The Speaking Christ: Gesture in Early Netherlandish Art

Allison Catherine Dilliard
To the University Council:

The Thesis Committee for Allison Catherine Dilliard certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

THE SPEAKING CHRIST:

GESETURE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

___________________________
Todd Richardson, Ph.D.
Major Professor

___________________________
Fred Albertson, Ph.D.

___________________________
Carol Crown, Ph.D.

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

___________________________
Karen D. Weddle-West, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs
STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master’s degree at The University of Memphis, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of the source is made.

Permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis may be granted by my major professor, or in his absence, by the Head of Interlibrary Services when, in the opinion of either, the proposed use of the material is for scholarly purposes. Any copying or use of the material in this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature ___________________________________________

Allison Catherine Dilliard

Date 04/05/2010 ___________________________________________
THE SPEAKING CHRIST:
GESTURE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

by

Allison Catherine Dilliard

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Major: Art History

The University of Memphis
May 2010
Copyright © 2010 Allison Catherine Dilliard
All rights reserved
To the late Dr. Carol J. Purtle.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Todd Richardson for acting as my advisor and as the head of my thesis committee along with Dr. Fred Albertson and Dr. Carol Crown for serving on my committee. I am very appreciative for these professors’ assistance; without them, this thesis would not have been possible.

I would additionally like to thank my husband, Aaron Dilliard, who has supported me throughout my graduate school career, and my family for providing me with the opportunity to further my education. I especially want to thank my grandmother for answering my theological questions and for suggesting sources to examine in my research as well as my dogs, Sugar and Butters, who have always kept me company during my schoolwork. I would also like to thank my friend and fellow student Michelle Williams who has supported and helped me during my undergraduate and graduate studies.

Most of all, I would like to thank the late Dr. Carol J. Purtle. She always pushed me to be my best and to strive for excellence in all aspects of my academic career. She assisted me in the early stages of this research project and provided an excellent foundation on which I could build.
ABSTRACT


By the late medieval period, certain compositions and motifs became standard practice when representing Christ with Mary, such as his performing a gesture of blessing. In three fifteenth-century Netherlandish works, of which two are attributed to the Robert Campin Group and one to Rogier van der Weyden, a gesture that is not in keeping with the more traditional motifs is employed by Christ. In this thesis, based on an iconological and semiotic approach, I argue that this gesture can be associated with Quintilian’s oratorical gesture of speech due to the physical resemblance, the application of rhetoric in artistic production and criticism in northern Europe, and the similarity of meaning, which is consistent with, and offers insight on, the already established Eucharistic themes of the paintings. I conclude that the gesture signifies the incarnation and that its possible rhetorical nature relates to the devotional function of the images.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.........................................................................................vii

