

CONSTRUCTING SACRED SPACE: THE *ST. URSULA RELIQUARY* IN THE
HOSPITAL OF ST. JOHN

By

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To Clara Randall

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Netherlandish painter, Hans Memling, was one of the most successful painters in Bruges at the end of the fifteenth century. The artist produced a range of works including altarpieces for public and private chapels, devotional paintings, a large number of portraits, and a reliquary for the Hospital of St. John in Bruges. In this study, I examine the *St. Ursula Reliquary*, commissioned for the hospital in 1489.

The reliquary contains the remains of the fifth-century princess, Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgin companions. The *St. Ursula Reliquary* stands out in Netherlandish art for its liturgical use and atypical style within the tradition of reliquaries. In my approach to the object, I consider its place in Bruges's visual culture and how it reflects late medieval spiritual attitudes. I assess Bruges's visual culture through a look at medieval aspects of vision, particularly St. Augustine's tripartite of sight laid out in Book 12 of *De Genesi ad litteram*. I structure my argument on Augustine's theory as a means to explore the shrine's painting and spiritual components.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

On October 21, 1489, the church of the Hospital of St. John in Bruges held a ceremony for the transfer of the relics of St. Ursula and her companions.¹ The hospital's new reliquary, crafted by local painter Hans Memling, was not only unique to the painter's *oeuvre*, but also to the tradition of reliquaries.² Wooden reliquaries were not unprecedented at the time; the hospital's original shrine from 1380-1400 (fig.1) was painted wood. The fact that Memling painted the reliquary in the contemporary style, however, makes the *St. Ursula Reliquary* (fig.2) a rare and remarkable object.³ Even more enchanting are the ways in which the artist plays with the form and medium of the reliquary, as well as the experience, to activate the imagery.

The *St. Ursula Reliquary* takes the traditional shape of a house or chapel, with gilded oak intended to mimic the look of metalwork shrines.⁴ Nched within its four pillars are sculpted saints: St. John the Evangelist, St. James, St. Agnes, and St. Elizabeth.⁵ Memling decorated the gabled roof with gold tracery, pinnacles, and *trompe-l'oeil* patterns that imitate the shrine's micro-architecture. The tondos on the roof are filled

¹ Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works* (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1994), 146.

² Jeanne Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine: the Subject as Object in Mental Pilgrimage," *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. Sarah Blick (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 59.

³ It may be that wooden reliquaries were more popular than surviving evidence indicates. However, painting in the contemporary Flemish style is unprecedented in the reliquary tradition. See Jeanne Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 58-59. For a discussion of this problem in relation to Flemish panel painting see Jean Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages: Studies in Society and Visual Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 14-15; see also Susie Nash's chapter "Dispersal and Destruction" *Northern Renaissance Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 296

⁵ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 301.

with painted figures from the scenes below. The structure of the reliquary is similar to traditional gothic cathedrals. The gothic skeleton hugs the sides of the reliquary with an arcade that frames six illusionistic scenes of the St. Ursula's portentous journey. The panels portray Ursula's pilgrimage to Rome and her return north on the Rhine. The scenes place emphasis on Ursula and her maidens' activity in the Rhineland and eventual martyrdom in Cologne. The ends of the reliquary feature St. Ursula with her maidens and the Virgin and Child (fig.3) encased in a chapel space. The eight brightly-colored panels appear as surrogates for stained-glass windows. The strikingly similar Paradise portal of the Church of Our Lady (fig.4), which is directly across from St. John's Hospital, supports the chapel concept behind Memling's arrangement.

The commission of the *St. Ursula Reliquary* speaks to new material values in art that reflect the spiritual attitudes of the period. Through the study of devotional texts, cultural practices, and artistic conventions, one can perceive the impetus behind the rise of naturalism in devotional painting. My goal is to demonstrate how the visual efficacy of the *St Ursula Reliquary* unveils itself as the apparatus behind one of the laity's primary quests: the experience of divine vision.⁶ To focus on the complexity and beauty of the shrine's surface, so vividly portrayed by Memling, was to participate in a deep spiritual meditation on its divine nature.⁷

⁶ See Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: the Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1984) 16-18; Craig Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting," *Simiolus* 15 (1985), 87-100; Cynthia Hahn, "Visio Dei: Changes in Medieval Visuality," *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance* (Cambridge 2000), 169-196.

⁷ I am referring the structure of divine contemplation theory, which had various interpretations throughout the Middle Ages. For example, the influential monastic writer, Abbot Suger, believed that outward splendor honored God and inspired spiritual contemplation. For an art historical discussion of his theory see Herbert Kessler, "The Function of *Vitrum Vestitum* and the use of *Materia Saphirorum* in Suger's St. Denis," *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), chapter 8.

For most of the fifteenth century, Bruges was the financial epicenter of the north. It was during this time, in 1465, that the German born painter, Hans Memling, purchased citizenship in Bruges.⁸ From 1465 until the year of his death in 1494, Memling ran the most lucrative artistic workshop in Bruges. The artist was among the wealthiest ten percent of Bruges citizens in 1480. This was also the decade that marks the beginning of the city's economic decline and Memling's greatest period of artistic activity.⁹

After the death of Charles the Bold at the battle of Nancy in 1477 and the death of his heir, Mary of Burgundy in 1482, Mary's husband, Maximilian of Austria, attempted to gain control the northern region. The conflict lasted most of the decade, with Bruges' brief triumph and eventual defeat in 1488.¹⁰ The political and economic chaos drove many of Memling's foreign patrons out of the city. The impact that the clashes had on Bruges's social and religious environment is difficult to discern, but aspects of lay behavior reveal certain anxieties people held over death and salvation in the period.¹¹

The most intense period of religious processions occurred in the 1480s when Bruges suffered from political turmoil. The civic engagement in prayer and penitential behavior at this time was a desperate call for peace and immediate salvation.¹² The public exhibition of worship enacted throughout Bruges visually illustrates the way spiritual life permeated the people and space of the city. The city's processions,

⁸ Barbara Lane, *Hans Memling: Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges* (London: Harvey Miller, 2009), 95.

⁹ Maximilian Martens, "Hans Memling and his Patrons: A Cliometrical Approach," *Memling Studies: Proceedings of the International Colloquium (Bruges 10-12 November 1994)* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 38; Lane, *Hans Memling*, 96.

¹⁰ Maryan W. Ainsworth, *Gerard David: Purity of Vision in an Age of Transition* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 1-2.

¹¹ Andrew Brown, *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 282-288.

¹² Brown, *Civic Ceremony*, 86.

especially the Procession of the Holy Blood, were testament to the sacred identity of Bruges.

Between 1480 and 1488, Memling completed 24 paintings, the majority made for local clients, including two executed for the Hospital of St. John.¹³ Like the response of Bruges's citizens through participation in liturgical acts, the spike in commissions among local patrons paintings reflects similar eschatological concerns.¹⁴ Personal meditation and piousness were means for infusing one's spiritual life. Religious paintings often functioned as aids in personal meditation.¹⁵ Although religious expression through bodily devotion (e.g. kneeling, processions, and flogging) stands in contrast to the more passive visual devotion, these aspects of devotion intertwine. The *St. Ursula Reliquary* illustrates some of the ways that visual and bodily devotion relate.

The reliquary was a precious liturgical object that was only displayed on the feast day of St. Ursula. In many ways, the *St. Ursula Reliquary* mimics the spiritual space of Bruges: the reliquary contains actual body parts, takes the shape of a local building, and as I will argue, sees with divine vision (the goal of worshipers of the time). This thesis will explore how the *St. Ursula Reliquary* embodies the spiritual ideals of the later Middle Ages. I use the term embody in a literal sense, as the reliquary was designed to hold and maintain the material remains in which the divine inheres. Further, the

¹³ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 96.

