



Vanitas and *trompe-l'œil*

Pictorial illusion as a visual strategy of the *memento mori*

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In the second half of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century, Netherlandish painting developed new, individualised representations of the *memento mori* that provoked a very personal and reflective form of contemplating death. These humanistically influenced images, which paved the way for the genre of the autonomous *vanitas* still life, find their place on the outer wings of private devotional triptychs/diptychs and the backs of independent portraits, but also in Flemish books of hours and in graphic arts. A striking characteristic of these pictures is that in them, the illusionary possibilities of artistic mimesis are explored extensively – even to the point of *trompe-l'œil* – in order to elicit the most direct, forceful confrontation of the viewer with death. This article seeks to explore this remarkable alliance between *memento mori* and *trompe-l'œil*, and to show that the painterly illusion was by no means aimed at merely deceiving the eye and creating a moment of shock, but that this play with perception was based on more complex intentions and considerations. The use of *trompe-l'œil*, according to the core thesis, must be understood as a highly reflected visual strategy by means of which reflection on transience was consciously initiated in a variety of content-related dimensions. The article will first consider the emergence and characteristics of the new *memento mori* images and then turn to *trompe-l'œil*, whose eminent potential to address *vanitas* lies in the interplay of sensual and intellectual experience. It will be argued that the use of artistic illusion for *meditatio mortis* was preceded by an intensive preoccupation with optical (illusory) phenomena in late medieval epistemology and piety, in the course of which error-prone visual perception was elevated to a cognitive moment for human thought and action. On the basis of several works, we will analyse how artists around 1500 adapted this understanding of optical illusion and opened up a complex reflection on *vanitas* to their paintings' recipients through a well-developed play with artistic illusion and by exploiting the performative potential of mobile panels and pages.

Detail fig. 5

New pictures of *memento mori*

The idea of *memento mori* was omnipresent in the late Middle Ages. The fear of death had increased dramatically at that time, inasmuch as the anticipation of judgement had moved closer in the course of the new doctrine of the particular judgement and under the impression of plague, war and famine. Various genres and pictorial forms, such as the dance of death or the *ars moriendi*, which were newly developed from the fourteenth cen-

tury onwards, bear witness to the intensified preoccupation with death. This preoccupation held an ambivalent position in Christian thinking, since on the one hand death had come into the world as a punishment as a result of the Fall, but on the other hand, after Christ's sacrificial death, it also marked the promising gateway to eternal life. Serving as a reminder of the inevitability of death and as a warning not to pursue a sinful life, these genres, emphasising the decomposition of the human body, painted a mostly macabre, frightening picture of death by portraying it as a threatening, relentless and destructive force.¹ From the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, however, alongside these still popular shocking images of death, other representations developed, primarily for private use, in which death was presented as *conditio humana* and elevated to the status of a subject of individual reflection. The motif of the skull now became the focus of a contemplative consideration of death.

Rogier van der Weyden seems to have been the first to depict such a *memento mori* in 1452/1453, in the *Triptych of Jean Braque* (fig. 1): a fearsome skull, 'staring' out of the picture with empty eye sockets, lies in the left outer panel on a brick eroded by time; opposite it on the right panel is a weathered stone cross. On the dark outer panels, although hardly recognisable today, the skull and cross are placed in a fictitious rectangular niche architecture built of ashlars, which even protrudes onto the frame. The flat wooden frame, painted with joints, looks to be made of dark-brown masonry, into which an inscription appears to have been 'chiselled'

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Rogier van der Weyden, *Triptych of Jean Braque*, c. 1452/1453, exterior panel: *Skull and cross*, oak, panel 41 x 69 cm (with original frame), Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. RF2063



at the top and bottom: 'Look, you, so proud and miserly,/ My body was beautiful, but now is meat for [worms]'.³ The admonishing call of the skull – to be mindful of mortality and to hold all earthly things in low esteem – is juxtaposed in the cross of the other panel with an inscription from the *Liber Ecclesiasticus* (41:1), which melancholically laments human transience: 'Oh death, how bitter is the thought of you to the one at peace among possessions, who has nothing to worry about and is prosperous in everything, and still is vigorous enough to enjoy food'.⁴ The sign of the cross, however, already counters this lamentation with the hope of salvation, which is only fully revealed on the inside with the depiction of Christ as *Salvator mundi*, flanked by Mary and John the Evangelist as well as John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene.⁵

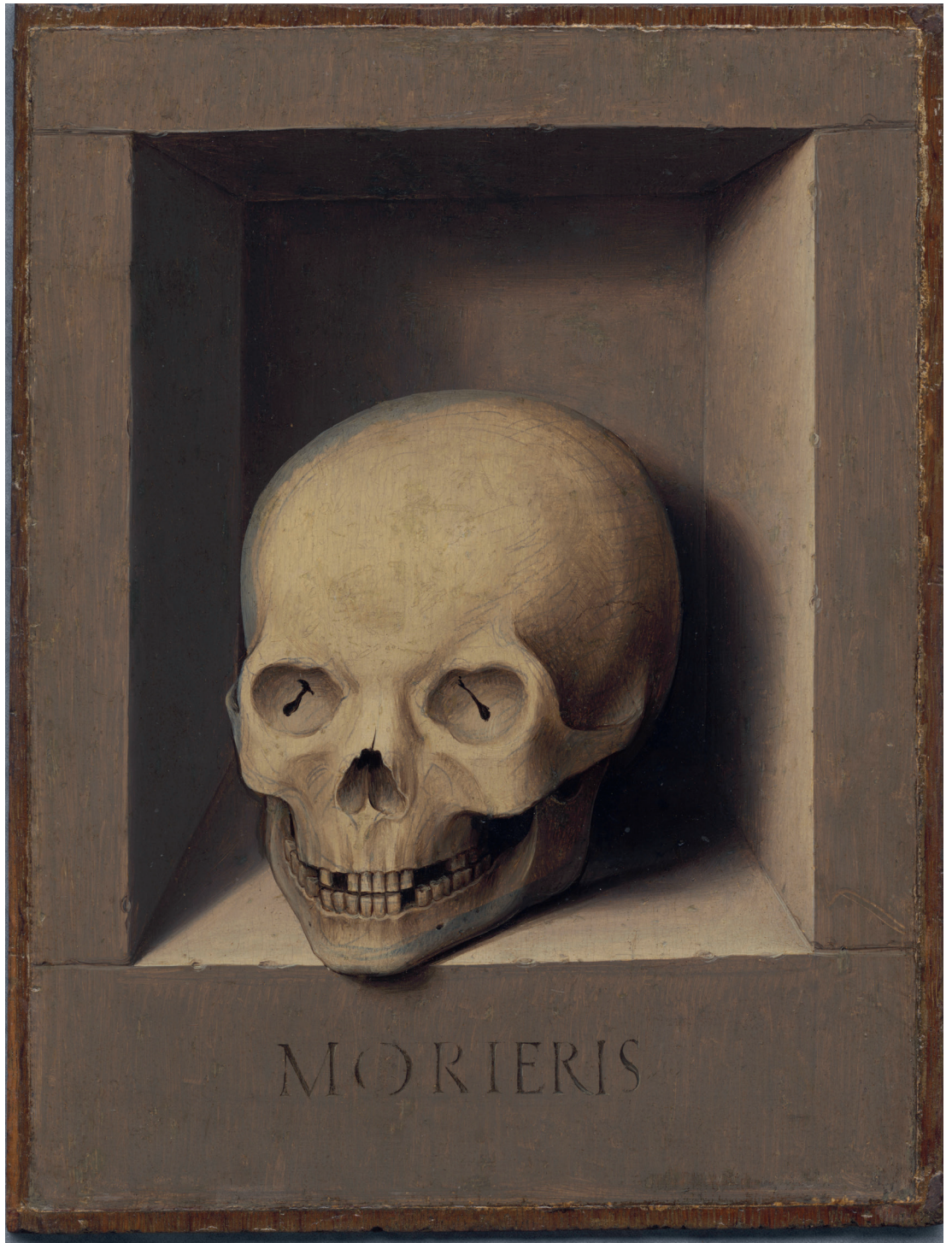
Rogier's work served as a model for Hans Memling when he painted his *Diptych with St. John the Baptist and St. Veronica* (fig. 2) in about 1483.⁶ The private devotional painting, whose wings are now separated, shows on the right exterior panel a skull that appears macabre, especially because of its grin, resting in a rectangular niche composed of five stones and partly damaged at the edges. As in Rogier's original, the skull's lower jaw protrudes slightly beyond the edge of the niche. Memling, however, positioned the bald, smooth skull, whose bones correlate with the stone surroundings, almost frontally, so that it seems to look at the viewer with its empty eye sockets. The inscription, consisting of only one word, 'MORIERIS' ('You will die'), soberly points out to the recipient the inexorable finiteness of his earthly existence. As a counter-image, a golden chalice with a snake, the attribute of John the Evangelist, can be seen on the left outer wing. The masterfully painted, shimmering poisoned chalice seems to stand within reach in an intact round-arched niche set into the stone wall. Its foot also protrudes slightly over the edge of the niche, casting a drop shadow on its rim. Since the original frame of the diptych has been lost, it remains open whether the fiction of the stone niche was continued as in the *Braque triptych*; nevertheless, in comparing the two works it is obvious that the artistic illusion in Memling's work is heightened further.⁷ The transgression of the boundary between pictorial space and physical space, the precise perspective rendering of the niches and the pictorial objects housed in them, as well as the masterly depiction of the lateral incidence of light and the resulting cast of shadows, turn the panels into a *trompe-l'œil* in which the boundary between the pictorial and the viewer's space seems to be abolished. Following on from this *memento mori*, Jan Gossaert, Jan Provoost and Bartholomew Bruyn the Elder were to create further *vanitas* paintings – to be discussed in more detail later – which played with visually deceptive effects on the exterior panels of devotional diptychs and double portraits.⁸

