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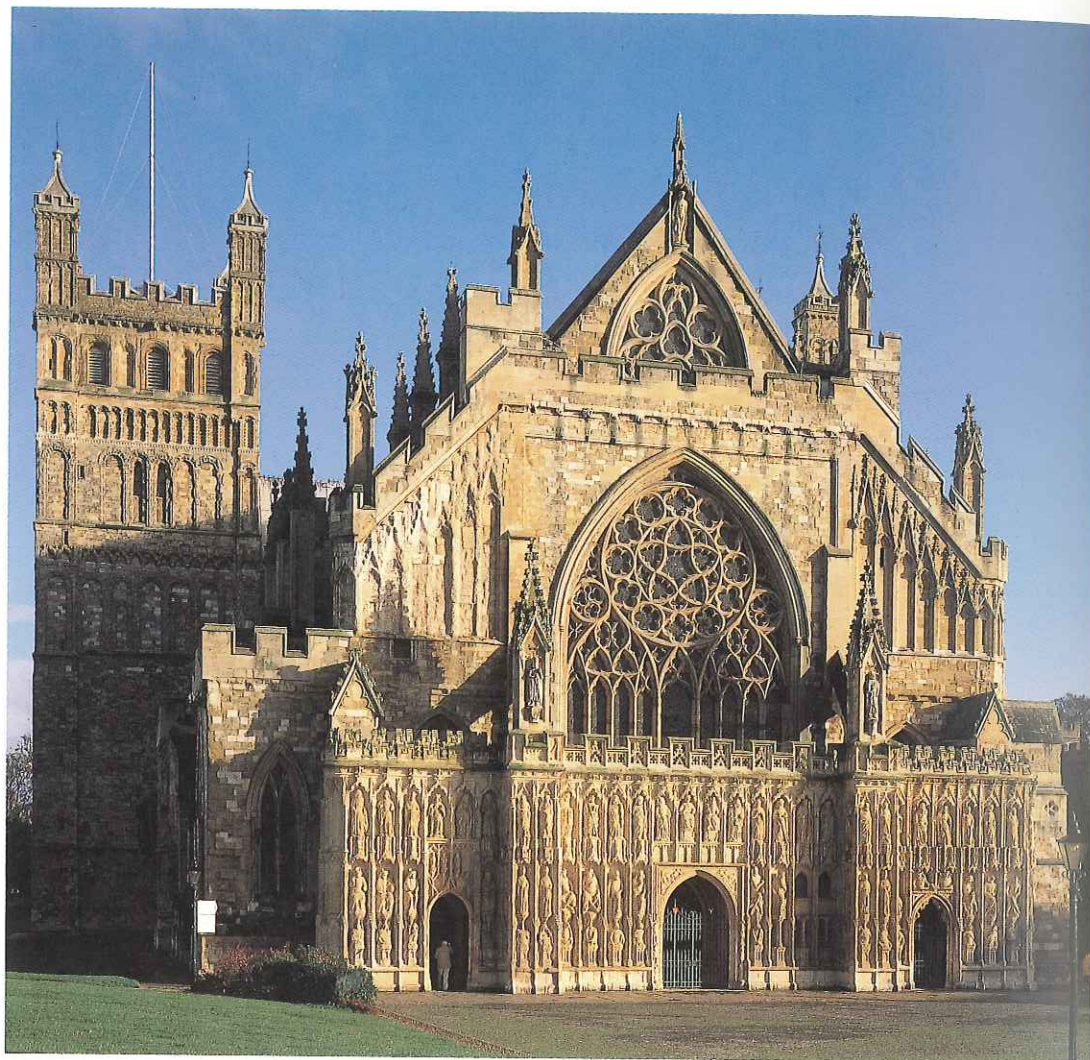
COURTIERS AND BURGHERS