¹⁴ Maximilian Martens conducted a study of patterns in Hans Memling's patronage based on the number of works where patrons have been identified. Martens found that most of his paintings were made for local and Italian patrons. Memling's commissions among local patrons steadily increased from 1465 until 1484. The 1480s marks his greatest period of activity; the peak of works made for local patrons was between 1480-1484. Local patrons declined gradually after 1485. In the last phase from 1490-1494, his Italian clientele disappeared entirely. See Maximilian Martens, "Hans Memling and his Patrons: A Cliometrical Approach," 35-41.

¹⁵ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 112.

reliquary is not simply a representation of this concept, but an actual instance of divine vision, a medieval theological concept describing the direct union between human subjectivity and God. I will also show how theological engagement with Augustine's theory of vision reflects certain aspects of medieval culture in relation to this liturgical object. The chapters of this thesis are modeled after Augustine's tripartite of vision. Chapter one, Corporeal Vision, will focus on the *St. Ursula Reliquary* and its commission for the Hospital of St. John. I examine the function of the object, subject matter, and possible artistic models Memling used for his execution. Through an engagement with the painted surface, the carnal aspects of vision can initiate spiritual meditation with the object. I also explore the relation between bodily and visual devotion. In referencing Bruges' religious processions and popular theater through somatic imagery, the paintings assert the use of the human body as a vehicle for devotion. The devotional experience is enhanced by the physical participation of the viewer who must encircle the shrine to follow the story of St. Ursula's journey. In chapter two, Spiritual Vision, I will show how the paintings on the sides of the shrine aid in a spiritual meditation. The subject, the Legend of St. Ursula, provides a visualization of the desired mental images for viewers. The execution of the panels confers with the popular meditational practice of making spiritual pilgrimages to the Holy Land. In chapter three, I analyze the concept of intellectual vision and the goal for achieving communion with the divine.¹⁶ Despite remaining an abstract form of spiritual meditation, I will show how the ambiguity of real space and implausible space in Memling's paintings visually illustrates this ideal.

¹⁶ Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 15-17.

The prominent position Memling held in the community undoubtedly excited patrons—half of whom were foreign—to commission his artwork.¹⁷ The completion of the *St. John Altarpiece* (fig. 5) in 1479 for the Hospital of St. John inspired emulation among donors. The donation of the panel, *Seven Joys of the Virgin* (fig. 15) to the Church of Our Lady by Pieter Bultinc one year later, is one example of this.¹⁸ Beyond the appeal of owning a work by the popular painter, can a deeper investigation of his paintings evince their cultural attraction? In the section that follows, I provide a brief explanation on how the era of private devotion was in part a corollary of theories of vision. To understand the role of *St. Ursula Reliquary* and how it embodies spiritual ideals, we must first consider not simply what people viewed, but *how* they viewed these images.

The Augustinian Effect on Late Medieval Vision

The character of late medieval spirituality owed heavily to the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo. The theory of sight laid out in his fifth-century work, *De Genesi ad litteram*, influenced various models of medieval vision. In Book 12, Augustine analyzes the vision of Paradise as seen by St. Paul. Paul provides a rather obscure account where he, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know...was caught up into Paradise.”¹⁹ Augustine uses Paul’s description of Paradise to devise a method for explaining vision. He divides vision in three parts: corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual vision.²⁰ He elucidates the division in chapter six:

¹⁷ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 115-116.

¹⁸ Martens, “Hans Memling and his Patrons,” 37.

¹⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Volume 1*, trans. by John Hammond Taylor (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 178-231.

When we read this one commandment, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, we experience three kinds of vision: one through the eyes, by which we see the letters; a second through the spirit, by which we think of our neighbor even when he is absent; and a third through an intuition of the mind, by which we see and understand love itself.”²¹

It is evident from the passage that the notion of corporeal vision relates to the faculty of vision, what one sees with the eyes of the body. When St. Augustine developed his influential theory of vision, he did not interpret corporeal sight as we do now. Early optical theorist since the time of Augustine believed the eye emitted a visual ray.²² When the visual ray encountered an object, it took the shape of that object and absorbed light, it then returned to the eye (the body’s window to the soul). The extramission theory, subscribed to by Plato, waned by the late Middle Ages, as scientists generally ascribed to an intromission theory of optics.²³ Medieval theology never explicitly discussed optical theories of vision; instead, theologians explored the implications of vision theory as it pertained to important questions concerning ontology and psychology.²⁴ Although a scientific understanding of vision would have escaped average medieval viewers, it is important to note how these theories migrated to the laity’s experience of the world. When the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that Christ was physically present in the Eucharist, this affected how one viewed the host. Communion was enacted visually through seeing the host’s elevation in mass. In the

²⁰ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 178-179.

²¹ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 185.

²² Hahn, “*Visio Dei*,” 174-175.

²³ David Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 145.

²⁴ Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 139-140.

Neoplatonic tradition, the extramission of the eye allowed one to “touch” the Eucharist, to become cleansed and healed by its power.²⁵

Inherent in spiritual vision, which Augustine described as “the eyes, by which we see the absent,” or memory, are the remnants of corporeal vision. Augustine viewed physical vision as a process of training, a useful and necessary means for reaching the next level of vision.²⁶ Just as physical sight requires light, divine illumination is central to spiritual vision. As religious scholar Margaret Miles explains, divine illumination is the *sine que non* of spiritual vision. Focusing the eye of the mind on God becomes possible and strengthened through divine illumination. According to Miles, corporeal vision and spiritual vision is a two-way street. The expression, “a soul votes with its feet,” sheds light on the role of faith in spiritual vision.²⁷ The selection of an object through physical sight requires an initial investment of the soul’s affection. Similarly, faith drives the process of spiritual vision, in the hopes one will, “touch God ‘in a trembling glance’.”²⁸ The relationship Augustine devises for corporeal and spiritual vision works as a model for describing the process of cognition.²⁹ Augustine’s Neoplatonic construction of vision plays a vital role, where emission from the eye allows for the direct interaction between an object and the human soul.³⁰ Augustine regarded the prolonged gaze of corporeal

²⁵ Joseph Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 71.

²⁶ Margaret Miles, “Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine’s ‘De trinitate’ and ‘Confession’,” *Journal of Religion* 63:2 (1983), 126-127.

²⁷ Miles, “Vision,” 128-131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 126-127; Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 96.

³⁰ Miles, “Vision,” 127.

vision as a metaphor for contemplation of the divine.³¹ A deeper engagement with an image guaranteed its fixation in the soul.

The third mode of vision by “which we see and understand love itself,” was the ultimate goal of the medieval worshipers. St. Paul’s vague account of his vision of God, as either in or out of the body, supports Augustine’s theory that a vision of God must be of “incorporeal substance.”³² Like the other modes of vision, which required training and focus, intellectual vision necessitates one’s concentration of love on God. It is not by coincidence that Augustine’s account of intellectual vision is steeped in the aroma of mystics. This form of vision was the same mystical union through love that St. Bernard of Clairvaux so warmly embraced—the bridegroom! For St. Bernard, man’s redemption pivoted on one’s ardent love toward God. He described the union of man and God in the language of a courtly romance, sanctioned in the *Song of Songs*.

St. Augustine in the Twelfth Century

St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s teachings in the twelfth century on devotional meditation originated from the Augustinian division of sight. St. Bernard of Clairvaux elaborated on many of Augustine’s theories, especially those pertaining to the flesh and body. Augustinian theory upholds that the body bears the scars of man’s original sin, yet simultaneously functions as the tool for man’s redemption.³³ The body is dually subject to its carnal desires (flesh) and the spirit. For Bernard, the flesh made the body sinful and alienated man from God. The body’s carnal desires were transmittable to the world

³¹ Hahn, “*Visio Dei*,” 184.

³² Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 183.

³³ Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 34.

through sight, what can be referred to as the “fleshy eye.”³⁴ Because the extramission model ended in the return of rays to the eye, Bernard believed leaving “one’s window unguarded” resulted in the intromission of things that caused the memory to become an “overflowing sewer.”³⁵ Bernard’s technique for resolving the contamination of the mind required a closing of the senses from the exterior world (mysticism derives from *myô*, meaning ‘to close the eyes’³⁶). Closing sensory apertures allowed one to contemplate in a highly sensual, “enclosed garden,” which Bernard conjured through the *Song of Songs*.³⁷ The Cistercian cloister instantiates this restriction.