The novel staging of the skull motif, however, was not reserved just for folding, private panel paintings, but also found its way into manuscript illumination.⁹ Since painterly illusionism became the leading artistic principle of Flemish books of hours in the late fifteenth century, this adoption may come as little surprise. In addition, however, it may have benefited from further analogies, such as the private context of use of the prayer books and the generally close medial relationship between the book form



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Hans Memling, *Diptych with St. John the Baptist and St. Veronica*, c. 1483, *St. Veronica panel* / reverse: *Goblet with snake*, oak, 31.2 x 24.4 cm (original frame lost), Washington, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection, inv. no. 1952.5.46b; *St. John panel* / reverse: *Skull*, oak, 31.6 x 24.4 (original frame lost), Munich, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 652



of the codex and the two-part structure of the diptych.¹⁰ The *Book of hours of Engelbert of Nassau*, created around 1475/1480, immediately confronts the viewer at the beginning of the Office of the Dead with eight differently positioned skulls, which are displayed in niches arranged above and next to each other, and frame both the text and a funeral scene (fig. 3).¹¹ If the confrontation with death is already forceful and direct here, it is further intensified in a miniature of the *Book of hours of Joanna I of Castile*, wife of Philip the Fair, made around 1500, since here the skull's empty eye sockets stare at the recipient frontally from a circular convex mirror rather than from a niche (fig. 4).¹² 'SPECULUM CONSCIENCIE' can be read on



the broad edge of the illusionistically painted mirror, which is suspended from a nail on a brick wall. James Marrow first drew attention to this remarkable miniature and pointed out two important aspects in which this picture – but, it should be added, also the representations of skulls in niches – differs from the earlier *memento mori* pictorial tradition. The first difference is the still-life character that the new *vanitas* image assumes. The skull, which until then had occupied its iconographic place primarily at the foot of the crucifix as an allusion to the skull of Adam and a symbol of human sinfulness, is, like other motifs, removed from any narrative context.¹³ In their “de-anecdotalized” state, Marrow points out, the images could be ‘seen as condensations and summaries of the visual and metaphorical traditions with which they are related’, now inviting ‘free reflection on sin, death, self-examination, penitence, and revelation’.¹⁴

The second, more important deviation for Marrow was the focus of the images: their new, explicit orientation towards the viewer. Although earlier pictorial forms such as the dance of death also aimed to serve the recipient as a means of self-observation and self-knowledge, they never directly held up a mirror to the other person, even if they were metaphorically called mirrors of salvation.¹⁵ The relentless power of death was always shown in these genres by means of the death of ‘others’; in acting as representative figures, according to Marrow, these ‘other’ figures, being afflicted by death, indirectly convey to viewers their own fate.¹⁶ In contrast, the new pictorial inventions correspond entirely to the appellative form of the *memento mori*, in that the image of death is directed confrontationally at the recipients. Although the mirror is rarely held up to the viewer as directly as in the *Book of hours of Joanna I of Castile*, the sight of the skull in the niche must also be understood as an anagogic look in the mirror. The skull’s facelessness, which makes the egalitarian effect of death immediately vivid, allows for the gaze at the image to be understood as an act of self-examination, and for the skull, which blindly faces forward, to be perceived as the future self.¹⁷ Frequently, personalised pictorial elements even explicitly underline this statement: the inclusion of personal coats of arms, mottos or initials in the *vanitas* paintings made it unmistakably clear to the patrons that their gaze was directed not at some anonymous skull, but at their own future face of death.

Specifically with regard to this altered relationship between picture and viewer, however, another important point can be added to Marrow’s differentiation – namely, that the direct, ostentatious experience of death is now evoked above all by the illusionary power of painting. The *vanitas* theme and *trompe-l’œil* form a significant alliance, especially north of the Alps.¹⁸ Through the illusionary execution, the new *memento mori* paintings attain an almost provocative-shocking immediacy.¹⁹ The moral-anagogical mirror goes hand in hand with an extreme, almost mirror-like accuracy of representation. The unavoidable reality of death virtually demands a special, reflected form of representation. This also names the field of tension that is constitutive for the images: on the one hand, they act as symbols of a future death, on the other hand, they play with perception in the present. The power of these images has been regularly emphasised by art historians and understood in the sense of a content-related state-



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Master of the David Scenes in the
Grimani Breviary, *Fall of man and
Expulsion from Paradise / Skull in mirror*
(so-called *Speculum consciencie*), illumi-
nated double page, *Book of hours of Joanna
I of Castile* (Ghent or Bruges, between
1496–1506), London, British Library, Add.
Ms. 18852, fol. 14v and 15r

ment – as an evocation of sudden, inevitable death. In principle, however, the semantic and symbolic dimensions of the *vanitas* subject have usually been given more attention in the study of the individual works than the mode of representation. In accordance with the iconographic method so influential for (analysing) Netherlandish painting in particular, the pictures have often been considered in light of their related pictorial and metaphorical traditions, and the objects and motifs depicted, such as the skull, the niche, the candle or the fly, have been interpreted as symbols of the transience, vanity and limitedness of earthly life. In contrast, this article aims to pursue a more perceptual-aesthetic approach by tracing the connection between *memento mori* and artistic illusion/*trompe-l'œil*, and to focus on the sensual reception of early *vanitas* still lifes instead of on a symbolic reading.²⁰ The focus will be on the question of how painting, by virtue of its own visually perceptible means, attempted to initiate a reflection on death. However, before the perceptual and discursive functions of artistic illusion for the *meditatio mortis* can be discussed in more detail, the common definition of *trompe-l'œil* must first be subjected to critical scrutiny.

More than just a trick of the eye

Trompe-l'œil is the term generally used to describe representations in which the depicted object bears such a strong mimetic resemblance to the real thing that the viewer can be deceived into believing that what is painted is real.²¹ The idea of such a trick of the eye goes back a long way, as ancient art literature describes in various anecdotes how humans and animals were deceived by paintings.²² The perfect *trompe-l'œil*, however, can only be successful under certain conditions: only inanimate, still objects are suitable as subjects, which must correspond exactly to the model in terms of scale and fictitious surface structure and must not be cropped from the edge of the picture. In addition, the perspective of the pretended objects must be correctly aligned with the beholder's point of view, and their lighting should also correspond to the real lighting conditions. If the painted objects cross the boundary between real and pictorial space, this reinforces the illusion for the viewers that they are an integral and tangible part of their own reality. The opacity of the pictorial surface is also decisive for the creation of this impression. The perfect *trompe-l'œil* defies the Albertian metaphor of the picture as a window and the transparency associated with it by presenting the pictorial ground as an impenetrable, material plane that seems to belong to real space and from which the pictorial objects stand out in order to be supposedly tangible for the other person.²³ The potential for deception, however, depends not solely on the painting, but also on its place of installation. Fake letter racks, niches or wall cupboards were particularly suitable for making the boundary between pictorial and real space unrecognisable.²⁴

If one applies these criteria to the new *memento mori* paintings, it quickly becomes clear that there is a discrepancy between this narrow definition and the art historical use of the term. While the definition – following the literal sense – focuses on the moment of (successful) eye deception, the term is used in research in a much broader framework. Highly mimetic representations that play with illusionistic effects such as the transgression of the boundary of the pictorial space are also regularly called *trompe-l'œil*, although the medial status of the art object remains undoubtedly recognisable to the viewer. The skulls found in Flemish books of hours around 1500, even if they are presented precisely and realistically in fictitious niches, deceive no one in their reduced scale. The play with illusion on the illuminated book page does not aim to deny its own medium or parchment ground, but rather refers to its materiality and objecthood.²⁵ The illusionistic border, as Bernhard Siegert and Helga Lutz recently argued, transforms the book page into a liminal and hybrid space, in which zones of different degrees of reality – the imaginary pictorial space of the miniature, the flat page and the real space of the viewer – are interconnected.²⁶ The re-structuring of the book page, they emphasise, must be interpreted as an expression of the 'self-reflexive becoming of the illuminated book page'.²⁷ The development of early modern *trompe-l'œil* is considered by the authors to be a result of this self-awareness: it was 'the oscillation between the transparency of the imagined pictorial space and the opacity of the material ground and its re-entry into the pictorial space, which repeatedly brought out the *trompe-l'œil*'.²⁸

Similarly, David Ganz has recently pleaded for an 'alternative history of trompe-l'œil', in which the topos of painterly deception is to be strongly relativised in favour of other moments of reflection:

The common reading of trompe l'œil is that of a 'trick' devised by artists to draw attention to the painterly mastery of nature and art by switching from illusion to dis-illusion. Crown witness to this reading is the much-cited legend of the grapes of Zeuxis and the curtain of Parrhasios. In absolutising this tale as the primordial scene of trompe l'œil par excellence, however, research itself succumbs to a fallacy of the eye that tempts us to define trompe l'œil painting as an internal artistic reflection of pictorial mimesis. This is countered, especially in the fifteenth century, by a broad experimentation with dispositifs of painterly illusion in different media and image practices.²⁹

Interplay between sensual and intellectual experience

The *trompe-l'œil* exteriors of diptychs also demand such an alternative, complex reading. Although the potential to deceive the eye appears more pronounced than on the illuminated book page owing to the adapted – but by no means always correct – scale and the frame that is often integrated into the pictorial illusion, these panels will only rarely have actually deceived their owners. Not only might the commission have been made in the knowledge of the 'deception of the eye', but the difference between the painting – which first had to be placed in the room – and its surroundings would usually have remained conspicuous enough to counteract the deception.³⁰ There are almost no surviving indications of how diptychs were installed in the room and concretely used: the illusion of the niche makes it plausible that they were mounted on or placed in front of the wall. Diptychs, however, that carry paintings on both exterior wings, are more likely to have functioned as portable objects and could have been placed or laid on a piece of furniture for devotion – such 'handling' would undoubtedly have destroyed the illusion as well.³¹