The fourteenth century

The thirteenth century had been the century of the great cathedrals, in which nearly all branches of art had their share. Work on these immense enterprises continued into the fourteenth century and even beyond, but they were no longer the main focus of art. We must remember that the world had changed a great deal during that period. In the middle of the twelfth century, when the Gothic style was first developed, Europe was still a thinly populated continent of peasants with monasteries and barons' castles as the main centres of power and learning. The ambition of the great bishops' sees to have mighty cathedrals of their own was the first indication of an awakening civic pride in the towns. But a hundred and fifty years later these towns had grown into teeming centres of trade whose burghers felt increasingly independent of the power of the Church and the feudal lords. Even the nobles no longer lived a life of grim seclusion in their fortified manors, but moved to the cities with their comfort and fashionable luxury, there to display their wealth at the courts of the mighty. We can get a very vivid idea of what life in the fourteenth century was like if we turn to the works of Chaucer, with his knights and squires, friars and artisans. This was no longer the world of the Crusades, and of those paragons of chivalry, which we remember when looking at the founders of Naumburg, *page 194, figure 130*. It is never safe to generalize too much about periods and styles. There are always exceptions and examples which would not fit any such generalization. But, with that reservation, we may say that the taste of the fourteenth century was rather for the refined than for the grand.

This is exemplified in the architecture of the period. In England we distinguish between the pure Gothic style of the early cathedrals, which is known as Early English, and the later development of these forms, known as the Decorated style. The name indicates the change of taste. The Gothic builders of the fourteenth century were no longer content with the clear majestic outline of the earlier cathedrals. They liked to show their skill in decoration and complicated tracery. The west window of Exeter Cathedral is a typical example of this style, *figure 137*.

Churches were no longer the main tasks of the architects. In the



growing and prosperous cities many secular buildings had to be designed – town halls, guild halls, colleges, palaces, bridges and city gates. One of the most celebrated and characteristic buildings of this kind is the Doges' Palace in Venice, *figure 138*, which was begun in the fourteenth century, when the power and prosperity of that city were at their height. It shows that this later development of the Gothic style, for all its delight in ornament and tracery, could yet achieve its own effect of grandeur.

The most characteristic works of sculpture in the fourteenth century are perhaps not those of stone, which were still made in great numbers for the churches of the period, but rather the smaller works of precious metal or

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*West front of Exeter
Cathedral, c. 1350–
1400*

The Decorated style



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Doges' Palace, Venice,
begun in 1309



ivory, in which the craftsmen of the period excelled. *Figure 139* shows a little silver-gilt statue of the Virgin made by a French goldsmith. Works of this kind were not intended for public worship. Rather, they were to be placed in a palace chapel for private prayer. They are not meant to proclaim a truth in solemn aloofness, like the statues of the great cathedrals, but to excite love and tenderness. The Paris goldsmith was thinking of the Virgin as a real mother, and of Christ as a real child, thrusting His hand at His mother's face. He took care to avoid any impression of rigidity. That is why he gave the figure a slight bend – she rests her arm on her hip to support the child, while her head is bent towards Him. Thus the whole body seems to sway slightly in a gentle curve, very much like an S, and Gothic artists of the period were very fond of this motif. In fact the artist who made this statue

probably did not invent either the peculiar posture of Our Lady, or the motif of the Child playing with her. In such things he was following the general trend of fashion. His own contribution lay in the exquisite finish of every detail, the beauty of the hands, the little creases in the baby's arms, the wonderful surface of gilded silver and enamel, and, last but not least, the exact proportion of the statue, with its small and graceful head on a long and slender body. There is nothing haphazard in these works by the great Gothic craftsmen. Such details as the drapery falling over the right arm show the infinite care the artist has taken to compose it into graceful and melodious lines. We can never do these works justice if we just pass them by in our museums, and devote no more than a quick glance to them. They were made to be appreciated by real connoisseurs, and treasured as pieces worthy of devotion.