The walls of the cloister operate like the closing of the senses, both designed to guard one’s interior space.³⁸

Bernard’s condemnation of the sensory world of things appears dichotomous to the sensual rhetoric of his sermons.³⁹ His justification for this rhetoric comes from divine sources. Bernard delivered eighty-six sermons on the *Song of Songs*.⁴⁰ His doctrine speaks above all to the importance of man directing his love for God and finding redemption. Bernard’s description of divine love is similar to the oscillatory relationship of sight: “What a great thing is love, provided always that it returns to its origin;...flowing

³⁴ For a discussion on corporeal vision and “fleshy” desire see Suzanna Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, especially chapter 2.

³⁵ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 54.

³⁶ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 140.

³⁷ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 118.

³⁸ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 114-120.

³⁹ For a discussion of the polarity of corporeal and spiritual vision see Suzanna Biernoff section on the “cloistered gaze” in *Sight and Embodiment*, 114-120.

⁴⁰ Irene Edmonds, Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs, volume 1*, trans. Killian Welsh (Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1971), ix.

back again into its source it acquires fresh strength to pour itself forth once again.”⁴¹

Bernard harnesses the sensual language of the *Song of Songs* as a means to prepare for man’s divine union with God in a way that is both spiritual and physical: “I ask, I crave, I implore; let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”⁴²

The conflict of Bernard’s highly sensual rhetoric is also inherent in Augustine’s theory of vision. Spiritual vision consists of elevated dream or imaginative imagery, often dependent on the absorption of corporeal vision. Although intellectual vision is imageless, it may arise from spiritual vision.⁴³ Augustine would have rejected corporeal senses from having access to the divine,⁴⁴ yet non-sensory, imageless devotion may entail working through the first level of vision. This brings us back to Bernard, whose sermons rely on the sensual imagery of the *Song of Songs*. Bernard appropriated its descriptive language as metaphors in the same way that visual imagery can be interpreted symbolically: “For a start I feel that my comparison of scriptural history to a garden is not unwarranted, for in it we find men of many virtues, like fruitful trees in the garden of the Bridegroom, in the Paradise of God.”⁴⁵ Bernard believed that deep reflection on the *Song of Songs* could populate one’s image space with “a foretaste of heaven.”⁴⁶ Implicit in the process for divine union is an admission of man’s sensory powers while simultaneously rejecting their embeddness in the material world.

⁴¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 8:3, 4.

⁴² Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 9:2, 54.

⁴³ Hahn, “*Visio Dei*,” 174.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 23: 2, 28

⁴⁶ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 112-114.

Bernard's sermons proved highly influential with scholars in the twelfth-century and his theories transformed late medieval devotion. In addition to cultivating an Augustinian concept of spiritual love, his sermons provided an impetus for the cult of the Virgin Mary and humanity of Christ.⁴⁷ Bernard's influence over the monastic community culminated in a Franciscan work that captivated readers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, translated into every Western European language, provided readers with a way of understanding the lives of Jesus and Mary in a more familial way. The author, John of Calibus,⁴⁸ aimed to teach his pupil, a Poor Clare nun, about the life of Jesus using sensual language; the imagery allowed for a more personal relationship to the story.⁴⁹ True to the Bernardian principle, *Meditations on the Life of Christ* was packed with descriptive imagery. The text was designed to aid in spiritual meditation and occasionally called upon the reader to participate. The reshaping of medieval spirituality owes heavily to *Meditations on the Life of Christ*; a change evident in the plastic arts and mystery plays of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵⁰

As I have mentioned, theories of optics shifted in the late Middle Ages. Scholars believe that since the time of the thirteenth century perspectivists—

⁴⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 5-8.

⁴⁸ The author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* has long been disputed. The author has often been referred to as Pseudo-Bonaventura, but is now identified as John of Calibus. See John of Calibus, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, ed. by Francis X. Taney (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Francis X. Taney, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, xxvii

⁵⁰ Taney, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, xxvii-xxix

most notably John Pecham, Roger Bacon, and Thomas Aquinas— optical theorists generally ascribed to an intromission theory of optics.⁵¹ The change plays a role in how we can interpret *Meditations on the Life of Christ* and its relation to the visual arts. With the authority of vision no longer stemming from the viewer, the object of one’s gaze gains power in the process of vision. Michael Camille argues in “Before the Gaze: Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” that the emphasis on intromission resulted in a more intense scrutiny of the visible world, resulting in a hypersensitive subject. The threshold to the world of nature, allowed Christ’s body to enter through the theater of sense. The subject became hypersensitive to “every bleeding gash and open orifice in God’s broken body.”⁵²

Scholars note that the language with which we have come to describe our experiences is primarily derived from Augustine’s framework of vision and from attitudes in the later Middle Ages.⁵³ For example phrases like “a piercing gaze”, “blind faith,” or “a fleeting glance,” had literal meanings in the later Middle Ages.⁵⁴ Moreover, the language of describing the spiritual world hinges on experience of the physical world. As Bernard reminded his students: “One learns more in the woods than from books; the trees and rocks will teach you more than you could ever learn elsewhere...”⁵⁵ The direct relationship between the object and subject only solidified one’s connectedness to the

⁵¹ See David Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*; Cynthia Hahn, “Visio Dei;” Michael Camille, “Before the Gaze: Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” *Visuality before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵² Camille, “Before the Gaze,” 207.

⁵³ See Suzannah Biernoff, Margaret Miles, and Cynthia Hahn.

⁵⁴ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 5.

⁵⁵ François Cali, *Bruges, the Cradle of Flemish Painting* (Chicago: Randy McNally, 1964), 73.

external world. The need to distinguish oneself, physical objects, and even the nature of dreams or visions left its mark in Flemish painting.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 140-142; Miles, "Vision," 125-126.

CHAPTER 2 CORPOREAL VISION

According to Augustine, an object perceived through corporeal vision is announced to spiritual vision. Therefore, this section is devoted to the physical appearance of the *St. Ursula Reliquary* (fig.2). This chapter explores the history of the reliquary and hagiography of St. Ursula in art to better understand Memling's execution for the paintings. The final section on theater is concerned with the somatic character of these paintings.

Commission of the *St. Ursula Reliquary*

One of the miracles the author of the *Golden Legend* attributed to Saint Ursula concerns the recovery of relics from her martyrdom. The miracle recounts the story of an abbot who asked a Cologne abbess for a body of one of the maidens killed in Cologne. The abbot promised to enshrine the body in a silver casket. A year passed and the body remained in a wooden box at the altar of his church monastery.

And in a night as the abbot sang matins, the said virgin descended from the altar bodily, and inclined honourably before the altar, and went through the choir, seeing all the monks which, were thereof sore abashed, and then the abbot ran and found it all void and nothing therein.¹

After, the abbot begged the Cologne abbess for a replacement, but he received nothing. The tale demonstrates the importance of honoring divine relics of saints. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that relics must not be displayed outside their containers.² The framework for communicating a shrine's internal value rested on the visual richness of the object's exterior. Reliquaries were often made of precious materials like silver or ivory, and embellished with semi-precious stones. The use of

¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, volume 6 (London: Temple Classics, 1900), 30-33.

² Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 56.

expensive materials not only honored the shrine's divine contents, but also enhanced its worth.³

The Hospital of St. John in Bruges commissioned a new reliquary completed in October 1489 for the transfer of the hospital's relics—bones attributed to St. Ursula and her companions, a stone from Golgotha, a rock from the slaying of St. Stephan, a piece of the virgin's hair, a thorn from the Crown of Thorns, along with forty-five other relics.⁴ Like the original shrine from c. 1380-1400 (fig.1), the new reliquary emphasized the contents of St. Ursula and her companions. The legend of Saint Ursula became popular in the fifteenth century, especially in the north where remains from her martyrdom were widely dispersed.⁵ Completed in October 1489, the new reliquary appeared to be quite atypical. Although the shape of the vessel was in the traditional chapel format, Memling painted its surface with a naturalistic representation of the saint's pilgrimage to Rome.