INTRODUCTION............................................................................................1

CHAPTER 1. THE GESTURE........................................................................3

CHAPTER 2. ORIGINS...................................................................................7

CHAPTER 3. FUNCTION................................................................................25

CHAPTER 4. DEVOTION..............................................................................47

CONCLUSION..............................................................................................57

BIBLIOGRAPHY..........................................................................................59

APPENDIX..................................................................................................66
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, St. Petersburg <em>Virgin and Child in an Interior</em>, 1430s</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Enthroned Madonna and Child</em>, 13th century</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Theophanes the Greek and Workshop, <em>Virgin of the Gift</em>, 1392</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Enthroned Madonna and Child</em> (Detail), 13th century</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Theophanes the Greek and Workshop, <em>Virgin of the Gift</em> (Detail), 1392</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, St. Petersburg <em>Virgin and Child in an Interior</em> (Detail), 1430s</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, <em>Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen</em>, ca. 1440</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, <em>Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen</em> (Detail), ca. 1440</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Rogier van der Weyden, <em>Miraflores Altarpiece</em>, 1445</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Rogier van der Weyden, <em>Miraflores Altarpiece</em> (Left Panel), 1445</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Rogier van der Weyden, <em>Miraflores Altarpiece</em> (Detail, Left Panel), 1445</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Rogier van der Weyden, <em>Miraflores Altarpiece</em> (Detail, Right Panel), 1445</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, <em>Werl Altarpiece</em> (Left Panel), 1438</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Masaccio, <em>The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden</em>, ca. 1426-7</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Sandro Botticelli, <em>A Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts</em>, ca. 1484</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Fra Angelico, <em>The Coronation of the Virgin</em>, ca. 1440-1</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Augustus of Prima porta, 20 BC</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Acclamation Scene from the Column of Trajan: Welcoming Sacrifice in Trajan’s Honor (Scene LXXXV), AD 112</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
19. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Mérode Altarpiece (Center Panel), ca. 1425-30…………………………………………..81

20. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, London Virgin and Child in an Interior, before 1432…………………………………………………82

21. Attributed to the Master of the Cité des Dames, Detail of a Presentation Miniature with Christine de Pisan Presenting Her Book to Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, ca. 1410-4…………………………………..83

22. Rogier van der Weyden, St. Columba Altarpiece (Center Panel), ca. 1455……..84

23. Jan van Eyck, Madonna and Child at the Fountain, 1439………………………85

24. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Holy Trinity, 1430s…………………...86

25. Ecclesia and Synagoga, double portal, south entrance, Strasbourg Cathedral, ca. 1230……………………………………………………87

26. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Holy Trinity and St. Petersburg Virgin and Child in an Interior (as a diptych), 1430s…………………………………………………………………………………………..88

27. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Brussels Annunciation, 1420s………..89

28. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Dijon Nativity, ca. 1420………………90

29. Rogier van der Weyden, Miraflores Altarpiece (Center Panel), 1445……………91

30. Rogier van der Weyden, Miraflores Altarpiece (Right Panel), 1445………………92
INTRODUCTION

In the St. Petersburg *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Mary and Christ are situated in a domestic interior next to a burning fire in a hearth (see fig. 1). As she supports the Child with her left arm, the Virgin warms her right hand by the flames. What appears to be a simple action of motherly affection, however, may also be understood as a sign of protection. Mary, knowing the fate of her son, subconsciously raises her hand to ward off evil and to protect Jesus from his impending death. This small iconographic motif fits within the overall Eucharistic theme of the painting, which I will discuss in the following chapters. I use it here, though, to illustrate the potential for gestures to activate interpretations on multiple levels.

Gestures are commonly used in art to communicate emotions, such as Mary’s desire to protect her son, as well as abstract, theological ideas. Two of the most commonly employed hand expressions that convey the second of these two functions are the *benedictio latina* (see fig. 2) and the *benedictio graeca* (see fig. 3), the blessing gestures of Christ. In the former (see fig. 4), the thumb, index finger, and middle finger are upraised while the remaining two fingers are pressed against the palm; in the latter (see fig. 5), the little finger is extended upwards. A gesture that does not adhere to these conventions, though, can be found in three fifteenth-century Netherlandish paintings: the St. Petersburg *Virgin and Child in an Interior* and the *Virgin and Child Before a

---


*Firescreen* attributed to the Robert Campin Group and in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* by Rogier van der Weyden.

Interestingly, this hand signal resembles the gesture described by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, in the *Institutio Oratoria*, as the one used by orators to indicate that they were about to speak. Given that many of the hand expressions that are employed to convey Christian concepts originate from ancient Roman speaking gestures, such as *adlocutio* and *acclamatio*, and that there was an awareness of rhetoric in northern Europe during the fifteenth-century, it is possible to connect the hand expression in the three aforementioned paintings to Quintilian’s oratorical gesture representing speech. Moreover, assigning such a meaning to the gesture makes sense not only due to its visual similarity to Quintilian’s description, but also because it is consistent with, and offers insight on, the Eucharistic themes of the images, which have been firmly established by previous scholarship.

