death and to teach them – as the title says – ‘The art of dying well’. The woodcut shows the pious man on his death-bed with the monk by his side putting a lighted candle into his hand. An angel is receiving his soul, which has come out of his mouth in the shape of a little praying figure. In the background we see Christ and His saints, towards whom the dying man should turn his mind. In the foreground we see a host of devils in the most ugly and fantastic shapes, and the inscriptions which come out of their mouths tell us what they say: ‘I am raging’, ‘We are disgraced’, ‘I am dumbfounded’, ‘This is no comfort’, ‘We have lost his soul’. Their grotesque antics are in vain. The man who possesses the art of dying well need not fear the powers of hell.

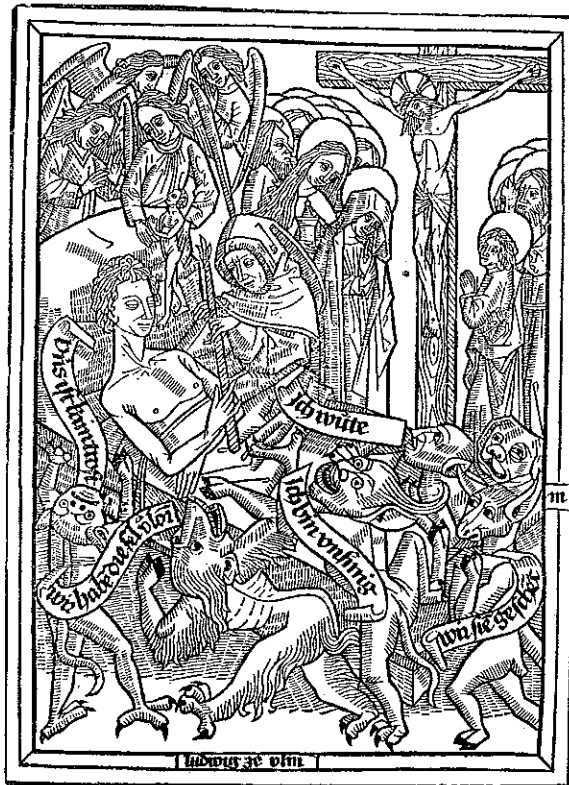
When Gutenberg made his great invention of using movable letters held together by a frame, instead of whole wood-blocks, such block-books became obsolete. But methods were soon found of combining a printed text with a wood-block for illustration, and many books of the latter half of the fifteenth century were illustrated with woodcuts.

For all its usefulness, however, the woodcut was a rather crude way of printing pictures. It is true that this crudeness itself is sometimes effective. The quality of these popular prints of the late Middle Ages reminds one sometimes of our best posters – they are simple in outline and economical in their means. But the great artists of the period had rather different ambitions. They wanted to show their mastery of detail and their powers of observation, and for this the woodcut was not suitable.

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The good man on his death-bed, c. 1470

Woodcut, 22.5 × 16.5 cm,
8 7/8 × 6 1/2 in; illustration
from 'The art of dying
well', printed in Ulm



These masters, therefore, chose another medium, which gave more subtle effects. Instead of wood, they used copper. The principle of the copper-plate engraving is a little different from that of the woodcut. In the woodcut you cut away everything except the lines you want to show. In the engraving you take a special tool, called a burin, and press it into the copper plate. The line which you thus engrave into the surface of the metal will hold any colour or printer's ink you spread over the surface. What you do, therefore, is to cover your engraved copper plate with printer's ink and then wipe the blank metal clean. If then you press the plate very hard against a piece of paper, the ink which has remained in the lines cut by the burin is squeezed on to the paper, and the print is ready. In other words, the copper-engraving is really a negative of the woodcut. The woodcut is made by leaving the lines standing, the engraving by cutting them into the plate. Now, however hard it may be to handle the burin firmly and to control the depth and strength of your lines, it is clear that, once you have mastered this craft, you can obtain much more detail and much more subtle effects from a copper-engraving than you can from a woodcut.

One of the greatest and most famous masters of engraving in the fifteenth century was Martin Schongauer (1453?–91), who lived on the upper Rhine at Colmar, in present-day Alsace. *Figure 185* shows Schongauer's engraving of the Holy Night. The scene is interpreted in the spirit of the great masters



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Martin Schongauer

The Holy Night,

c. 1470-3

Engraving, 25.8 x 17 cm,
10 x 6 in

of the Netherlands. Like them, Schongauer was anxious to convey every little homely detail of the scene, and to make us feel the very texture and surfaces of the objects he represents. That he should have succeeded in doing so without the help of brush and colour, and without the medium of oil, borders on the miraculous. One can look at his engravings through a magnifying glass and study the way he characterizes the broken stones and bricks, the flowers in the crags, the ivy creeping along the vault, the fur of the animals and the hair and beards of the shepherds. But it is not only his patience and craftsmanship we must admire. We can enjoy his tale of Christmas without any knowledge of the difficulties of working with the burin. There is the Virgin kneeling in the ruined chapel which is used as a stable. She kneels in adoration of the Child, whom she has carefully placed on the corner of her cloak, and St Joseph, lantern in hand, looks at her with a worried and fatherly expression. The ox and the ass are worshipping with

her. The humble shepherds are just about to cross the threshold; one of them, in the background, receives the message from the angel. Up in the right-hand corner we have a glimpse of the heavenly chorus singing 'Peace on Earth'. In themselves, these motifs are all deeply rooted in the tradition of Christian art, but the way in which they are combined and distributed over the page was Schongauer's own. The problems of composition for the printed page and for the altar-picture are in some respects similar. In both cases, the suggestion of space and the faithful imitation of reality must not be allowed to destroy the balance of the composition. It is only if we think of this problem that we can fully appreciate Schongauer's achievement. We now understand why he has chosen a ruin as setting – it allowed him to frame the scene solidly with the pieces of broken masonry that form the opening through which we look. It enabled him to place a black foil behind the principal figures and to leave no part of the engraving empty or without interest. We can see how carefully he planned his composition if we lay two diagonals across the page: they meet at the head of the Virgin, which is the true centre of the print.

The art of the woodcut and of engraving soon spread all over Europe. There are engravings in the manner of Mantegna and Botticelli in Italy, and others from the Netherlands and France. These prints became yet another means through which the artists of Europe learned of each other's ideas. At that time it was not yet considered dishonourable to take over an idea or a composition from another artist, and many of the humbler masters made use of engravings as pattern books from which they borrowed. Just as the invention of printing hastened the exchange of ideas without which the Reformation might never have come about, so the printing of images ensured the triumph of the art of the Italian Renaissance in the rest of Europe. It was one of the forces which put an end to the medieval art of the north, and brought about a crisis in the art of these countries which only the greatest masters could overcome.

*Stonemasons and
the king, c. 1464*

From a manuscript of the
story of Troy, illuminated
by Jean Colombe;
Kupferstichkabinett,
Staatliche Museen, Berlin