A few factors may contribute to the design of the *St. Ursula Reliquary*. At the time of the commission, the city of Bruges was facing economic decline. In a study of the shrine, Jeanne Nuechterlein wonders whether the hospital's finances contributed to the commission of a painted reliquary in lieu of more expensive jewel metalwork, which she attributes to the hospital's inadequate funding.⁶ Yet, despite the city's economic recession, in the 1480's both the Hospital of St. John and Hans Memling were doing quite well. The decade was marked by extreme violence between the city and the Emperor Maximilian of Austria in a struggle for power. The struggle led to a decrease

³ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 57.

⁴ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 52.

⁵ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 55.

⁶ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 60-61.

among Memling's foreign patrons, though the artist still managed to have the most successful decade of his career.⁷

The Hospital of St. John suffered financially from the mid- to late fifteenth century before undergoing institutional reorganization. A group of lay brothers and sisters founded the hospital before it became a religious community. The hospital's first charter in 1188 was inspired after a text by Saint Augustine requiring that administration be governed by city authorities and that care of the poor, sick, and travellers be left to a group of lay brothers and sisters.⁸ The hospital generated income from charges, gifts, bequests, taxes, and earnings off its fishponds, woods, and farm.⁹

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that communities like the Hospital of St. John adopt an approved religious rule. Members elected to follow the Rule of Augustine, a rule not unlike the hospital's first charter. The greatest change for the hospital was the new law dictating that members of the community repudiate personal property.¹⁰ In an effort to improve finances and weaken the control of city magistrates, the hospital underwent institutional reorganization. The Charter of 1459 transferred the hospital's authority to the Bishop of Tournai, which resulted in the division of authority between the bishop and city.¹¹ The city magistrates maintained control of the hospital's finances. In the 1470s, the Hospital of St. John, along with other religious institutions,

⁷ Martens, "Hans Memling and His Patrons," 38.

⁸ Irène Smets, *The Memling Museum--St John's Hospital Bruges* (Ghent: Ludion, 2001), 9.

⁹ Smets, *Memling Museum*, 17.

¹⁰ Vida Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings for the Hospital of Saint John in Bruges* (New York: Garland, 1981), 32-33.

¹¹ Hull, *Hans Memling*, 36.

were required to pay for ducal grants to reduce recent endowments.¹² Shortly after, however, the hospital acquired considerable land holdings; a fortunate turn of events celebrated in the background of the hospital's *St. John's Altarpiece* (fig.5) by Memling.¹³ The hospital's improved financial situation also spurred the renovation and expansion of the hospital chapel from 1473-74.

It is, therefore, likely the commission of a painted reliquary in the late 1480s was not in the interest of frugality, but rather it was likely caused by a change in material values around that time. Memling's local reputation with Bruges' elite may have incentivized the commission. At the time of the reliquary's unveiling, the hospital already boasted two panel paintings by Memling: the *St. John Altarpiece* and the *Floreins Triptych*. Following the completion of *St. John's Altarpiece* in 1479, two of the hospital's members commissioned personal triptychs from Memling.¹⁴ The rich imagery of the *St. Ursula Reliquary* suggests issues beyond finance were at play. The unusual visual program seems to elicit new values in art that reflect new ways of seeing.

The Program of the *Saint Ursula Reliquary*

In *City of God*, St. Augustine praised saints who "see with an extraordinary power of sight."¹⁵ For Christians in the fifteenth century, the goal to "get closer" to the divine led followers to grasp onto more tangible forms. People who desired visions sought to do so

¹² Brown, *Civic Ceremony*, 278.

¹³ Memling completed the *St. John's Altarpiece* (fig. 5) for the hospital's church in 1479. In background of the central panel are two barrels of wine being unloaded by a crane. The inclusion in the background celebrates one of the hospital's financial privileges, to test and control weights and measures to determine tolls. The fee for the testing was allotted to the hospital. See Hull, *Hans Memling*, 38-40.

¹⁴ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 60-61.

¹⁵ Hahn, "*Visio Dei*," 170.

by emulating saints.¹⁶ The increased devotion to Saint Ursula in the Rhineland was a natural outcome of this lay behavior.

The hagiography of Saint Ursula comes from the *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth century collection on the lives of saints.¹⁷ According to the text, Ursula was the daughter of a Christian king from Britain. The princess was known for her beauty, wisdom, and virtue, which garnered the attention of the pagan King of Anglia. The king resolved to wed his heir and son, Etherius, to the beautiful princess. Ursula consented to the marriage on the condition that Etherius convert to Christianity. The arrangement enabled Ursula to embark on a three year pilgrimage to Rome before the wedding. Ten virgins accompanied Ursula, and each of these ten virgins brought one thousand virgin companions, who would all convert to Christianity. On the return voyage in Cologne, they found the city held captive by the Huns. After Ursula refused the Hun leader's offer of marriage, his army attacked and massacred Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins. The tale of Ursula's martyrdom in Cologne fueled her popularity in the region.¹⁸

It is likely Memling knew of the many cycles of the St. Ursula Legend.¹⁹ Just a few blocks from the Hospital of St. John at the convent of the Black Sisters, an altarpiece completed c. 1475-80 included scenes from the legend. The Bruges Master of the St. Ursula Legend painted the story in eight sections on the altarpiece wings (fig.6).²⁰ The first three scenes of the cycle recount Ursula's betrothal to Etherius. In contrast to

¹⁶ Hahn, "Visio Dei," 169-196; Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 93-94.

¹⁷ Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 30-33.

¹⁸ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 300-302

¹⁹ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 164.

²⁰ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 65-66.

Memling, the Bruges Master set the narrative in Bruges.²¹ A direct influence for Memling's version seems to be a Cologne prototype. The Cologne Master's *Legend of St. Ursula*, divided the legend into fifteen panels, dates from after 1455.²² Some of Memling's compositions for the shrine and poses of his figures, as we will see, borrow directly from this series. Unlike early examples, like the legend painted for the St. Ursula Church in Cologne in twenty panels, Memling abbreviates the story into six scenes.²³ Memling omits the story of Ursula's infancy and betrothal thereby placing greater emphasis on the journey.

Memling begins the cycle with *Arrival in Cologne* (fig.7). The scene depicts Ursula and her maidens disembarking at Cologne. Their two vessels are pictured from the bow in the left foreground. Four men unload the maidens' belongings. Ursula disembarks from the gangplank assisted by two companions. The arched gateway marks the maidens' entry into the city. The narrative within the scene continues with the maidens passing through the city gates. The ladies usher in through the archway in a way that seems to invite viewers to follow in the procession.²⁴ The background features Cologne's contemporary skyline; the buildings are all identifiable, from left to right: the Bayenturm, the towers of St. Maria Lyskirchen, the nave and tower of the St. Severin's, the Great St. Martin, and the Cologne cathedral.²⁵ Through two enlarged windows at the

²¹ Although much of the townscape in the Bruges Master's version is ambiguous, the third scene includes Bruges's belfry. See Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 65-66.

²² De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 302; Hull, *Hans Memling*, 178.

²³ Hull, *Hans Memling*, 176-188.

²⁴ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 164.

²⁵ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 297.

right of the city gate, an angel appears before Ursula to announce she will “receive the crown of martyrdom.”²⁶

In the second panel, *Arrival in Basel* (fig.8), Memling positions the ships with views of the sterns. The ladies once again are in the process of disembarking. The number of passengers on the vessels has doubled; its crew separated by gender. Two men at the stern of the maidens’ ship hoist the sails for dock. At the bow, Ursula again treads the liminal space between land and sea. The townscape features a late-Gothic tower, though the setting is overall fictive.²⁷ Memling includes events from the next moment in the narrative at the far right. This is the point when the ladies “left there their ships and went to Rome afoot.”²⁸

The third scene opens at the far left where Ursula and her companions usher through Rome’s gates. For *Arrival in Rome* (fig.9), Memling alters the composition to suit the urban setting. In the first two panels, he positions the perspective from the opposite bank of the Rhine. The space unfolds to absorb the cities and landscapes. In this scene, however, it is as if the overlays of arches envelop the scene. The overt emphasis on architectural elements serves to highlight the sacred space of the city and the Baptistery. In the foreground, Pope Cyriac emerges from the Baptistery to welcome the maidens.²⁹ Through the large arch next to the pope, clergymen perform baptismal rites for members of Ursula’s party. Behind the font, Ursula receives communion. These two episodes of cleansing mark the end of the “departure” side of the shrine.