The Cologne painter Bartholomew Bruyn the Elder, who created a series of remarkable *vanitas* paintings in imitation of Netherlandish models, extended the *trompe-l'œil* of the skull in the niche to include familiar *vanitas* motifs when in 1524 he faked a rectangular wall recess, divided into two levels by a shelf, on the back of the portrait of Margaretha von Mochau (fig. 5).³² The 61-by-51-centimetre panel formed the right half of a portrait of a married couple, whose two panels are now separated. Its counterpart shows the jurist and Protestant theologian Gerhard von Westerborg, who came from a distinguished Cologne family and was active as a Reformation agitator at the time the picture was painted.³³ His portrait has lost its original reverse side, but the parquetry that has been applied could indicate that the reverse was never painted, or that it was only painted in monochrome and thus perhaps placed firmly against or in front of a wall.³⁴ When closed, the *vanitas* niche still life on the exterior of the diptych could then have presented itself as seemingly belonging to the real room. Here, too, the centre of the composition is occupied by a skull placed on the upper-

most level and aligned frontally. While the cranium, with one last tooth remaining in the upper jaw, protrudes only slightly over the edge of the shelf, the detached lower jaw, lying to the right of it and protruding further, has a highly unstable position. The slightest movement, the unstable arrangement suggests, threatens to bring it tumbling down. Directly below, on the lower level of the niche, a small board leans against the wall, on which a sheet of paper is fixed with two nails. The inscription on it additionally expresses the dominant motif of the fall of all earthly things in words: 'Everything passes in death/ Death is the ultimate limit of all things'.³⁵ The extinguished candle placed at the front left edge of the picture and the fly resting on the skull are also symbols of this fleetingness and transience. With them, and the play with the boundary of the pictorial space, the uncertainty of the viewer as to what is real and what is fiction is once again forced. The foot of the candlestick protrudes so far from the worn floor of the niche that it also threatens to fall into the real space. The fly, clearly visible on the white bone, is identified as belonging to the pictorial space by its view, which corresponds to the semicircle of the skull and not to the vertical surface of the picture, but since the cranium is designed with just as much illusionary power as the insect, which is realistically reproduced in lifelike size, the irritation about what is still real and where the fiction of the picture begins may have been additionally intensified at this point.³⁶ But even if this *trompe-l'œil* was based on an eye-teasing intention, it would be naïve to believe that this effect, which lasts only a moment and cannot be achieved again afterwards, constituted the actual attraction of the representation. Since a diptych aims for repeated viewing, the question arises as to what long-term stimuli and moments of insight the play with illusion can open up – especially in the context of the *memento mori*.

In fact, the *trompe-l'œil* is not exhausted in the one-time sequence of illusion and dis-illusion, but remains effective even after the discovery of the eye deception, as it is characterised by a constantly changing build-up and breakdown of suggestion.³⁷ *Trompe-l'œil* derives its power of attraction and effect from the interplay of appearance and reality, of sensual and intellectual experience: while the *eyes* receive a deceptive impression, the *mind* knows that they are being deceived.³⁸ This special dynamic of effect is decisive for the aesthetic pleasure that viewers feel even when they encounter the *trompe-l'œil* repeatedly.³⁹ In addition to the aesthetic pleasure, the visual experience, which is both pleasurable and reflective, can also open up processes of cognition, as it stimulates a questioning of one's own perception. Louis Marin defined *trompe-l'œil* in 1978 as 'mimesis in excess' and at that time already referred to the interplay between sensory perception and consciousness – and not to the one-sided topos of deception and its subsequent uncovering. The excessive form of mimesis no longer belongs to the order of representation from the moment of its transformation, the author argues, but actually turns against it.⁴⁰ The effect of representation is that the viewing subject identifies what is represented as such and thereby also learns something about its own cognitive access to the world.⁴¹ The *trompe-l'œil*, however, opposes precisely this effect, since it develops such a strong, inescapable presence that for a short time, what is depicted does not appear to be a representation.⁴²





The excess of mimesis, which deliberately appeals to the senses and causes irritation, can thus briefly undermine the sovereign perception of the recipient and thus question it. Even if the mind knows that the *trompe-l'œil* is a fiction, the *ratio* recedes for a moment behind the sensual experience. In its power and attraction, excessive mimesis succeeds even when the illusion is seen through, in making the viewer aware of their own location in the sensual and the associated susceptibility to deception. It is precisely these two moments – being led astray or seduced by sensual appearances, and the insight into the inadequacy of human perception gained from the discrepancy between seeing and knowing – that create fundamental points of contact with the theme of *vanitas*. The thesis to be pursued further is that the painterly illusion heightened in the *memento mori* paintings of around 1500 had a multi-layered content dimension in addition to the aesthetic dimension: understood as a visual strategy, the *trompe-l'œil* not only made the ‘empty appearance’ or the nothingness of the seductive earthly world of the senses directly vivid. By demonstrating to the viewer the inadequacy and error-proneness of their own vision, it was also able to provoke reflection on his own sinful nature and the right way to deal with death. Seeing, perception as such, is called into question in the perspective of death and is exhibited and questioned in its complexity in the picture – also on the part of viewers. If the sight of the skull seemingly intruding into real space suggests the (omnipresence) of death, the viewer is at the same time confronted with their own reaction. In view of the unstable arrangement so conspicuously staged in Bruyn’s *Vanitas still life* and emphatically emphasised in the inscription, the question arises

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Bartholomew Bruyn the Elder, *Portrait of Margaretha von Mochau*, reverse (p. 70): *Vanitas still life*, 1524, oak, 61 x 51 cm, Otterlo, Kröller-Müller-Museum, inv. no. KM 102.025 (photo: © Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, the Netherlands)

Bartholomew Bruyn the Elder, *Portrait of Gerhard von Westerburg*, 1524, oak, 62.3 x 52.5 cm, Compton Verney, inv. no. CVCSC:0385.N (photo: © Compton Verney/Bridgeman Images)

whether the owners, before opening the diptych, might have briefly hesitated, fearing that the candle and lower jaw might fall towards them with the movement of the wing? Essentially, the *trompe-l'œil* aims at a 'bodily pictorial experience': while it generally addresses the sense of touch as a 'haptic image', the illusion of the skull in the niche might have first provoked an opposite reaction, one of recoiling and disinclination to touch.⁴³ It is therefore all the more interesting and noteworthy that the early *vanitas trompe-l'œil* has its fixed place on the wings of triptychs and diptychs and on the pages of illuminated manuscripts – that is, on movable picture supports whose performative moment in a way demanded that the 'fear of touching' death be overcome. This refined, considered use of *trompe-l'œil* in favour of the *memento mori* will be analysed further in the following. Before that, however, the question of why *trompe-l'œil* and *vanitas* were linked in the first place must be explored in greater detail.

Optical illusion as visual challenge for an ethical state of mind

The pleasure in playing with masterfully created illusion developed in Italian and Northern art directly parallel to the development of a new sense of reality through empirical imitation of nature.⁴⁴ The medieval science of optics, *perspectiva*, which gained great significance in Western thinking from the thirteenth century onwards, may have been fundamental to painting's simultaneous endeavours of achieving a convincing vividness and presence by on the one hand appropriating the human visual impression, and on the other hand presenting 'the painterly and perceptive preconditions of evidential experiences themselves' in the picture through illusion and disillusion.⁴⁵ Since the new discipline was dedicated to the study of all aspects of vision, it was closely integrated into the late medieval philosophical-theological discourse, which increasingly focused on the question of the relationship between sensory perception and cognition.⁴⁶ Theories on visual perception – that is, on the external and internal processes of seeing and questioning the value, reliability and significance of optically acquired information – henceforth emphatically determined the discourse on epistemology and may also have significantly promoted artistic interest in *trompe-l'œil*.⁴⁷

The most important initiator in this was Roger Bacon, who – based on an intense reception of Greco-Arabic science and in particular the work of Alhazen – developed an epistemology with a strongly visual character, which understood the experience of the world and the subsequent process of cognition as a process mediated by images (*species*). In the course of the complex debates that followed from his teachings, the susceptibility of external vision to error and thus the discussion of phenomena of optical illusion received great attention and importance: because optical deceptions are usually caused by interference in the transmission of the *species* emanating from the visible object to the eye – for example, by reflection or refraction of light rays – they contributed to a better understanding of both the first phase of vision, the physiological reception of external optical stimuli, and of the conditions that determine correct (or incorrect) vision. On the other hand, it was precisely on the basis of these optical

illusions, which vividly demonstrate a discrepancy between sensual and cognitive perception, that the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible world could be intensively discussed, which formed a basis for understanding the interplay between the various cognitive faculties such as sensory perception, imagination, judgement and intellect.⁴⁸ The success of *perspectiva*, as Mark Smith has emphasised, was essentially based on the fact that it understood itself as a 'science not only of vision but also of perceptual rectification', because this enabled it to present itself as a 'scientifically justified world view'.⁴⁹