The love of fourteenth-century painters for graceful and delicate details is seen in such famous illustrated manuscripts as the English Psalter known

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Virgin and Child,
c. 1324–39; dedicated
by Joan of Evreux in
1339

Silver gilt, enamel and
precious stones, height 69
cm, 27¼ in; Louvre, Paris



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*Christ in the Temple; a
hawking party, c. 1310*

Page from Queen Mary's
Psalter; British Library,
London

to do with the sacred text. It is a theme from the daily life of the time, the hunting of ducks with a hawk. Much to the delight of the man and women on horseback, and of the boy in front of them, the hawk has just got hold of a duck, while two others are flying away. The artist may not have looked at real twelve-year-old boys when he painted the scene above, but he had undoubtedly looked at real hawks and ducks when he painted the scene below. Perhaps he had too much reverence for the biblical narrative to bring his observation of actual life into it. He preferred to keep the two things apart: the clear symbolic way of telling a story with easily readable gestures and no distracting details, and, on the margin of the page, the slice of real life, which reminds us once more that this is Chaucer's century. It was only in the course of the fourteenth century that the two elements of this art, the graceful narrative and the faithful observation, were gradually fused. Perhaps this would not have happened so soon without the influence of Italian art.

as 'Queen Mary's Psalter'. *Figure 140* shows Christ in the Temple, conversing with the learned scribes. They have put Him on a high chair, and He is seen explaining some point of doctrine with the characteristic gesture used by medieval artists when they wanted to draw a teacher. The Jewish scribes raise their hands in attitudes of awe and astonishment, and so do Christ's parents, who are just coming on to the scene, looking at each other wonderingly. The method of telling the story is still rather unreal. The artist has evidently not yet heard of Giotto's discovery of the way in which to stage a scene so as to give it life. Christ, who was twelve at the time, as the Bible tells us, is minute in comparison with the grown-ups, and there is no attempt on the part of the artist to give us any idea of the space between the figures. Moreover, we can see that all the faces are more or less drawn according to one simple formula, with the curved eyebrows, the mouth drawn downwards and the curly hair and beard. It is all the more surprising to look down the same page and to see that another scene has been added, which has nothing

In Italy, particularly in Florence, the art of Giotto had changed the whole idea of painting. The old Byzantine manner suddenly seemed stiff and outmoded. Nevertheless it would be wrong to imagine that Italian art was suddenly set apart from the remainder of Europe. On the contrary, Giotto's ideas gained influence in the countries north of the Alps, while the ideals of the Gothic painters of the north also began to have their effect on the southern masters. It was particularly in Siena, another Tuscan town and a great rival of Florence, that the taste and fashion of these northern artists made a very deep impression. The painters of Siena had not broken with the earlier Byzantine tradition in such an abrupt and revolutionary manner as Giotto in Florence. Their greatest master of Giotto's generation, Duccio (c. 1255/60–c. 1315/18), had tried – and tried successfully – to breathe new life into the old Byzantine forms instead of discarding them altogether. The altar panel of *figure 141* was made by two younger masters of his school, Simone Martini (1285?–1344) and Lippo Memmi (died 1347?). It shows to what an extent the ideals and the general atmosphere of the fourteenth century had been absorbed by Siennese art. The painting represents the Annunciation – the moment when the Archangel Gabriel arrives from Heaven to greet the Virgin, and we can read his words coming out of his mouth: '*Ave gratia plena*'. In his left hand he holds an olive branch, symbol of peace; his right hand is lifted as if he were about to speak. The Virgin has been reading. The appearance of the angel has taken her by surprise. She shrinks away in a movement of awe and humility, while looking back at the messenger from Heaven. Between the two there stands a vase with white lilies, symbols of virginity, and high up in the central pointed arch we see the dove, symbol of the Holy Ghost, surrounded by four-winged cherubim. These masters shared the predilection of the French and English artists of *figures 139* and *140* for delicate forms and a lyrical mood. They enjoyed the gentle curves of the flowing drapery and the subtle grace of slender bodies. The whole painting, in fact, looks like some precious goldsmith's work, with its figures standing out from a golden background, so skilfully arranged that they form an admirable pattern. One can never cease to wonder at the way in which these figures are fitted into the complicated shape of the panel; the way in which the angel's wings are framed by the pointed arch to the left, and the Virgin's figure shrinks back into the shelter of the pointed arch to the right, while the empty space between them is filled by the vase and the dove over it. The painters had learned this art of fitting the figures into a pattern from the medieval tradition. We had occasion, earlier, to admire the way in which medieval artists arranged the symbols of the sacred stories so as to form a satisfying arrangement. But we know that they did so by ignoring the real shape and proportion of things, and by forgetting about