²⁶ Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 31.

²⁷ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 301.

²⁸ Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 31.

²⁹ Hull, *Hans Memling*, 183-184

The first scene on the “return” side of the shrine is *Departure from Basel* (fig.10). The narrative moves in a seamless zigzag from the gates, aboard the large ships, and down to the small tender. Instead of separating the subject with arches, Memling orchestrates a view of the vessels that allows him to slice the figural groups using the ropes of the mast. He depicts Ursula and the pope twice in the scene; they embark on the “stern” ship and depart on the lower “bow” ship.

Memling gave the greatest importance to the martyrdom scenes (fig.11, 12), portraying the episodes in two panels. He reserves the final panel for the martyr of Ursula in order to distinguish her saintly death. Memling’s inspiration for the martyrdom scenes comes from the fifteen-panel Cologne cycle. In both, the dramatic finale occurs on the right bank of the Rhine; the Ursulas’ gesture in polite refusal in the face of fully drawn archers. He unifies *Martyrdom of Ursula’s Maidens* and *Martyr of St. Ursula* through a continuous landscape; Saint Ursula is in both scenes. In Cologne, she rejects the chief of the Huns marriage proposal and willingly accepts her fate.³⁰

Maur Guillaume Linephty wrote that in Memling’s version, “the massacre is accomplished quietly.”³¹ For such a violent act, Memling has executed the scenes of slaughter with a certain decorum. When compared to Memling’s version, the Bruges Master has left little room for mercy. His pope is already decapitated and a Hun kneels on the back of his victim for the *coup de grâce*. The Bruges Master rendered the scene more faithfully, there is no pregnant moment before the bloodshed; his account shock. The “quiet” nature of Memling’s scene is unrealistic; instead, what marks his portrayal

³⁰ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 165-168.

³¹ Cali, *Bruges*, 34.

as true to life is the theatrical nature of each episode. Memling's painting becomes "real" in the way it relates to the viewer's experience of city life.

Bodily Devotion: Religious Processions and Theater

Physical acts of praying, kneeling, flogging, and participating in the liturgy relate to how one interprets the divine through the body. At the heart of this ideology is the doctrine of the Incarnation, which itself justified the place of the body in worship.³² The rise of bodily participation, in part, had to do with how lay relationships with Christ had become more personal. Thanks to writings like the *Meditation of the Life of Christ* and Ludolph of Saxony's popular variation of the text, a person participated in processions and plays that reenacted the life of Christ.³³

A key characteristic of Memling's painting is the emphasis he placed on movement. Scholars believe mystery plays staged in Northern cities inspired Memling's execution of the *St. Ursula Reliquary* as well as his other cyclical paintings: the Turin *Scenes of the Passion* (fig.14), the *Seven Joys of the Virgin* (fig.15) and the Greverade triptych.³⁴ For a Bruges resident, the emphasis on moving in and out of doorways or under arches recalled religious procession.³⁵ Ursula and her cortege flowing from scene to scene are like those who parade the streets of Bruges behind the Holy Blood.

Entering through archways was also similar to the triumphal entry of monarchs, not so unlike Phillip the Good or Charles the Bold's many entries into Bruges. A

³² Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 26.

³³ Vida Hull, "Spiritual Pilgrimage in the Paintings of Hans Memling," *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. Sarah Blick (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 29-31.

³⁴ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 301.

³⁵ Sally Coleman, "Empathetic constructions in early Netherlandish painting: Narrative and Reception in the art of Hans Memling," (PhD Diss., University of Texas, Austin 2003), 48.

miniature from the late fifteenth century illustrates the humiliation ritual of ducal entries (fig.13). The miniature depicts Phillip the Good's triumphal entry at Ghent, like the ones performed in Bruges in 1437 and 1440, where the duke forced ten citizens to abase themselves. They greeted him kneeling, bareheaded, and barefoot.³⁶ In a Christian procession, modeled after Roman processions, the men and women zigzag through the streets in a trajectory similar to the processional character of Memling's scenes. People imagined Bruges as the New Jerusalem during religious processions.

For the Procession of the Holy Blood, enacted each year on May 2nd, numbers of followers came to witness the Holy Blood as it was paraded through the city. During these liturgical processions, narrative scenes were set up along the routes, erected in wagons, or performed by actors.³⁷ On the *St. Ursula Reliquary's* panels, there is a processional quality in the way figures travel through the scenes. Like the stops made at important sites in a Passion procession (i.e. the stations of the cross), the episodes on the shrine have a stop-and-go feel to them. The isolation of each episode allows the viewer to pause and reflect on certain moments in the story. *Arrival at Basel* (fig.8) baits viewers, inviting them along. The viewer can act as an imaginative pedestrian in the scenes. An experience of the painting conveys "sense of movement in an almost palpable manner," a sensation doubled by having to actively encircle the shrine.³⁸

³⁶ Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages*, 34-36.

³⁷ Mitzi Kirkland-Ives, "Narrative Performance and Devotional Experience in the Art of Hans Memling" (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2005), 38.

³⁸ Kirkland-Ives, "Narrative Performance," 16.

After the Procession of the Holy Blood, the festival continued with a feast followed by a performance of the 'Mysteries.'³⁹ The members of various brotherhoods performed the mystery plays. The sets and decoration for the plays were the work of local painters.⁴⁰ Historians of Flemish art often look to the way these theatrical performances have influenced painters.⁴¹ The influence is undeniable. The architectural features painted on the *St. Ursula Reliquary*—like Cologne's city gate—have a stage-like quality to them. The costumes and props invoke the theatricality of the scene. Francois Cali called the Hun's sword in the final scene "a stage like property sword which could never pierce the flesh."⁴²

The iconic figures of the Virgin and Child and St. Ursula, with her maidens at the ends of the shrine, may work like dramatic devices popular in the thirteenth through the fifteenth century. A *toog* (plural *togen*) is a "figure" such as a religious sculpture or painting, presented as a scene within a scene, found most commonly in Flemish theater.⁴³ These scenes, or *togen*, usually appeared at the end of a play after the unveiling of a curtain. The play would be secular, but the *toog* would always be a religious theme such as a Resurrection or Last Supper. The *toog* depended on the context of the play; the scene was always silent. When the *toog* is unveiled, it signals a shift in the play from words to images. The *toog* represented the revelation of the play's

³⁹ Cali, *Bruges*, 37.

⁴⁰ Cali, *Bruges*, 37; Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages*, 13-39.

⁴¹ See Francois Cali, *Bruges*; Mitzi Kirkland-Ives, "Narrative Performance", Sally Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions."

⁴² Cali, *Bruges*, 34.

⁴³ Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 50.

main character.⁴⁴ The placement of the Virgin and Child and St. Ursula at the ends of the shrine could be *togen* that mark the end of the “arrival” and “departure” sides.

Just before a *toog* appears within the scene, a character in the play may ask, “How do I make myself into a spiritual house?”⁴⁵ The imagery conjured by that question is best exemplified by the chapel setting in which the Virgin and Child and St. Ursula figures inhabit. In the case of the *St. Ursula Reliquary*, a vessel encasing the divine, the metaphor of the soul as a “spiritual house” takes on a very literal meaning. The impression of visual imagery on the soul, incised upon seeing the *St. Ursula Reliquary*, positions the viewer for the second mode of vision.

⁴⁴ Coleman, “Empathetic constructions,” 51.