Bacon had already attempted to theologically validate his preoccupation with optics when he emphasised its special use and value for religion in his *Perspectiva* (1267). He transferred the three different modes of external vision into a religious interpretation of spiritual vision when he declared: 'Direct vision we attribute to God; departure from rectitude by refraction, which produces weaker vision, is suited to angelic nature; reflected vision, which is weaker [still], can be assigned to humans'.⁵⁰ According to Bacon, only in heaven will man be again granted the privilege of perfect, direct vision; on earth, on the other hand, his vision is considerably weakened.⁵¹ With this interpretation, which postulated this worldly, spiritual vision as imperfect, distorted and prone to error, he established a normative model that subsequently allowed theology to use the teachings of optics for a popularly moralising, allegorical interpretation of vision and to transfer it into a theory of piety and morality.⁵² One compendium, the *Tractatus moralis de oculo* (1275/1276-1289) by Peter of Limoges, played a decisive role in spreading the teachings of *perspectiva* throughout almost all of Europe and in almost all ecclesiastical circles.⁵³ In it, the author deals with all aspects of medieval optical theory, interpreting them first with regard to knowledge (*scientialiter*), then with regard to morals (*moraliter*). He took the fundamental weakness of this world's vision as the starting point for a discussion of well-known optical phenomena, which were intended to confirm the inadequacy of the human sense of sight. In this life, he states, following Bacon and the 'wisest perspectivist' Paul, vision is 'the weakest of all [the three types of vision], and it has to take place through reflection, just as the vision by which something is seen in a mirror also has to take place through the intermediary of reflected lines'.⁵⁴

The fact that this theological view was received pictorially is vividly shown by the miniature of the '*speculum consciencie*' already discussed (fig. 4). The image of the skull appearing in the mirror is part of an illuminated double-page spread that follows the calendar section, precedes the text and thus occupies an important zone of transition in the prayer book of Joanna I of Castile. The calendar illustrations that open the book, since they refer to the earthly-temporal existence of man, situate the reader in the world before the other texts open the 'transcendent space of prayer'.⁵⁵ Because of this mere position between the world and prayer, the double page has a threshold function, which is also revealed in the pictorial programme itself. The miniature of the convex mirror painted in *trompe-l'œil* style, behind whose glass surface, convincingly faked by light and shadow effects, the skull looks out frontally from the picture, is located on the right side above the small text field and is framed by a broad border on

which flowers and insects appear, *qua* illusion, equally close to reality. The opposite side of the picture, on the other hand, offers a view of Paradise, where the scene of the Fall of Man takes place. The entire border zone is designed here as an architectural frame which, since it refers to the gate of Paradise, itself functions as a threshold. Thus, on the picture's left edge, the narrative continues in a remarkable way with the banishment scene: Adam and Eve, the border design suggests, are expelled from Paradise by the angel into the viewer's space. As Marrow has already pointed out, this representation, which plays with levels of reality, aims not only aesthetically but also in terms of content at a transgression of space and time.⁵⁶ If viewers can already see themselves at this point as part of the fallen world in need of redemption, their own existence, corrupted as a result of the Fall, is held before their eyes even more drastically on the following page in the mirror image. Here, the mirror forces the viewer to look their own inevitable death in the face and combines this with the call to self-knowledge and examination of conscience. At the same time, however, it also serves as a motif to remind us that man can only see God in his unhappy present state through that 'mirror clouded by the sin of the first man'.⁵⁷ Through the reinforced illusionism of the mirror's surface and the fictitious flowers and insects, the seductive earthly world of the senses is thereby 'unmasked' as eye-deceiving and 'transient'.⁵⁸

This unmasking, it should be emphasised, does not, however, mark a general degradation or even denigration of vision, since *trompe-l'œil* also has the ability to show the viewer the workings of the mind in the process of sense perception. Even if man's susceptibility to optical deception was understood as evidence of the *conditio humana* corrupted by the Fall, this did not mean a fundamental condemnation of human vision in late medieval theory. Peter of Limoges in particular endeavoured to overcome the 'essential paradox of the medieval senses in which epistemology is based on sensory perception while at the same time Christian metaphysics demands a denunciation of the very senses that act as the agents of cognition'.⁵⁹ Instead of distrusting the visual process due to its susceptibility to error, he conceived of visual perception, with all its fallibility, as a foundation for the ethical thinking and acting of man. His discussion of optical illusions is based on the core idea that human beings do not simply succumb to them, but that they can recognise the illusion and thus also their own deficit and correct the first erroneous impression. While the author interpreted the first phase of visual perception, the physiological reception of external optical stimuli, as a merely passive reception of sometimes deceptive visual images, he understood the second phase, the cognitive processing of the received visual sense impressions, as a process of active inner seeing, in which the received images must be put together, evaluated and communicated to the mind. In this interpretative (and, if necessary, corrective) stage, Peter of Limoges saw the human capacity for judgement and cognition as proof and foundation of the ethical-moral disposition of man. Precisely because optical illusions reveal a discrepancy between appearance and reality and thus test the viewer's perception, they were particularly important to the author's discussion of morally 'right' and 'wrong' insights as well as thoughtless or reflected actions.⁶⁰ Deceptions of

the eye thus become far more than mere optical-physiological phenomena; they become indicators of the viewer's ethical state of mind.⁶¹ As a moral implication, Peter of Limoges derived from the cognitive analysis and prevention of errors the call not to allow oneself to be tempted into rash, ill-considered and thus possibly wrong actions or judgements, but to counter inconsiderate behaviour through introspection.⁶²

This understanding of optical illusion, which links moral-religious with cognitive questions and calls for introspection, opens up a concrete approach to the *memento mori* paintings and their use of *trompe-l'œil*. Based on the admonition to be aware of one's own mortality and to disregard everything of this world, the pictures demand active mental participation. They challenge viewers to reflect morally on themselves, to recognise their own susceptibility to error and to think about how the fleeting time of life can be used virtuously with a view to eternal life. At the centre of the *meditatio mortis* is always the question of the right way to deal with death. Through the use of *trompe-l'œil*, this question could be particularly stimulated, especially considering the performative dimension of the folding pictures, as the following, more detailed analyses of several diptychs will show.

Contemplation of death as a test of maturity

A devotional diptych created in 1517 by Jan Gossaert for the high-ranking Burgundian politician and cleric Jean Carondelet (fig. 6) presents two illusionistically painted semi-circular stone niches when closed, each set in a frame simulating marble.⁶³ The right panel shows the donor's coat of arms suspended from a hook, supplemented by his initials, which are inserted between the straps in a symmetrically interlaced cord.⁶⁴ The left panel contrasts this depiction with the *trompe-l'œil* of a skull. The skull, painted in virtuoso manner, rests in the same stone niche, as the motto 'MATVRA' seemingly 'engraved' in the masonry suggests, but everything is in an advanced state of decay. The niche is nicked in many places and the skull is not intact. Mocking the loss of the ability to speak, the detached lower jaw juts uselessly over the edge of the niche and threatens to tumble into the void, while the cranium has rolled backwards. The cord has also disintegrated, its knot has opened and can no longer bear the initials that unmistakably identify the skull as the future face of Carondelet.⁶⁵

As art historical scholarship has already pointed out, the diptych's complex interplay between the outer and inner panels stimulates the viewer to reflect on representation.⁶⁶ Gossaert has used the folding logic in such a way that the escutcheon – if the double panel were opened to the left like a book – reveals the depiction of the Virgin and Child. The genealogical or dynastic representation is here related to the Mother of God, whom the donor (with the words '*me representa*') asks for intercession. The skull meanwhile is a counter-image to the coat of arms, as Hans Belting has noted, and mocks as a 'ridiculously helpless object' any intention of individual representation, since – with the opening reversed from left to right – it is decidedly set against the donor's portrait (described as '*Representacion*').⁶⁷ The latter mode of opening seems to have been common in diptychs owing



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Jan Gossaert, *Diptych of Jean Carondelet*, 1517, exterior panel: *Skull / Coat of arms*; interior panel: *Portrait of Jean Carondelet / Virgin and Child*, oak (with original frame), each panel 42.5 x 27 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. 1442-1443

to the traditional hierarchy of the interior panels. Gossaert's double panel, however, breaks with the hierarchy in that it presents the donor on the left wing, which is usually reserved for the sacred image. This deviation was probably due to the intention to let the deathly decay demonstrated in the interaction of the skull and the portrait be followed by the image of the Mother of God promising salvation only when the diptych is fully opened.⁶⁸ In the sense of an *anti-representation*, according to Belting, the claim to representation of the lifelike mimetic portrait in the same medium is criticised and undermined by reference to the faceless skull; the 'resistance of the image to the death of the sitter' is thereby revealed 'as a media fiction, whereby limits of representation are set for the image itself'.⁶⁹

If Carondelet wanted to use his diptych for devotion, he had to actively confront death. Similar to Bruyn's *Vanitas still life*, Gossaert's depiction also seems to have aimed at overcoming the fear of tactile contact with death when the double panel is opened, owing to the supposedly unstable and wobbly arrangement of the skull in the niche and the lower jaw that threatens to fall into the real space at any moment. The idea for this challenge of 'handling' death probably arose from a changed, humanistically influenced conception of death at the turn of the late Middle Ages and the