In this thesis, I will argue that the hand expression of Christ in these three artworks is a symbol for the word of God made flesh, thus further supporting the theories of preceding scholarship concerning the Eucharistic implications of these paintings. Based an iconological approach, the following will be discussed in the second and third chapters: the origins of gestures within Christianity; the knowledge of rhetoric and how it was applied to art production and criticism in northern Europe during the fifteenth-century; and the function of the hand expression within the Eucharist theology of the images. Lastly, using a semiotic method, the manner in which the Eucharistic themes would have been mentally received by contemporary viewers will be examined in the fourth chapter.
In the *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, attributed to the Campin Group, Mary and the Christ Child are placed within a fifteenth-century domestic environment (see fig. 1). Sitting next to a hearth, Mary cradles Christ in her left arm while her right hand is held up to the fire. Christ, as he rests on his side, extends his legs behind him and his arms upward as if he is stretching. As he gazes to his right, he performs a gesture with his left hand that is notable: the middle finger and thumb come together, nearly touching, while the index, ring, and little finger remain upraised (see fig. 6). At first glance, this depiction seems no more than a simple hand signal. However, this very same expression is also found in another painting attributed to the Campin Group, *The Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* (see fig. 7).\(^1\) Mary and the Christ Child are once again situated in a domestic interior setting. The Virgin, who has been reading from her devotional text, pauses to nurse the Child who reclines in her lap and gazes towards the viewer’s space. With his right leg outstretched and his left leg drawn towards his torso, his left hand, as in the former piece, performs the same action: the thumb and middle finger are brought together while the remaining three fingers are in a raised position (see fig. 8).

In addition to these two artworks by the Campin Group, the gesture can be observed in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* by Rogier van der Weyden, who is believed by Georges Hulin de Loo to have worked in Campin’s workshop from around 1427 to 1432.

---

This piece consists of three panels that portray the theme of the Christian Bible—New Testament stories accompanied by typological prefigurations from the Old Testament represented in the reliefs. In the left panel, a nativity-like scene is depicted; the Child lies upon the Virgin’s lap while she and Joseph pray (see fig. 10). Christ’s left hand gestures in a similar manner as the Child in the two Campin Group paintings: the middle finger and thumb come together with the index, ring, and little finger extending upwards (see fig. 11). This gesture is also echoed in the right panel by the adult Jesus who is appearing to his mother before the ascension (see fig. 12).

The source and meaning of this hand expression seem elusive for it does not resemble the traditional hand signals used in Christian worship, such as the aforementioned 
\textit{benedictio latina} or the \textit{benedictio graeca}. Art historians who have addressed these three paintings are either ambiguous about the hand expression or simply ignore it altogether. In Carol J. Purtle’s thorough examination of the iconographic program of the Campin Group’s Virgin and Child images, she makes no mention of the considered gesture.\footnote{3} Susie Nash, when discussing the \textit{Virgin and Child in an Interior}, primarily focuses on the bathing aspect of the painting, giving no regard to the Child’s hand expression.\footnote{4} In reference to the \textit{Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen}, Lorne

---

\footnote{2}{Rogier van der Weyden, \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece}, 1445, Staatliche Museen, Berlin; Georges Hulin de Loo, “Robert Campin or Rogier van der Weyden? Some Portraits Painted Between 1432 and 1444,” \textit{The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs} 49, no. 285 (December 1926): 268.}


Campbell writes, “…the gesture of his left arm is puzzling without obvious meaning.” Beth Williamson also notes that the hand expression in this artwork is “strange” and “may require some explanation.” Interestingly, both scholars embark on different paths in addressing this gesture. Campbell purports that the painting is actually based on a lost work of the Campin Group, *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin*, in which the Child is shown playing with a string of beads; in the *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen*, the beads were simply not included, which explains why the Christ Child’s left hand is positioned in such an unusual manner. Williamson, though, references Michael Michael who believes that the hand expression is intended to show the site of the nail wound that Jesus would receive during the crucifixion; Williamson further outlines how the positioning of the Child’s body reflects such a notion for each of the areas where he would receive a wound—hands, feet, and side—are highlighted. Martin Davies in his lengthy essay that critically examines each of van der Weyden’s works overlooks the gesture of the Christ Child in the left panel of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* but discusses the expression of the adult Christ in the right panel; Davies, like Williamson, believes that this gesture was intended to highlight the nail wound.