⁴⁵ Coleman, “Empathetic constructions,” 52.

CHAPTER 3 SPIRITUAL VISION

Augustine distinguished the spiritual from corporeal vision as that “by which we think of absent bodies in imagination—whether recalling in memory objects that we know, or somehow forming unknown objects which are in the power of thought possessed by the spirit.”¹ This mode of seeing without the physical eye is central to forms of devotional meditation in the late Middle Ages. In this chapter, I examine the artistic tradition of representing simultaneous narratives in a single space. This type of representation participates in a devotional trend of the time known as spiritual pilgrimage. I will look at how the *St. Ursula Reliquary* functions in this meditational process and how the work relates to similar paintings.

Spiritual Pilgrimage and Simultaneous Narrative

Spiritual pilgrimage is a late medieval devotional practice by which one could earn indulgences. Since the time of the first crusade in 1215, those who traveled to the Holy Land earned plenary indulgences. By the mid-fourteenth century, indulgencies for pilgrimage increased dramatically.² Alternatively, focusing step-by-step on the events and settings of the Passion could earn the devotee the same indulgences as those earned by making an actual pilgrimage to the Holy Land.³ Since the fourteenth century, pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land mapped and recorded with anecdotal detail important sites where one could obtain indulgencies.⁴ Artists in the fifteenth century utilized

¹ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 193.

² Kathryn M. Rudy, "A Guide to Mental Pilgrimage: Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal Ms.212," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 63 (2000), 494.

³ Vida Hull, "Spiritual Pilgrimage," 30

⁴ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 154.

pilgrims' guides to assist with illustrations of the theme. An image of a bird's-eye view of Jerusalem, packed with several narrative events, provided a visual aid for one to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage. Paintings like Memling's *Turin Scenes of the Passion* (fig.14) and *Seven Joys of the Virgin* (fig.15) enhanced the experience of spiritual pilgrimage.

Images that visualized spiritual pilgrimage employ a form of representation known as *Simultanbilder*— the distribution of several narrative scenes into one continuous landscape. The origins of the tradition are German, but simultaneous representations haven't been traced to the beginning of the fifteenth century in the Southern Netherlands.⁵ More often, scholars compare Memling's *Simultanbilder*, for example, his *Turin Scenes of the Passion* of around 1470, with the German Wasservas *Calvary* of 1420 (fig.16).⁶ The two donors of the Wasservas kneel together in prayer at the lower left of the composition, the same place as the donor in the Turin panel. The *Scenes of the Passion* includes events like the Nailing of Christ to the Cross, which are unknown in Flemish art, but included in the Wasservas version. In earlier forms of the tradition, scenes are often crowded resulting in an ambiguous narrative.⁷ Memling's skill lies in his ability to incorporate more episodes into one single view, while still maintaining a greater sense of spatial unity and coherence than his predecessors provided.⁸ Episodes transpire in isolated spaces, marked off through walls, coulisses, hills, and other architectural and geographical elements. In contrast to pilgrims' guides, where the

⁵ Maurit Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana: From Hemling to Memling -- From Panoramic View to Compartmented Representation," in *Memling Studies: Proceedings of the International Colloquium (Bruges 10-12 November 1994)* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 179.

⁶ See Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana;" Lane, *Hans Memling*.

⁷ Hull, "Spiritual Pilgrimage," 36.

⁸ Hull, "Spiritual Pilgrimage," 36; Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana," 182.

reader must follow textually and pictorially page by page, Memling's panoramic view of the Holy Land is remarkable for its ability to convey a "comprehensive meditative literature."⁹

Paintings that aid in spiritual pilgrimage thematized the goal of pilgrimage. For example, Barbara Lane interpreted several figures in the *Scenes of the Passion* as contemporary pilgrims. The observer could relate to the idea of pilgrimage via pilgrims represented in the painting. Figures like the man and child walking on the path outside the town wall (fig.14), both gaze right at Christ's resurrection. The inactivity and distance exhibited by figures at these sacred places leads scholars to believe they are pilgrims.¹⁰ The subject of the *St. Ursula Reliquary* is itself a story of pilgrimage, heightened by Memling's intentional focus on the journey.

A panoramic view of the landscape provided a visualization of spiritual pilgrimage. In contrast, the segmenting of multi-episodic scenes in a polyptych connotes different functions. Maurit Smeyers distinguished these functions in a comparison of Memling's *Scenes of the Passion* and a follower of Memling's triptych dated around 1500.¹¹ The triptych shares many of the same episodes as Memling's *Scenes of the Passion* and there is a clear relationship between the imagery. The triptych, however, does not follow the sequence in chronological order. Smeyers deduces that this is because only the themes of the episodes were important for the function of the image, not their order. The size, subject, and compartmentalized views in the latter, indicate that this panel

⁹ Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana," 182-184.

¹⁰ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 153.

¹¹ Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana," 184-190.

functioned for personal prayer, but not for spiritual pilgrimage.¹² Nineteen of the twenty-four scenes on the Memlingian triptych include Mary. The cycle begins with the Annunciation and ends with the Coronation of the Virgin—a trend found in most Rosary illustrations in the Rhineland.¹³ The Rosary prayer developed in the Rhineland in the late fifteenth century. Alanus de Rupe, a preacher in Lille, established the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary, printed for the first time in Ulm in 1483. Rupe encouraged one to fix the eyes on a corresponding image during the Rosary prayer.¹⁴ The use of the Memlingian triptych was likely for identification with Jesus and Mary during meditation. This distinction raises questions about the function of the *St. Ursula Reliquary*, where the sequence of the narration matters.

Portraying Pilgrimage

Despite their separation by columns, there is great spatial and temporal unity between the *St. Ursula Reliquary's* panels. This is similar to the unified view of Jerusalem in *Scenes of the Passion*. It appears as if the Rhine flows through the shrine; its current both drives and unites the narration. The ships sailed south and tied up on the left bank of the Rhine, placing Cologne on the right. When the maidens return to Cologne, they sail on the right bank so that Cologne appears on the opposite left of the Rhine.¹⁵ The movement of the maidens in the first panel does not correspond, however, with the plausible direction of their voyage. As Jeanne Nuechterlein observed, if they moved south, then that would entail the ladies disembarking and traveling left, yet

¹² *Ibid.*, 190-192.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁵ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 301.

Memling has them moving right out of the picture.¹⁶ In this case, he has sacrificed accuracy in favor of maintaining a left to right movement in the narrative.

Detailing Cologne's contemporary townscape during this time was an already established tradition. Both the Cologne Ursula cycles include well-known buildings in the background. Similarly, Bruges painters incorporated parts of the city in religious scenes. In the background of the *St. John Altarpiece* (fig.5), commissioned for the chapel of St. John's Hospital a decade before the reliquary, Memling painted a crane that was in place at the time he created the work. This was the first instance when Memling incorporated contemporary Bruges in his painting.¹⁷ Representations of the painter's city may serve as a form of civic pride. Jeanne Nuechterlein argues that the choice of portraying Cologne reflected a concern for connecting the subject to its the actual setting.¹⁸ Portraying the correct location of the story may have authenticated the representation. In the case of the *St. Ursula Reliquary*, the topographical accuracy of Cologne certified its efficacy as a liturgical object.¹⁹ A reliquary was intended to provide a link between the physical and spiritual. It was, therefore, important to bridge the connection between the saint and the place of her martyrdom.

Memling's setting for the narrative cycles of Saint Ursula's journey contrasts with previous accounts in Flemish painting. The Master of the St. Ursula Cycle in Bruges placed the scenes all within Bruges.²⁰ This was the case for many religious paintings of

¹⁶ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 66-67.

¹⁷ Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 117.

¹⁸ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 69.

¹⁹ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 70.