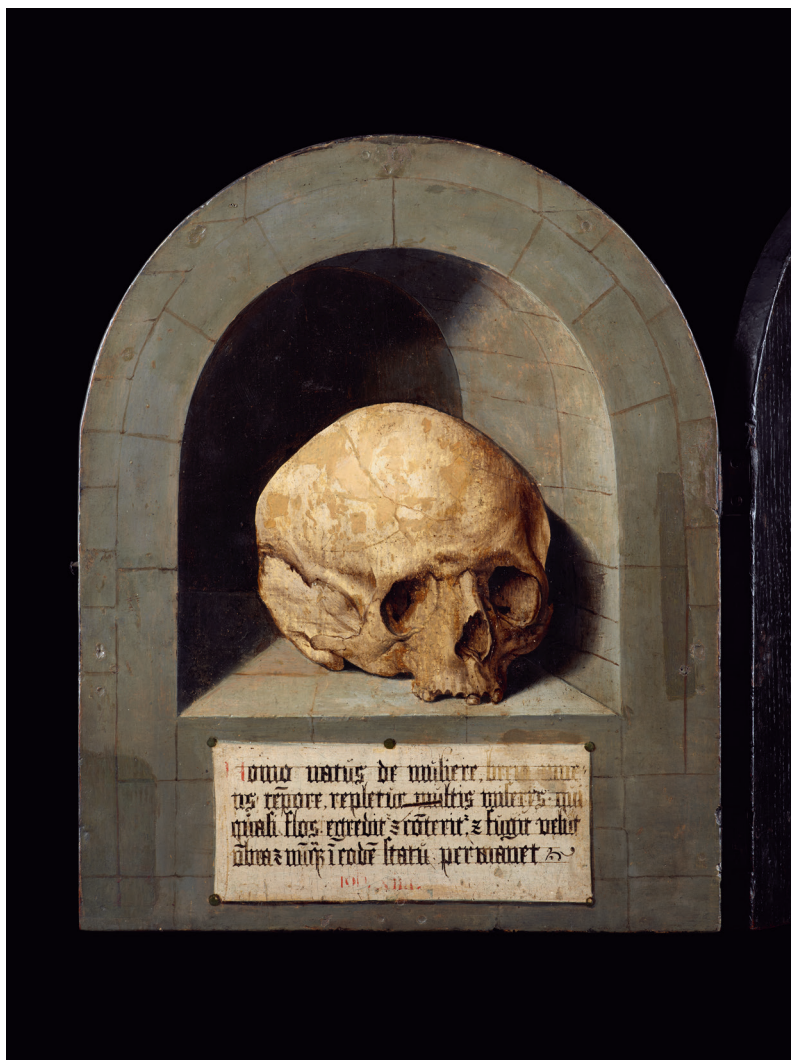
early modern period. Instead of seeing death as a punishment and facing it passively with fear, people were supposed to accept it as *conditio humana*. The new understanding of death called for a constant and conscious confrontation with one's own finitude during one's lifetime, since the insight into the frailty of earthly existence gained from such a continuous contemplation of death could enable people to shape their own lives in an exemplary, best possible way as a preparation for death.⁷⁰ Since the diptych exteriors provoked just such a confrontation with the help of *trompe-l'œil* and at the same time demanded that the frightening sight of death be actively confronted cognitively and haptically, they corresponded to this new attitude towards death in a special way.

The fact that the skull in Gossaert's panel 'turns from an image of horror into an object of philosophical reflection' is also confirmed by the reference to Jerome as the most important model and guarantor of the *meditatio mortis*.⁷¹ Above the skull, a *cartellino* fixed to the niche wall shows the year of the painting's creation and a quote from Jerome: 'He who is always aware of his mortality easily disregards everything'.⁷² This is the final sentence of a letter addressed to Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, in which the Church Father urges his reader to disregard all earthly goods and temptations and to devote his life entirely to the study of the Holy Scriptures, in order, as it

says earlier, to acquire on earth the knowledge that will last in heaven.⁷³ Even before the inside of the diptych showed Carondelet's hope for the hereafter, the outside invited him to *meditatio mortis* and thus to introspection. In connection with the motto 'MATVRA', which means as much as 'Hurry (to make the best of yourself)', the sight of the cranium is an appeal to the donor to make the best possible use of the given time in the sense of striving for spiritual, virtuous perfection and at the same time represents a test of maturity for his inner attitude:⁷⁴ either the skull, which purposefully transgresses the aesthetic boundary but at the same time appears grotesque, succeeded in terrifying Carondelet with its anti-representation; or the learned donor acquainted with Erasmus succeeded in demonstrating his Stoic serenity in contemplating death. The diptych corresponds, as Christiane Wiebel has already emphasised, to 'a humanistically influenced attitude of piety, which, in addition to the hope of redemption as the central religious concern, reflects the idea of spiritual perfection in this world through the formulation of humility towards the finite.'⁷⁵

Conundrums and the limits of knowledge

The idea of deliberately contrasting skull and portrait was to find repeated application in early sixteenth-century paintings. In the 1528 *Portrait diptych of Gerhard and Anna Pilgrim* by Bartholomew Bruyn (fig. 7), only one exterior panel is painted.⁷⁶ When closed, the *trompe-l'œil* of the skull painted on the back of the woman's portrait masks the portrait of the husband.⁷⁷ The sight of the cranium is complemented here by a biblical quotation on a note attached to the stone wall with sealing wax: 'Man, born of woman, is of few days and full of trouble: he springs up like a flower and withers away, like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure'.⁷⁸ Bruyn's panel, as Roland Krischel recently argued, deliberately introduces a contradiction here between the quotation and the virtuoso, "'for all time" painterly captured shadow play', which, however, is in turn undermined when the panel is opened – by the paradox that the actually immovable, solid stone niche moves.⁷⁹ Krischel points out that both through the perspective view of the skull and by means of the fictitious lighting, namely above all through the pronounced shadows painted on the inside and outside, the pictorial illusion is heightened again in the very first opening phase, before it is literally 'flattened' with the progressive movement of the wing.⁸⁰ It is precisely through the dynamics of the folding image, Krischel emphasises, that the *trompe-l'œil* is 'intellectually potentiated', as the construction and dismantling of the illusion decisively presents death as a 'turning point' that takes shape in the panel hinge itself. Since the power and presence of death are annihilated as the opening progresses, the turn to the inner portrait panels can be interpreted as an outlook on the Day of Judgement and the resurrection of the flesh – just as, conversely, the closing of the diptych can also be understood as an 'exercise in dying'.⁸¹ Only in passing does Krischel add an important consideration to his observations, namely that probably the most famous depiction of the skull, Hans Holbein's *anamorphosis*, could have emerged from the performative potential of the movable folding diptych panels that make death appear and disappear in the construction and



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Bartholomew Bruyn the Elder, *Portrait diptych of Gerhard and Anna Pilgrim*, 1528, back of right panel: *Skull in niche*, oak, each panel 38 x 30.5 cm, Cologne, loan of Kölner Gymnasial- und Stiftungsfonds in the Wallraff-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, inv. no. Dep. 14/15



8

Hans Holbein the Younger, *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ('*The ambassadors*'), 1533, oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm, London, National Gallery, inv. no. NG 1314

dismantling of the illusion.⁸² In the double portrait *The ambassadors* (fig. 8) from 1533, it is the viewer who must move in order to see the representation of the portrayed *or* the skull in the correct perspective. Here, too, the play with perception has a complex dimension in terms of content. The anamorphic *vanitas* motif, as Tristan Weddigen has argued, need not be understood fundamentally as a critique of the human striving for knowledge, but since it demonstrates the limited, location-dependent perspectivity of perception, it immediately makes people aware of their own extreme limits of knowledge in the reference to death.⁸³

Finally, it is precisely with regard to this aspect of the limitations of knowledge that we should consider a particularly enigmatic diptych by



Jan Provoost, whose complex pictorial programme presupposes scholarly recipients.⁸⁴ The folding double panel, dated 1522, is painted on both outer wings, whereby the front and rear views differ significantly from each other. Whereas the right wing illudes a stone surface, probably imitating porphyry, interspersed with bright-red splashes, and the painted frame simulates light-brown-greyish marble, the left wing presents a skull slightly tilted to the side and deprived of its lower jaw, resting on a stone pedestal in front of a shallow niche.⁸⁵ The frame of this panel differs from the opposite side not only in that it appears to be composed of four differently marbled mouldings, but that it is also the bearer of painted words and pictorial symbols that form a rebus. The skull, the pictorial riddle and the traditional hierarchy of the interior panels suggest that this panel is the front.⁸⁶ The unusual design quickly makes it clear that deception of the eye was not the painter's primary goal here. The brief impression that the skull on its pedestal protrudes into the real space is undermined at the lower edge of the picture by the overlap of the pedestal spur. In addition, the rebus also deliberately counteracts the illusion. The French words and musical notes do not evoke the suggestion of being carved, and the objects depicted – a rock, a pansy, playing dice and a headdress – deliberately conflict in their perspective view with the vertical surface of the fictitious stone frame. The decipherment of the rebus still puzzles researchers today, since on the one hand the identification of the first symbol as a pictogram (*borne*) or ideogram (*dur*) has produced divergent readings of the upper line (Bonne/Dur est la pensée de la [mort]) and on the other hand the musical fragment of the lower line has been determined as either la or mi (Bon est de penser a mi/la [mort]).⁸⁷

The word 'penser' emblazoned on the frame below the skull seems to have been elevated to a programmatic statement on this panel, since both the oscillation of the illusion and the picture puzzle make it clear that mere seeing is not sufficient, and that visual perception that combines eye and intellect is required. In order to decipher the rebus, which plays with semantics and consonance, knowledge, understanding and the ability to combine are required. The aim of this intellectual challenge, it should be emphasised with regard to the skull, which functions as a symbol of the mortal *conditio humana*, was certainly not to search for a solution to the riddle in order to then – vainly – boast of it. Just as the excess of mimesis creates irritation and reveals susceptibility to deception, the rebus also deliberately leaves room for ambiguity – in terms of the signs to be identified, but also in terms of the question of 'who is speaking'. By retaining an ambiguity in the complex pictorial programme and thus showing the recipients the relativity of their own knowledge, a premise of the new conception of death and *meditatio mortis*, namely the insight into the limitations and uncertainty of one's own ability to know, is raised to programmatic significance.⁸⁸

In Provoost's diptych, too, the *trompe l'œil* effect seems to intensify briefly with opening when the panel is slightly angled, before it is then nullified.⁸⁹ The image of the skull gives way to the redemptive sight of Christ carrying the cross on the left inner panel, followed by the donor's portrait on the right. The Franciscan, shown close-up against a dark-green back-