141
 Simone Martini &
 Lippo Memmi
The Annunciation,
 1333

Part of an altarpiece made
 for Siena Cathedral;
 tempera on wood; Uffizi,
 Florence

space altogether. That was no longer the way of the Sienese artists. Perhaps we may find their figures a little strange, with their slanting eyes and curved mouths. But we need only look at some details to see that the achievements of Giotto had by no means been lost on them. The vase is a real vase standing on a real stone floor, and we can tell exactly where it stands in relation to the angel and the Virgin. The bench on which the Virgin sits is a real bench, receding into the background, and the book she holds is not just the symbol of a book, but a real prayer book with light falling on it and with shade between the pages, which the artist must have studied from a prayer book in his studio.



Giotto was a contemporary of the great Florentine poet Dante, who mentions him in his *Divine Comedy*. Simone Martini, the master of *figure 141*, was a friend of Petrarch, the greatest Italian poet of the next generation. Petrarch's fame today rests mainly on the many love-sonnets he wrote for Laura. We know from them that Simone Martini painted a portrait of Laura which Petrarch treasured. We remember that portraits in our sense had not existed during the Middle Ages and that artists were content to use any conventional figure of a man or woman, and to write on it the name of the person it was intended to represent. Unfortunately, Simone Martini's portrait of Laura is lost, and we do not know how far it was a real likeness. We do know, however, that this artist and other masters in the fourteenth century painted likenesses from nature, and the art of portraiture developed during that period. Perhaps the way in which Simone Martini looked at nature and observed details had something to do with this, for the artists of Europe had ample opportunity of learning from

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Peter Parler
the Younger
Self-portrait, 1379-86
Prague Cathedral

his achievements. Like Petrarch himself, Simone Martini spent many years at the court of the Pope, which was at that time not in Rome but at Avignon in southern France. France was still the centre of Europe, and French ideas and styles had a great influence everywhere. Germany was ruled by a family from Luxemburg who had their residence in Prague. There is a wonderful series of busts dating from this period (between 1379 and 1386) in the cathedral of Prague. They represent benefactors of the church and thus serve the same purpose as the figures of the Naumburg Founders, *page 194, figure 130*. But here we need no longer be in doubt. These are real portraits. For the series includes busts of contemporaries including one of the artist in charge, Peter Parler the Younger (1330–99), which is in all probability the first real self-portrait of an artist known to us, *figure 142*.

Bohemia became one of the centres through which this influence from Italy and France spread more widely. Its contacts reached as far as England, where Richard II married Anne of Bohemia. England traded with Burgundy. Europe, or at least the Europe of the Latin Church, was still one large unit. Artists and ideas travelled from one centre to another, and no one thought of rejecting an achievement because it was 'foreign'. The style which arose out of this mutual give-and-take towards the end of the fourteenth century is known among historians as the 'International style'. A wonderful example of it in England, possibly painted by a French master for an English king, is the so-called Wilton Diptych, *figure 143*. It is interesting to us for many reasons, including the fact that it, too, records the features of a real historical personage, and that of no other than Anne of Bohemia's unlucky husband – King Richard II. He is seen kneeling in prayer while St John the Baptist and two patron saints of the royal family commend him to the Holy Virgin, who seems to stand on the flowery meadow of Paradise, surrounded by angels of radiant beauty, all of whom wear the badge of the king, the white hart with golden antlers. The lively Christ Child is bending forward as if to bless or welcome the king and assure him that his prayers have been answered. Perhaps something of the ancient magical attitude towards the image still survives in the custom of 'donors' portraits' to remind us of the tenacity of these beliefs which we have found in the very cradle of art. Who can tell whether the donor did not feel somehow reassured in the rough and tumble of life, in which his own part was perhaps not always very saintly, to know that in some quiet church or chapel there was something of himself – a likeness fixed there through the artist's skill, which always kept company with the saints and angels and never ceased praying?