²⁰ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 65.

the period. Devotional texts of the time encouraged the devout to imagine the life of Christ and the Virgin in familiar places like the home or nearby buildings. When portraying chronicles of the Passion, the topographical accuracy of holy places was rare in Flemish art.²¹ Memling painted three of the Cologne scenes on the shrine with such accuracy of the cityscape, that it supports scholarly opinion that Memling spent time in Cologne.²² Placing parts of the journey in Cologne may have to do with the proximity of the city, whereas a journey to Jerusalem was not as practical for artists. When Bernhard von Breydenbach traveled to the Holy Land in 1483, he brought an artist to sketch buildings and views of the city. This instance of book illustration was unheard of before the time.²³ The trend for representing places accurately reflected new attitudes about travel.

If Memling did in fact travel to Cologne, and it is likely that he did, he based his view of the city from his own experience.²⁴ This could relate to a new concern for contemporary experience. Similar to how the theatricality related to the viewer's experience, the artist suggests his own experience. The new accuracy helps viewers connect their lived experiences with the subject. These attitudes reflect societal interests in tangible subjects. The painting acts in accordance to the instructions laid out in *Meditation on the Life of Christ* by "feeling yourself present in those places as if the things were done in your presence."²⁵

²¹ Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana," 182.

²² De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 142.

²³ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 73.

²⁴ Nuechterlein, "Hans Memling's St. Ursula Shrine," 74; De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 18.

In portraying the scenes of Christ life or St. Ursula's journey through a temporal and spatial continuity, the episodes appeared to occur all at once in a way that transcends time. A pilgrim visiting the Holy Land imagines the events of the Passion, but understands them through one's present experience of city. One's experience unfolds over the time it takes to walk the narrow streets of the city. During local reenactments of the Passion, someone watching the actor carry across can imagine himself as a contemporary witness to event.

The process of spiritual pilgrimage, in the form of spiritual vision, allows one to transcend time and space. The image of St. Ursula's journey can aid in the process of spiritual pilgrimage because, through his use of continuous narrative and geographical accuracy, Memling rendered an image of Ursula's voyage that transcends time and geographical space. The *St. Ursula Reliquary* represents what De Vos called a "true simultaneous happening as viewed by the Almighty himself and freed from the constrictions of time. Space is one and time is expressed only through the spatial conception."²⁶

²⁵ Smeyers, "Analecta Memlingiana," 184; Taney, *Mediations*, xxvii. For a history of pilgrimage indulgences see Kathryn Rudy, "A Guide to Mental Pilgrimage: Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal Ms.212," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 63 (2000), 494–515.

²⁶ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 402.

CHAPTER 4 INTELLECTUAL VISION

St. Paul's vision of the Third Heaven was of "incorporeal substance." Augustine described divine vision in relation to concepts such as wisdom and justice to show how "nothing of such nature can be seen with the eyes of the body."¹ Since divine vision is imageless and therefore has no substance, I consider how the *St. Ursula Reliquary* visually alludes to abstract spiritual concepts. In this chapter, I will explore Memling's artistic techniques and its relevance to spiritual themes.

"Seeing-through:" Metaphor and Matter

Until the year 1300, on the Friday commemorating its arrival in Bruges, the Relic of the Holy Blood would miraculously liquefy from its congealed state. Inside the crystal phial, Christ's blood would ooze from the white cloth [Joseph of Arimathea](#) used to clean Christ's body.² A century later, the Hospital of St. John would house a relic with similar transformative powers. The *St. Ursula Reliquary* reveals similar revelatory powers, where oil has dematerialized the object's surface into rich, illusionistic scenes.

Art historians often explore the notion of artist as genius. Jeffrey Hamburger described painting as "an emblem of the process of creation and redemption, with Christ's blood as the medium that binds image and artist, man to his maker."³ The belief in the transformation of matter promulgated medieval religious rituals and was central to the Eucharist. The Mass was a re-enactment of Christ's Passion and acted as a

¹ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 183.

² Brown, *Civic Ceremony*, 40; Cali, *Bruges*, 35-36.

³ Jeffrey Hamburger, "To make women 'weep'," Ugly Art as "feminine" and the Origins of Modern Aesthetics," *Res* 31 (1997), 17.

redemptive sacrifice for the living and those in Purgatory.⁴ The language of Christian doctrine hinges on the relationship between matter and metaphor, likewise imagery visually communicates spiritual ideas through matter.

There are two types of illusionism Memling used for the reliquary: *trompe l'oeil*, an artistic technique of visual mimicry to disguise the painted surface; and illusionism, the representation of plausible space that is similar to the space inhabited by the viewer. *Trompe l'oeil*, meaning to “fool the eye,” is an innovation often associated with Memling’s well-known predecessor, Jan Van Eyck. Chief among Van Eyck’s artistic achievements was his play with the effects of light on reflective surfaces, especially brass, precious gems, and glass. On Memling’s reliquary, the roof is painted to imitate the look metalwork shines, as if the tondos are medallions set into gilded carving.

Hans Memling is distinguished from other Flemish painters for his illusionistic techniques that help draw attention to the internal realm of the image. Atypically, Memling provides no visual clues that comment on the invented space of the image.⁵ Following in the tradition of Jan van Eyck, Memling enchanted viewers with his ethereal play on reflective surfaces. Unlike Jan van Eyck, who suggested the earthly place of the viewer and the reality of the painted object through reflective surfaces, Memling’s interest lie in the expansion of the invented space to further insinuate a realm beyond the painted surface.

A comparison of the convex mirror in Van Eyck’s *Arnolfinin Portrait* (fig.17) and Memling’s convex mirror in the *Maartin van Nieuwenhove* (fig.18) illustrates this

⁴ Hull, “Spiritual Pilgrimage,” 32-33.

⁵ For a general discussion on Memling’s pictorial devices see Susie Nash’s chapter on Hans Memling in *Northern Renaissance Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 121-127.

difference. The highly illustrious convex mirror in the rear of the *Arnolfini Portrait* distinguishes the space of the viewer and space of the image by reflecting a figure outside the picture frame.⁶ Reflected on the convex mirror in the *Maartin van Nienwenhove* diptych are the donor and the Virgin seen from the rear. The device links the frame of the diptych with the sacred space of the Virgin and donor. The effect creates a sense of shared space, but also emphasizes the discrepancy between the material and sacred realm.⁷ Hans Belting called the combination of real and symbolic space in the *Maartin van Nienwenhove* diptych a place “which only the soul can enter.”⁸

Jeanne Nuechterlein described the naturalistic representations on the *St. Ursula Reliquary* as a “seeing-through” effect;⁹ a term I will borrow as it relates to the effects of stained glass. The “seeing-through” of the shrine’s illusionism exhibits an interest in obviating its material surface. It is as if the viewer can look through the stained-glass windows of a gothic chapel. The gilded arcade establishes the boundary between the material and the immaterial world of the painting. In physical terms, the space occupied by Ursula and her maidens is realistic. The light shadows on the figures give them a corporal substance. This plausible reality implicates the viewer’s experience of the scene.¹⁰

⁶ Nash, *Northern Renaissance Art*, 123. On Jan van Eyck see Craig Harbison, *Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism* (London: Seattle: Reaktion Books; University of Washington 1991).

⁷ Reindert Falkenburg, “Hans Memling’s Van Nieuwenhove Diptych: the place of prayer in early Netherlandish devotional painting,” in *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 98-103.

⁸ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 432.

⁹ Nuechterlein, “Hans Memling’s St. Ursula Shrine,” 61-66.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Marrow, “Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance,” *Simiolus* 16, No. 2/3 (1986), 158-161.