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Jan Provoost, *Diptych with Christ carrying the cross and a portrait of a Franciscan friar*, 1522, exterior panels: *Porphyry imitation* and *Skull in niche*, oak (with original frames), each panel 50 x 40 cm, Bruges, Musea Brugge, Hospitaalmuseum, Sint-Janshospitaal, inv. no. OSJ 191

ground in three-quarter profile and dressed in the traditional habit of the order, whose age according to the inscription is 54, turns towards Christ with prayer and a concentrated gaze.⁹⁰ In accordance with the special structural logic of the devotional diptych, the vivid image of the cross-bearer is to be understood as an image arising from the unknown donor's prayer and standing before his inner eye.⁹¹ That this is about an inner seeing with the heart is also confirmed by the two small hearts at the upper edge of the fictitious marble frame. As on the outside, the inscription running across both frame mouldings combines image and word, with the inserted pictograms again containing a clever play on words. The rope not only correlates visually with the cord used to tie Christ's hands, but must also be related to the 'chorda' of the Franciscan habit in the context of the inscription. Playing off the consonance with the Latin word for hearts, 'corda', the inscription can be understood as follows: 'Francisci chorda traxit ad se plurima corda' ('Franciscan cords carry [or draw] the most hearts').⁹² This play with words and images obviously aimed to analogise the Franciscan chorda, whose knotting recalls the vow of poverty, obedience and chastity, with the spiritual cord that connects Jesus with the heart of the brother. However, the strength of this 'symbolic cord' may have been deliberately left open.⁹³ Not only the small, detailed cord, which, according to its precise shadow cast, floats freely in front of the picture rail without any support, may be taken as an indication in this direction, but also changes during the working process may support the thesis. The donor's hands, which also



appear to have been bound with a rope in the underdrawing, seem to have been joined to Christ's hands in the first stage of the design. In the painting process, however, this detail was not executed.⁹⁴ Such an explicit staging of one's own following of Christ could perhaps have seemed inappropriate, especially with regard to the vow of poverty, since it seems paradoxical that a member of a mendicant order apparently possessed such an elaborate devotional diptych.⁹⁵ Instead of confirming the Franciscan in his following of Christ and the hope of salvation associated with it, the diptych was probably intended to show him the necessity of *imitatio Christi* in view of human weakness and susceptibility to error. Similar to the outside, the inside also denies the donor an unambiguous truth or certainty and instead calls on him to continually reflect and to act correctly.

Although scenes from the passion were not entirely unusual for devotional diptychs, Provoost's work marked a novelty in two respects. The theme of the Carrying of the Cross – closely linked to the idea of the *imitatio Christi* – was a first in this context, and the concrete realisation of the subject must also be considered unusual.⁹⁶ Placed directly in the foreground, Christ in half figure dominates the scene. Shouldering the cross, his body is turned to the left, while his face, crowned with thorns and covered in traces of blood, is turned to the right towards the donor. While this 'dramatic close-up' is quite in keeping with convention, the faces appearing directly behind the cross-bearer, also close-up, are a striking, unusual addition. Both in the compositional principle of *horror vacui* and in the

contrast between well-formed and hideous figures, the panel at this point is related to a pictorial invention by Hieronymus Bosch, which has been handed down in the Ghent *Carrying of the Cross*.⁹⁷ The weeping faces of the Virgin Mary and John, the favourite disciple, which are shown cut off by the beams of the cross in the upper left segment of the painting and appear first when the diptych is opened, are demonstratively juxtaposed with the malicious faces of the tormentors on the right edge of the picture. While the helmeted henchman looks spitefully and cunningly at the Son of God, the caricature of the lower, slightly green-tinted grimacing face with its glaring eyes and wide-open mouth is driven to a disgusting extreme. Only on closer inspection does one finally discover another pair of eyes, accentuated by strong reflected light, staring at the viewer at the upper edge of the picture from a dark, barely recognisable face, which was inserted late into the composition. The feeling of confinement was obviously deliberately intensified in the course of the working process and thus also the impression of the oppression and humiliation of the Son of God.⁹⁸ However, this may not have been the only motivation for the densely packed depiction. Through the deliberate contrasting of the accompanying figures, right and wrong behaviour, the *com-passio* on the one hand and the failure to recognise the Son of God on the other, are demonstratively juxtaposed. While Mary and John function as exemplary figures of identification, the Franciscan nevertheless found himself exposed to greater spatial proximity and direct eye contact with the monstrous figures. In a clever way, Provoost made use of the special constellation of the devotional diptych, in which the donor's gaze not only falls on the picture from the outside, but is also mirrored in the picture by the integration of his own portrait and presented as an inner gaze, in order to stage diametrically opposed gazes in terms of content. When the donor sat in front of the open diptych, the turn of Christ's body might have strengthened his hope of being seen by God and sharing his grace. However, the eyes flashing out of the darkness directly above the face of the cross-bearer, fixing him out of the picture, counteract this with a moment of disturbance. The pair of wide-open eyes that distract attention from the cross-bearer seems like a reminder that the donor can also be waylaid by demons and fall prey to sinful, wrong actions.⁹⁹ Placed at the turning point from good to evil, the dangerous, deceptive dimension of earthly seeing also seems to be addressed in this highly irritating outward gaze. This danger – as the image seems to demand in the opposition of the gazes – must be resisted by the donor, namely by turning to Christ through introspection, by means of an attentive and corrective inner perception that combines visual seeing and cognition.

Conclusion

The central concern of the *memento mori*, it should be emphasised in summary, was never to raise death alone as the subject of individual reflection, but always also earthly life and the question of its proper shaping. The new *memento mori* depictions on the outer wings of private devotional paintings and portrait panels and on the illuminated pages of Flemish books of hours unmistakably located their viewers in this world when they

confronted the latter with their inescapable fate and the fears and worries associated with it in the form of the skull. Playing on the deceptive power of the sensual, the images deliberately aimed to generate moments of irritation and uncertainty. The illusionistic artistic game, in conjunction with the performative potential of the multi-dimensional, mobile image carriers, is exploited to show the recipients their sensual (deceptive) susceptibility and their always limited perspective of perception as a warning sign of their imperfect *conditio humana*. Yet the paintings also use *trompe-l'œil* to appeal to the viewer's capacity for judgement and cognition, and thus to the mental agility that characterises human nature. Although they do not yet offer the viewer an immediate way out of their mortal destiny and also no certainty of salvation, they nevertheless point to the possibility of actively withdrawing from the horror of death through ethical thought and action guided by inner judgement and reflection – as a conscious preparation for death and the hoped-for eternal life. By using the *trompe-l'œil*'s interplay of sensual and intellectual experience in a complex, reflected way to stimulate the *meditatio mortis*, those *memento mori* paintings presented themselves by combining visual seeing and cognition as 'speculative pictorial form' in the true sense of the word.¹⁰⁰

Notes

*I would like to thank Bernd Stiegler, the editorial board and peer reviewers for their helpful, constructive feedback and suggestions, as well as the colloquium of Karin Leonhard for the opportunity to present and discuss first ideas for this article, which is linked to my current post-doc research project. Many thanks also go to Markus Rheindorf for his translation.

- 1 On the history of death and its images in general, see, among others, cat. Cologne 2006, Ariès 2002 and Reudenbach 1998.
- 2 See De Vos 1999, 268–273, cat. no. 19, Kruse 1996, 43f. and Sterling 1981, 47.
- 3 'MIRE VOUS CI ORGUEILLEUX ET AVERS/ MON CORPS FU BEAUX ORE EST VIANDE A [VERS]', translation from Jolly 2010, 100. In a deliberate play on words, the inscription juxtaposes *avers* (greedy, avaricious, miserly) and *viande à vers* (meat for the worms); see De Vos 1999, 270.
- 4 'O MORS QUA[M] AMARA EST MEMORIA TUA HOMI[N]I INIUSTO ET PACEM HABENTI IN SUBSTA[N]CIIS SUI VIRO QUIETO ET CUI[US] DIE DIRECTE SUNT IN OM[N]IBUS ET AD HUC VALENTI ACCIPERE CIBU[M] ECC. XH.'; translation from Jacobs 2012, 89.
- 5 On opening the work, the gloomy exterior gives way to the radiant interior, and inevitable death is displaced by the image of the Saviour of the world. See, in more

detail, on the iconographic programme of the triptych, which was probably commissioned by Jean Braque's wife, Catherine of Brabant, immediately after his death: Jolly 2010, De Vos 1999, 268–273, cat. no. 19 and Lane 1984, 127–128.

- 6 See Kruse 1996, here 44; see also cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 170–177, cat. no. 25.
- 7 This is already revealed, among other things, in the fact that the illusion on the outside of the *Braque triptych* is cancelled out in the painting itself by the inserted coats of arms, which emphasise the flatness of the picture surface. See also Kruse 1996, 39–44.
- 8 In addition, there exist also Italian examples that may have emerged from artistic exchange with the Netherlands, which intensified in the 15th century, such as Andrea Previtali (Cordeliaghi), *Portrait of a man*, reverse: *Skull*, c. 1502, Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli; Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, *Portrait of Girolamo Casio*, reverse: *Skull*, c. 1493/1494, Derbyshire, Chatsworth House, Devonshire Collection. See Stoichita 2020 and Dülberg 1990, 248, cat. nos. 207–209.
- 9 At the same time, the *memento mori* of the skull in a niche became a popular motif in prints as well; see, among others, the engraving of three skulls by the monogramist 'W.A.' in the second half of the 15th century, subsequently re-engraved by Israhel van Meckenem with

a modified inscription; Göttler & Wolf 1995. However, since the pictorial illusion is inevitably weaker due to the reduction of colour, these graphic images — which nevertheless have a very direct and drastic effect — are neglected here.