It is easy to see how the art of the Wilton Diptych is linked with the works we have discussed before, how it shares with them the taste for

143 OVERLEAF

*St John the Baptist,
St Edward the
Confessor and
St Edmund commend
Richard II to Christ
(the Wilton Diptych),
c. 1395*

Tempera on wood; each
section 47.5 × 29.2 cm,
18 × 11½ in; National
Gallery, London



GEORGE OF BARRING IN OYLE 1411. THIS WAS PAINTED BEFORE, IN



DEI MARIAE GRAVIDA IURE ET TOCARE ET ANA ALIIS ET TABULA VITAE ET...

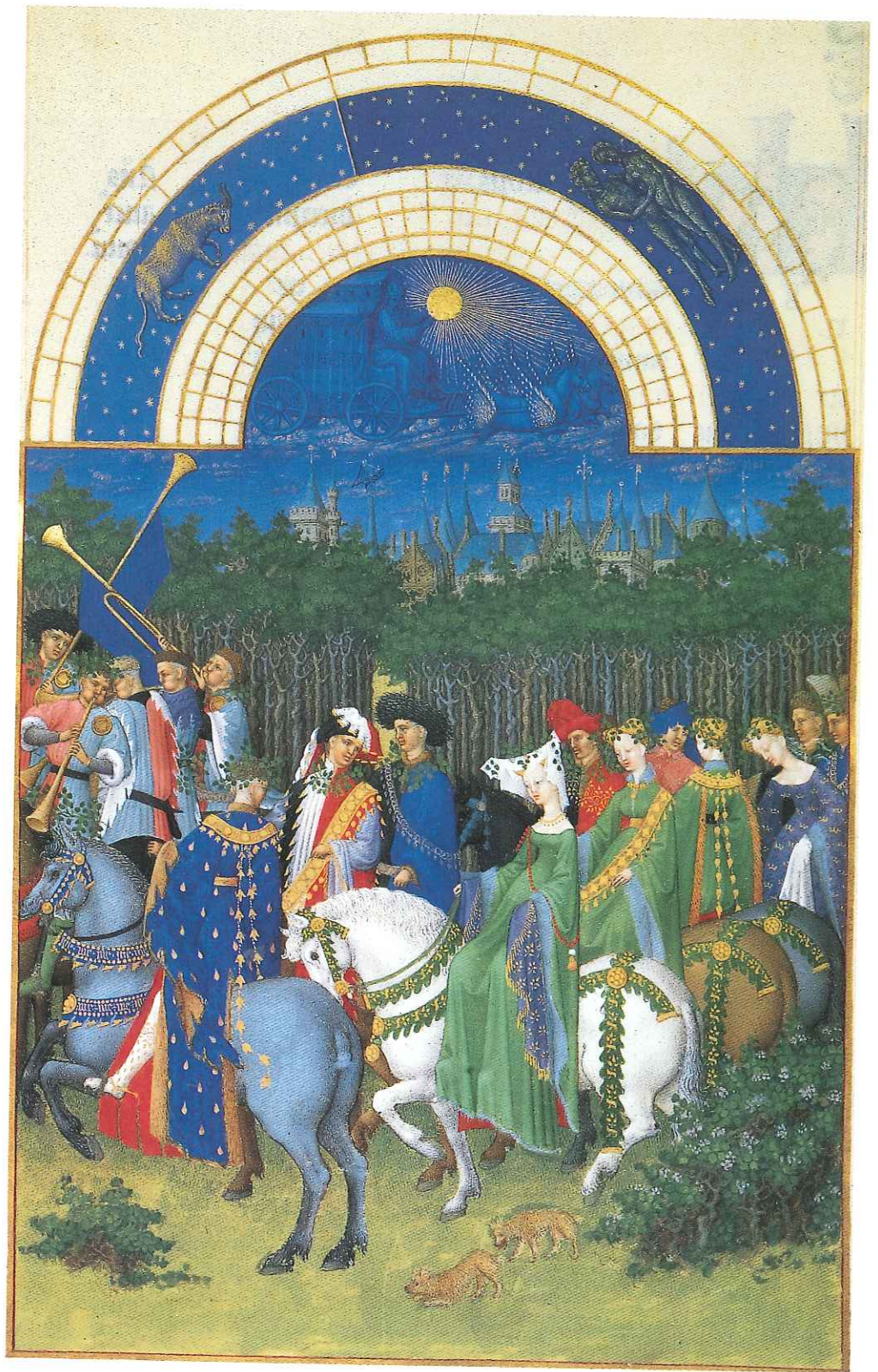
beautiful flowing lines and for dainty and delicate motifs. The way in which the Virgin touches the foot of the Christ Child and the gestures of the angels, with their long and slender hands, remind us of figures we have seen before. Once more we see how the artist showed his skill in foreshortening, for instance in the posture of the angel kneeling on the left side of the panel, and how he enjoyed making use of studies from nature in the many flowers which adorn the paradise of his imagination.