In modeling the shape of the reliquary after the Paradise portal (fig.4), Memling draws on the connection that his panels share with stained glass. In the twelfth century, Abbot Suger sought to elevate the function of religious images through the medium of stained glass. Suger developed the stained glass program for the choir of St. Denis in Paris. Suger described the windows as “vitri vestiti et saphirorum material,” a comment, according to Herbert Kessler, that alludes to the dual aspect of glass to veil imagery and glow with jewel-like radiance.¹¹ The luminous windows provided a proper instrument for divine contemplation that “veils at once shrouding and revealing the ineffable.”¹²

This is not to suggest that Suger’s theory of the effects of stained glass in the twelfth century were necessarily applicable to Bruges in the late fifteenth century. Visual theories between these centuries certainly shifted. In fact, Michael Camille argued that by the late Middle Ages, the notion of occluding light was no longer relevant.¹³ There was more interest in theories concerning light-refraction, attested by the advent of crystalline reliquaries, like the nearby Relic of the Holy Blood in Bruges. As oppose to stained glass, which gave off its own jewel-like luminosity, the significance was on a transparent system for light to pass through.¹⁴ The intromission theory of optics, as opposed to an extramission theory was by this time, generally accepted. Through an intromission theory, more power was vested in the world of nature, and the effects of light. The visual clarity of Memling’s surface, and his exceptionally thin application of

¹¹ Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing*, 190-193.

¹² Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing*, 193.

¹³ Camille, “Before the Gaze,” 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

paint,¹⁵ may not so much work to reveal and conceal the relics, but fully allow one to see transparently through the image.

The visual experience of the *St. Ursula Reliquary* is opposite to the experience of standing inside the choir of St. Denis. It is as if the viewer's gaze pierces into the space of the chapel, or more precisely, the sacred space within the reliquary. In turn, the chapel space of the reliquary works symbolically like the casing of the soul. The second step of Augustine's theory, spiritual vision, relates to images of the mind, but the soul functions as a two-way street. To suggest the "soul votes with its feet," entails an investment of the soul with the object it perceives. Augustine believed that through this visual process, the soul "takes the shape of" objects of its affection.¹⁶ In the case of the *St. Ursula Reliquary*, the sacred space within the reliquary takes the form of a church and has filled itself with images. If the intromission theory took emphasis away from the viewer's vision and onto the power of the image, then, according to Michael Camille, "these eyes, as in cult statues and devotional images, could stare back." Therefore, by suggesting that the *St. Ursula Reliquary* sees with divine vision, I am referring to how the reliquary embodies the divine, the autonomy of the object, and more importantly, the way Memling painted its surface:

Thus we can take a picture by Van Eyck or Memling, even one capable of limitless enlargement—for all was painted in the most minute detail, as though with the help of a lens; all is sharp, with no hint of grain or blurring. I deliberately write in photographic terms...As times there seems to be

¹⁵ Scholars often observe the luminous effect of Flemish painting. Memling stands out among the Flemish painters for his thin application of paint; the thin layers may be the beginnings of an economical development in Flemish painting. See Nash, *Northern Renaissance*, 124; Maryan W. Ainsworth, "Hans Memling as a Draughtsman," *Hans Memling: Essays* (Ghent: Ludion, 1994), 84–86.

¹⁶ Miles, "Vision," 125-128.

something inhuman about the detail and precision of Flemish painters, an almost inhumanly objective of the brush...¹⁷

Memling engaged with the sacred space contained within the shrine, which, like intellectual vision, is ultimately of “incorporeal substance,” through painting that reveals and enhances what can be seen with the human eye. Memling’s *St. Ursula Reliquary*, at once suggests its materiality as a precious gilded shrine, while simultaneously denying its physicality through the painted surface. The hallowing effect of the shrine’s panels implies that the object is without substance. It is as if, the reliquary sees outward from all four angles, and the affectionate viewer, directs their attention in loving gaze.

Conclusion

Changes in medieval theories of vision influenced spiritual devotion during the fifteenth-century. One obvious explanation for the rise in personal devotion had to do with the accessibility of text like *Mediations on the Life of Christ*, a migration of St. Bernard’s theology into vernacular texts. Religious interpretations of spiritual life engendered the entanglement with the material world, as any attempt to describe it required the extrapolation of things from the material world (a realm where even the laity had entry). With a vision of the divine based in the material world, more people could begin to see and understand themselves in relation to oneself, the social body, and the divine.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cali, *Bruges*, 38-39; Rudolph Preimesberger interprets much of the microscopic detail that characterizes the works of Jan van Eyck as part of a “silent” debate between the arts. He points to the scale of some of these figures as evidence that Van Eyck was testing the capabilities of painting in comparison with sculpture. See Rudolph Preimesberger, “On Jan Van Eyck’s Diptyck in the Thyssen-Bornemisza,” *Paragons and Paragone* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institution, 2011).

¹⁸ Suzanna Biernoff described medieval vision as “a way of relating to oneself, to the sensible world including other animate beings, and to God. As such, it exceeded both viewing subjects and visible objects, as well as determining their mode of interaction,” in Suzanna Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 3.

Bruges' rise in religious processions, possession of the Relic of the Holy Blood, and peak in devotional painting during the 1480s, are testament to how spiritual life inundated the streets and minds of its citizens. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how the devout interacted with the visible world. Early theories of vision and the way vision influenced religious thought are critical to any investigation concerning the visual culture. As this thesis has attempted to describe, worshippers of the late Middle Ages who wished to experience a vision of God, could fix their gaze on the *St. Ursula Reliquary*; in turn, by the meticulous hand of the painter, they were met with the visual clarity of saints.

APPENDIX A
FIGURE CITATIONS

Figure 1. Anonymous, *St. Ursula Shrine*, c. 1380-1400.¹

Figure 2. Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.²

Figure 3. Details of St. Ursula and her Maidens and Virgin and Child, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.³

Figure 4. Paradise Portal, Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk, c.1450-1460. ⁴

Figure 5. Hans Memling, *St. John Altarpiece*, c. 1479, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.⁵

Figure 6. Bruges Master of the St. Ursula Legend, c. 1475-1480, Bruges, Convent of the Black Sisters.⁶

Figure 7. *Arrival in Cologne*, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.⁷

Figure 8. *Arrival in Basel*, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.⁸

Figure 9. *Arrival in Rome*, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.⁹

Figure 10. *Departure from Basel*, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.¹⁰

¹ Sarah Blick, *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage In Northern Europe And the British Isles* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), vol. 2, 24, fig. 24.

² Lane, *Hans Memling*, plate 11.

³ Blick, *Art and Architecture*, 25, fig. 26.

⁴ Ernerst Gilliat-Smith, *The Story of Bruges*. (London: J. M. Dent & co, 1901), 307.

⁵ Lane, *Hans Memling*, plate 5.

⁶ Blick, 30, fig. 31.

⁷ De Vos, Hans Memling, 298-299.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ De Vos, Hans Memling, 298-299.

¹⁰ De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 298-299.

Figure 11. *Martyrdom of St. Ursula's Maiden's*, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.¹¹

Figure 12. *Martyr of St. Ursula*, Hans Memling, *St. Ursula Reliquary*, c. 1489, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.

Figure 13. Master of the Privileges of Ghent and Flanders, *Scene of the Humiliation of the citizens of Ghent*, after 1440, Vienna.¹²

Figure 14. Hans Memling, *Scenes from the Passion of Christ*, c. 1470, Turin, Galleria Sabauda.¹³

Figure 15. Hans Memling, *Seven Joys of the Virgin*, c. 1480, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.¹⁴

Figure 16. *Wasservas Calvary*, c. 1420, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum.¹⁵

Figure 17. Jan Van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, c. 1434, London, National Gallery.¹⁶

Figure 18. Hans Memling, *Maartin van Nieuwenhove*, c. 1487, Bruges, Hospital of St. John.¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wilson, *Bruges and the Middle Ages*, 33, fig. 8.

¹³ Lane, *Hans Memling*, plate 12.

¹⁴ Lane, *Hans Memling*, plate 13.

¹⁵ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 56.

¹⁶ Lane, *Hans Memling*, 84.

¹⁷ Lane, *Hans Memling*, plates 4-5.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Laura Randall earned her Bachelor of Arts in Art History in 2008 at Florida State University. From 2009-2010, Laura taught English in the Nord de pas Calais region of France. There, she was able to see many French and Flemish paintings firsthand and get to know the region where the Northern Renaissance was born. Laura's interests include medieval theology and its relationship to modern critical theory. Laura graduated with her Master of Arts degree in Art History in August 2012.