- 10 Diptychs were thus referred to, inter alia, as 'tableau (...) en manière d'un livre' or 'tableau (...) en form d'unes heures'; on this media relationship, see Ganz 2010, 45–47, Gelfand 2006 and Eichberger 1998.
- 11 Further examples are *Rothschild prayerbook*, Ghent or Bruges, c. 1505/1510, Kerry Stokes Collection, fol. 164v–165r; *Musgrave hours*, Bruges, 1524, Upperville, VA, Collection Mrs. Paul Mellon, fol. 265v (Simon Bening; *Burial mass / Border with skulls*); see also Büttner 2002, 268–280.
- 12 The miniature is part of an illuminated double page, which will be discussed in more detail later. On the novel motif of this miniature, see, above all, Marrow 1983 and Marrow 2005, 27–33.
- 13 On the skull motif — which also illustrates the necessity of penance exemplified by the saint in the context of hermit iconography, for example, in images of St. Jerome in the Desert — see Wiebel 1988, 109–112, and Jeon 2005, 35–46.
- 14 Marrow 1983, 161.
- 15 E.g., Guy Marchant's 1485 *Dance macabre* was subtitled '*Miroir salutaire pour toutes gens*'. On the metaphors of the mirror in the earlier pictorial genres, see Marrow 1983, 157f., Reudenbach 1998, 76–78, and

- Taylor 1984.
- 16 Marrow 1983, 161f., Marrow 2005, 28f.
 - 17 Marrow 2005, 28, seems to interpret the skulls in niches as a concrete reference to the death of others. However, since the depiction of the skull often referred specifically to the patrons and first users, and since the facelessness of the skull also opened up a possibility of identification for others, his argumentation can also be applied to these images, in the opinion of the author.
 - 18 In the context of this observation, it is interesting to take a comparative look at the phenomenon of early Netherlandish grisaille, as the painted stone sculptures, also presented in fictitious niches, correspond equally to the principle of the *trompe-l'œil*. However, while the fiction of stone sculpture is particularly pronounced in the works of the first half of the 15th century — one need only think of Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation diptych* in Madrid — the *trompe-l'œil* character is increasingly undermined in the grisailles of the second half of the century, as these now oscillate more and more between the suggestion of dead, inorganic stone material and lively, painterly representation.
 - 19 Stoichita 2020, 41.
 - 20 The special connection between pictorial illusion and the *vanitas* theme was emphasised early on by Schneider 1980, 20f. Reudenbach 1998, 86, n. 30, remarks in passing that in addition to the subject, the mode of representation should also be taken into account. Krischel 2020, in his discussion of the *Pilgrim diptych*, which will be treated later, recently pursued an approach similar to that of the present article. Beyond the *vanitas* theme, Marrow in 2005 and 2007 in particular has traced the meaning of the play of illusion in Netherlandish painting and manuscript illumination of the 15th century.
 - 21 On pictorial illusion/*trompe-l'œil* in general, see Büttner 2011, cat. Munich 2018, cat. Hamburg 2010 and cat. Washington 2002. On the early play with tricks of the eye in the 15th and 16th centuries, see Siegert & Lutz 2020a, Lecoq 1996 and Krieger 1996.
 - 22 The prime example is, of course, the legend handed down by Pliny the Elder of the artistic competition between Zeuxis, who deceived the birds with his faked grapes, and Parrhasios, who in turn deceived the competitor with his painted curtain and thus won the day; Plinius, *Naturalis historia*, book XXXV, 35, 65. For an overview of the various ancient anecdotes, see Kris & Kurz (1934) 1995, 89–98.
 - 23 Cf. Ebert-Schifferer 2010, Büttner 2011, 202f., and Marin (1978) 2001.
 - 24 See Böhm 2010, 26.
 - 25 See recent contributions by Siegert & Lutz, Ganz, Gludovatz and Tumanov in Siegert & Lutz 2020a, as well as Lutz 2015 and Siegert & Lutz 2011. On the interpretation of *trompe-l'œil* in late medieval manuscript illumination, see also Marrow 2005, Grebe 2001, Krieger 1996, 13–15, DaCosta Kaufmann & Roehrig Kaufmann 1991 and Pächt 1984, 198–202.
 - 26 See Siegert & Lutz 2011, 267–281, here especially 270, 280f.
 - 27 Siegert & Lutz 2011, 269.
 - 28 Siegert & Lutz 2011, 283.
 - 29 Ganz 2020, 77f. The original German quote, translated here by the author, contains a word play (*Täuschung/Ent-Täuschung*) that does not translate exactly into English: 'Die gängige Lesart des Trompe-l'Œil ist diejenige eines von Künstlern ersonnenen "Tricks", der durch den Umschlag von Täuschung zu Ent-Täuschung auf die malerische Beherrschung von Natur und Kunst aufmerksam machen soll. Kronzeuge dieser Lesart ist die vielzitierte Legende von den Trauben des Zeuxis und des Vorhangs des Parrhasios. In der Verabsolutierung dieser Erzählung zur Urszene des Trompe-l'Œil schlechthin erliegt die Forschung jedoch selbst einem Augentrag, der dazu verleitet, die Trompe-l'Œil-Malerei auf eine binnenkünstlerische Reflektion bildlicher Mimesis festzulegen. Dem steht gerade im 15. Jahrhundert ein breites Experimentieren mit Dispositiven malerischer Illusion in differierenden Medien und Praktiken von Bildern entgegen'.
 - 30 Unlike, for example, the *trompe-l'œil* paintings created later for art chambers or collections, the diptychs were primarily used in a private context, limited to a few viewers; they were used primarily not for the contemplation of art, but for religious devotion and representational purposes.
 - 31 On the question of the storage and use of diptychs, see Verougstraete 2006, cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 4, and Verougstraete & Van Schoute 1997.
 - 32 For a compilation of Bruyn's numerous reverse *vanitas* depictions, see Dülberg 1990, 252–256, plates 117–124.
 - 33 See Brecher 1897.
 - 34 See Dülberg 1990, 252, cat. no. 219. In another of Bruyn's portraits of a married couple, the *Pilgrim diptych* to be discussed later, only the reverse of the woman's portrait was painted.
 - 35 'Omnia morte cadunt/ mors ultima linia rerum'; translation from Bialostocki 1981, 282. In art historical literature the inscription is often said to be a borrowing from Lucretius, but in fact the quotation goes back to Horace (*Epistles*, 1.16:79); see Ubl 2021, 45, n. 90, who furthermore notes that Westerburg's brother-in-law had read Horace and referred to the ancient author in a writing against Johannes Eck.
 - 36 On the *trompe-l'œil* motif of the fly, which in the tradition of symbolic interpretation is interpreted negatively, above all as a symbol of temptation and sin and for this very reason is also a popular symbol in the context of *vanitas*, see, e.g., Gludovatz 2020, Dittrich & Dittrich 2004, 153–157, Kemp 2003 and Chastel 1984.
 - 37 See Böhm 2010, 27: 'Anders als die Novellistik des Plinius weismachen wollte, geht es nicht um eine Alternative von Täuschung oder "Ent-Täuschung" im Sinn ihrer Aufdeckung. *Trompe-l'œils* sind keine visuellen Fallen, aus denen man sich nicht oder nur schwer zu befreien vermöchte. Sie sind auch keine Einbahnstraßen, sondern optische Systeme, die Züge in unterschiedliche Richtung in Bewegung setzen'. (Contrary to what Pliny's stories would have us believe, it is not a question of an alternative of deception or anti-deception in the sense of its uncovering. *Trompe-l'œils* are not visual traps that are difficult or impossible to escape from. Nor are they one-way streets, but optical systems that set trains in motion in different directions.)
 - 38 This simultaneous experience has been characterised as 'bimodal reception', whereas the succession of deception and its uncovering is understood as 'bipolar reception'; see Hobson 1982, 12f. For a discussion of *trompe-l'œil* from the perspective of cognitive psychology, see also Singer 2002.
 - 39 See especially Böhm 2010, as well as Gludovatz 2020, 62, and Büttner 2011, 203.
 - 40 Marin (1978) 2001, 315: 'In a sense, *trompe-l'œil* (...) does indeed stem from the domain of mimesis, but because it manifests a servile submission to the thing itself as it appears before the eyes, the thing painted is no longer the representation of the "real" thing, but its presentation in its double: *trompe-l'œil*,