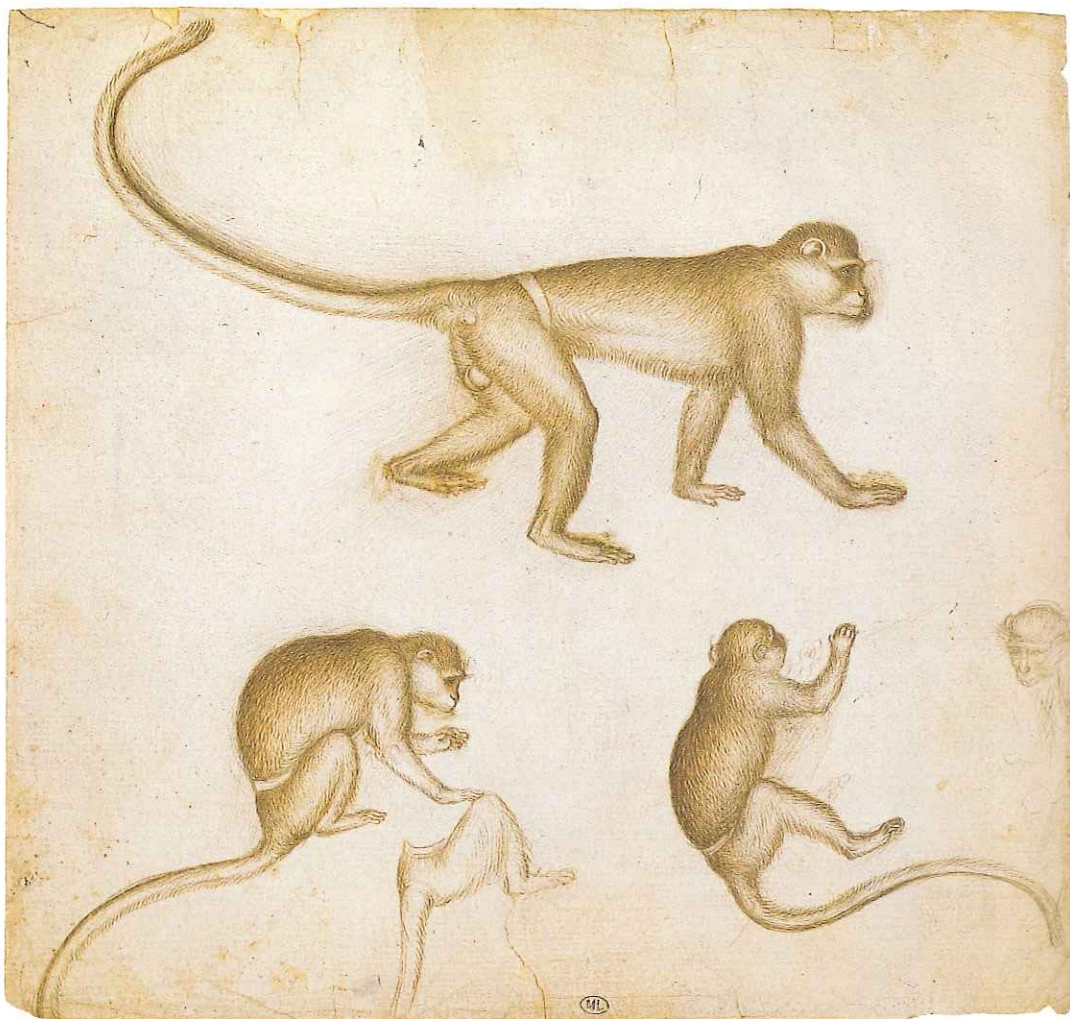
The artists of the International style applied the same power of observation, and the same delight in delicate and beautiful things, to their portrayal of the world around them. It had been customary in the Middle Ages to illustrate calendars with pictures of the changing occupations of the months, of sowing, hunting, harvesting. A calendar attached to a prayer book which a rich Burgundian duke had ordered from the workshop of the Limbourg brothers, *figure 144*, shows how these pictures from real life had gained in liveliness and observation, even since the time of Queen Mary's Psalter of *figure 140*. The miniature represents the annual spring festival of the courtiers. They are riding through a wood in gay attire, wreathed with branches and flowers. We can see how the painter enjoyed the spectacle of the pretty girls in their fashionable dresses, and how he took pleasure in bringing the whole colourful pageantry on to his page. Once more we may think of Chaucer and his pilgrims; for our artist, too, took pains to distinguish the different types, so skilfully that we almost seem to hear them talking. Such a picture was probably painted with a magnifying glass, and it should be studied with the same loving attention. All the choice details which the artist has crowded on to his page combine to build up a picture which looks nearly like a scene from real life. Nearly, but not quite; for when we notice that the artist has closed the background with a kind of curtain of trees, beyond which we see the roof-tops of a vast castle, we realize that what he gives us is not an actual scene from nature. His art seems so far removed from the symbolic way of telling a story which earlier painters had used, that it needs an effort to realize that even he cannot represent the space in which his figures move, and that he achieves the illusion of reality mainly through his close attention to detail. His trees are not real trees painted from nature, but rather a row of symbolic trees, one beside the other, and even his human faces are still developed more or less out of one charming formula. Nevertheless, his interest in all the splendour and gaiety of the real life around him shows that his ideas about the aims of painting were very different from those of the artists of the early Middle Ages. The interest had gradually shifted, from the best way of telling a sacred story as clearly and impressively as possible, to the methods of representing a piece of nature in the most faithful way. We have seen that the two ideals do not necessarily clash.

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Paul and Jean
de Limbourg
May, c. 1410

Page from the '*Très Riches
Heures*', painted for the
Duke of Berry; Musée
Condé, Chantilly





It was certainly possible to place this newly acquired knowledge of nature at the service of religious art, as the masters of the fourteenth century had done, and as other masters were to do after them; but, for the artist, the task had nevertheless changed. Formerly it was sufficient training to learn the ancient formulas for representing the main figures of the sacred story and to apply this knowledge in ever-new combinations. Now the artist's job included a different skill. He had to be able to make studies from nature and to transfer them to his pictures. He began to use a sketchbook, and to lay up a store of sketches of rare and beautiful plants and animals. What had been an exception in the case of Matthew Paris, *page 197, figure*

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Antonio Pisanello
Studies of a monkey,
 c. 1430

Leaf from a sketchbook;
 silverpoint on paper, 20.6 ×
 21.7 cm, 8 × 8½ in;
 Louvre, Paris

132, was soon to be the rule. A drawing such as *figure 145*, made by the north Italian artist Antonio Pisanello (1397–1455?) only some twenty years after the Limbourg miniature, shows how this habit led artists to study a live animal with loving interest. The public which looked at the artist's works began to judge them by the skill with which nature was portrayed, and by the wealth of attractive details which the artist managed to bring into his pictures. The artists, however, wanted to go one better. They were no longer content with the newly acquired mastery of painting such details as flowers or animals from nature; they wanted to explore the laws of vision, and to acquire sufficient knowledge of the human body to build it up in their statues and pictures as the Greeks and Romans had done. Once their interest took this turn, medieval art was really at an end. We come to the period usually known as the Renaissance.



A sculptor at work,
c. 1340

Marble relief by Andrea
Pisano from the Florentine
Campanile; height 100
cm, 39½ in; Museo
dell'Opera del Duomo,
Florence