- or mimesis in excess'. Marin based his argument on an article published a few years earlier by the psychoanalyst Pierre Charpentrat; see Charpentrat 1971.
- 41 Marin (1978) 2001, 314: 'Thus the effect of representation (...) is not that it *makes us believe* in the presence of the thing itself in the picture (...) but that it *lets us know* something about the position of the subject thinking and contemplating the world, instructing us, as theoretical subjects of truth, about our rights and our powers over the "reality" of "objects".'
- 42 See Marin (1978) 2001, 314ff.
- 43 On this aspect, see also Kern 2018, 60f., and Rath *et al.* 2013.
- 44 In this context, reference should be made to Giotto's Arena Chapel (Scrovegni Chapel) with its fictitious plinth zone, or the *trompe-l'œil* effects in Jan van Eyck's oeuvre. On the 'aesthetics of the fictional' in Italian paintings of the 14th and 15th centuries, see especially Krüger 2017, here 67, Krüger 2001 and Krieger 1996.
- 45 Böhme 2007, 331. On this assumed connection between optics and painting in general, see Smith 2014, 298-316, and Büttner 2013 (including further references).
- 46 Based on a strong reception of Greco-Arabic science, the science of *perspectiva* encompassed in a novel synthesis the physical theories of light radiation and refraction, as well as the metaphysics of light, the anatomical-physiological description of the eye and the visual process, and the explanation of the psychological processes of visual perception. Contrary to today's predominant, more art-related understanding of perspective, it was by no means limited to the mathematical-geometric sub-area. For an introductory overview of the new optical doctrines and related discourses, see Lindberg 1976 and Smith 2014, as well as Camille 2000.
- 47 See also Tachau 1988, xv-xvi: 'At least as early as Roger Bacon, (...) scholars perceived the whole range of optical concerns as lying not at the periphery but at the nexus of natural philosophy and epistemology (all ultimately at the service of theology). Hence from the mid-thirteenth-century medieval intellectuals sought what might seem a "unified field theory" of light, vision, cognition, and our expression of what we know to be true.'
- 48 See Perler 2014 and Denery 2005.
- 49 Smith 2014, 277.
- 50 Roger Bacon, *Perspectiva*, pars III, dist. 3, cap. 2: 'Nam rectitude visionis Deo debetur; declination a rectitudine per fractionem, que debilior est, angelice nature convenit; reflexive visio, que est debilior, homini potest assignari'; Lindberg 1996, 328-329; Smith 2014, 270.
- 51 For human vision in its present state, Bacon re-asserted the distinction, as it were: 'In the present state [of mankind], vision is of three kinds: direct in those who are perfect, refracted in those who are imperfect, and reflected in evildoers and those who ignore God's commandments (...)'; Lindberg 1996, 328-331.
- 52 See Denery 2005, 100-106.
- 53 The compendium was intended to serve as an exemplary collection, especially for the preparation of sermons. More than 220 surviving manuscripts from the late 13th to the 15th century as well as over 40 supplementary references to manuscript copies that have since disappeared or been destroyed bear witness to the extremely successful reception history of the treatise, which also appeared in several printed editions from the end of the 15th century onwards. On the treatise, see Newhauser 2012, Kessler & Newhauser 2018 and Newhauser 2010, here 31.
- 54 Newhauser 2012, 12f. Previously, Bacon had already made the connection to Paul (1 Cor. 13, 12: 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face'); Lindberg 1996, 328-329.
- 55 For more details, see Kaschek 2012, 216f.
- 56 Marrow 2005, 29. A similar strategy can already be found on the inside of the *Ghent altarpiece*, where the figures of Adam and Eve standing in niches are elevated to a point of reference or identification for the viewer not only through their realistic representation and perspective, but also through the play with the aesthetic pictorial boundary, thus making them aware of their own sinfulness and need for redemption; see Belting & Kruse 1994, 102f.
- 57 Bonaventura, *Sententiarum*, book 2, dist. 23, art. 2, ques. 3: 'In statu vero miserie videtur per speculum obscuratum per peccatum primi hominis; et ideo nunc videtur per speculum et in aenigmate'; Denery 2005, 104.
- 58 Reudenbach 1998, 86.
- 59 Newhauser 2010, 30. See also Hamburger 2000, 358f.
- 60 Denery 2005, 106-113; Schnitzler 2011, 316-318.
- 61 See Pfisterer 2005, 160.
- 62 'In the fact that vision is not completed in the eyes, which appear externally, but rather in the common nerve, which is hidden internally, we are instructed morally to avoid rash judgement and not to judge matters as they appear at first sight, but rather to have recourse to an internal judgement through careful consideration'. See Newhauser 2012, 16, and Denery 2005, 107.
- 63 See cat. New York 2010, 245-249, cat. no. 40.
- 64 Interestingly, the pictorial illusion seems to be somewhat subverted on this panel, for while the hook suggests a suspension *before* the niche, the escutcheon itself is clearly placed *in* the niche.
- 65 See Sander 2006, 425.
- 66 See Sander 2006, 424f., and Belting 2002, 39-41.
- 67 Belting 2002, 39f.
- 68 On the opening mode, see Verougstraete 2006, 158, who argues that the protective function of the movable panel may here also have been intended to correspond to the protective role of Mary, Mother of God.
- 69 Belting 2002, 31.
- 70 See Jeon 2005, 74-78, and Schleif 1987.
- 71 Wiebel 1988, 109. The special significance of the Church Father for the new conception of death and *meditatio mortis* has been dealt with in detail by the author elsewhere; see Leonhard & Hindriks 2020, 133-161.
- 72 Hieronymus, *Ep. LIII. Ad Paulinum presbyterum*: 'Facile contemnit omnia qui se semper cogitat moriturum'; CSEL 1996, 465, Z. 8f.; translation from Wiebel 1988, 120.
- 73 Hieronymus, *Ep. LIII. Ad Paulinum presbyterum*: 'discamus in terris, quorum nobis scientia perseveret in caelo'; CSEL 1996, 464, Z. 5f. See also Ainsworth in cat. New York 2010, 249.
- 74 'MATVRA' has repeatedly been translated as 'maturity' in research, but it is an imperative form that admonishes urgency ('hurry up') — clearly in order to attain maturity as well; Leonhard & Hindriks 2020, 146, n. 50.
- 75 Wiebel 1988, 121; Wiebel 1993, 69-77, here 72. Among other things, Jean Carondelet cultivated an acquaintance with Erasmus of Rotterdam, who describes him as an 'old friend' in a letter of 26 March 1518 and dedicated his new edition of the works of St. Hilarius of Poitiers to him in 1523; see Bietenholz & Deutscher 1985, vol. 1, 272f., and Olin 1979, 95-117.
- 76 See Krischel 2020, Krischel 2009 and Westhoff-Krummacher 1965, 105f.
- 77 See Krischel 2020, 249, who in this context

- also emphasises the gender aspect, in that woman and death must move while the man is allowed to remain calm and dignified.
- 78 Job 14, 1-2: 'Homo natus de muliere, brevi vivens te[m]pore, repletur multis miseri[i]s. Qui quasi flos egredit[ur] et co[n]terit[ur] et fugit velut u[m]bra et numq[uam] in eode[m] statu permanet. Job. XIII^l, Westhoff-Krummacher 1965, 105f.
- 79 Krischel 2020, 249, 255.
- 80 Krischel 2020, 249f. See also Verougstraete 2006, 159-161.
- 81 Krischel 2020, 255-257. At the same time, this interpretation could also be applied to the *Carondelet diptych*, whose potential for reflection is thus increased once again.
- 82 Krischel 2020, 250.
- 83 See Weddigen 2005.
- 84 See cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 210-125, cat. no. 31; cat. Bruges 1998, vol. 2, 36-39, cat. no. 22. The painter, who belonged to the Bruges Brotherhood of Jerusalem Pilgrims at the time of the work's creation and may have been in contact with the early Bruges chambers of rhetoric, may also be assumed to have had a corresponding erudition; see Spronk in cat. Bruges 1998, vol. 1, 94f., and Spronk 2005, 111.
- 85 As can be seen in the underdrawing, there was a loose pile of books under the skull in the first draft, supported by a cushion; see cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 296, cat. no. 31.
- 86 See Verougstraete 2006, 159, and Spronk in cat. Bruges 1998, vol. 2, 38, cat. no. 22. Scherer 2003, 84f., on the other hand, erroneously assumes a book-analogous opening, which cannot be completely ruled out but does not represent the rule. However, we agree with her that the imitation of the stone may have not only a decorative but also a substantive meaning. Cf. in this regard also Fricke 2010 and Gelfand 1994, 139-153.
- 87 For details on the different proposals, see Spronk in cat. Bruges 1998, vol. 2, 38, cat. no. 22; and cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 321, cat. no. 31, n. 7. Scherer 2003, 82f., makes a different decipherment, especially of the upper line, by interpreting the rock as a touchstone ('toucheau'). Her reading does not seem convincing insofar as this symbolic transfer requires additional arguments.
- 88 On the relationship between scholarship and humility before finitude, see Schuster 1991, 152-157, and Wiebel 1988, 78-87.
- 89 See Verougstraete 2006, 159-161.
- 90 The inscription on the two lower panels reads: 'anno dni xv xxii / fueram annorum liiii'.
- 91 On the structural logic, in which the dispositifs of seeing are specifically thematised and different modes of seeing — external seeing and the inner world of images, the empirically experienced and the imagined, spiritual vision — are juxtaposed, see Ganz 2010, 47-49, and Schmidt 2003.
- 92 See cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 210, cat. no. 31, and Scherer 2003, 79.
- 93 Wise 2018, 15, who may have too quickly described this connection as 'as steadfast as the lash that ties Christ's hands and as unwavering as the intense gazes of the two figures'. See also Acres 2011, 596f.
- 94 See cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 210, 296, cat. no. 31.
- 95 The 54-year-old Franciscan has not been identified so far owing to a lack of further clues. As can be seen from the X-ray examination of the panel, he was first portrayed in a fully executed interior room. See cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 215, 296, cat. no. 31.
- 96 See Spronk in cat. Bruges 1998, vol. 2, 36, cat. no. 22; and Ringbom 1965, 149, n. 27.
- 97 Successor of Hieronymus Bosch, *Kreuztragung*, oil on wood, 78.8 x 83.1 cm, Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, inv. no. 1902-H; Ilsink *et al.* 2016, 442-449, cat. no. 29. See also Scherer 2003, 81.
- 98 See cat. Washington & Antwerp 2006, 215, 296, cat. no. 31; and Spronk in cat. Bruges 1998, vol. 2, 38, cat. no. 22.
- 99 In addition to the exaggerated, monstrous appearance of the figures on the right edge of the picture, the feeling of being oppressed and excited evokes associations not only with depictions of hell, but also with images of the temptation of St. Anthony, who saw himself exposed to demons and diabolical temptations while asleep and thus at the moment of rest of the *ratio*.
- 100 On the characterisation of the 17th-century *vanitas* still life as a 'speculative pictorial form', see Leonhard & Hindriks 2020, 177.

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