Clearly, there is neither a consensus as to the purpose and meaning of this gesture nor as to how it would have functioned within the broader theological notions raised in each painting. Such a lack of knowledge, however, should not be dismissed as a result of the expression’s insignificance. As the next chapter will show, gestures from the time of the Campin Group and van der Weyden, and even in preceding centuries, were vital in the communication of ideas and beliefs.

1996), 115-8, 126-9, 296, 297-8; Dirk de Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden: the Complete Works* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 226-33; and Hans Belting and Christiane Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: Das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1994), 180-1. Interestingly, Davies connects the hand expression of the adult Christ in the right panel of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* to the gesture performed by the right hand of John the Baptist in the left wing of the *Werl Altarpiece* (see fig. 13); Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Werl Altarpiece* (Left Panel), 1438, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Davies explains that van der Weyden’s hand expression may have been a precursor to that of the Campin Group. Upon closer examination, however, one notices that the gestures are slightly different. In the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, the middle finger and thumb of Christ come together while the index finger and thumb of John the Baptist are slightly touching. Stephan Kemperdick dismisses such an association by citing that several other gestures were used in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* before the current one was employed thus causing it to not serve as a forerunner to the hand expression of John the Baptist. Moreover, the current dating of the *Werl Altarpiece* is 1438, seven years before the date of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*; therefore, Christ’s gesture could not have been an antecedent to the hand expression of John the Baptist. See Stephan Kemperdick, “Rogier van der Weyden: *Miraflores Altarpiece,”* in *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden*, ed. Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sander (Berlin: Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen, 2008), 320. Investigating this gesture of John the Baptist is beyond the scope of this thesis and must be reserved for another time.
CHAPTER 2
ORIGINS

As scholars are well aware, gestures employed in Medieval and Renaissance art often functioned to aid in communicating to the viewer the work’s subject matter as well as its emotional tone; they had uses beyond indicating a Christian benediction or blessing. The utilization of hand expressions as forms of communication originated from monks and priests who employed gestures as communicative devices during times of silence and in sermons. Evidence of this dates back to as early as the tenth-century. Scholars know from studying the sign languages of monastic orders, such as the Trappists, Cluniacs, and Cistercians, that in addition to tangible items, such as a loaf of bread or a book, abstract, theological ideas were also communicated, for instance the hallelujah sung by the angels and the element of fire. The sign for the hallelujah consists of raising one hand and moving the fingers in a flying motion to signify the angels’ wings. The action of singing the hallelujah is indicated by placing the index finger below the eye and moving it downwards twice. The sign for fire is carried out by holding the index finger in an upwards position and blowing on it.\(^1\) In regards to priests, Michael Baxandall explains that hand signals were helpful in enabling those who did not speak Latin to follow a Latin service. Moreover, preachers travelling throughout Europe utilized hand expressions as a way to effectively converse with those who did not speak their language. Baxandall cites

several fifteenth-century examples based on the Bible that demonstrate how the priests would have formulated their gestures. For instance, if a preacher wanted to convey an agreeable temperament to the congregation, he should simply draw his hands towards himself as indicated in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” If joy needed to be expressed, the priest should raise his hands as in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

According to Baxandall, hand expressions of this nature were not unique to any particular region and would have been discernable to a broad audience, both in terms of economic class and level of education.

In a similar fashion to monastic sign language and the gestures of priests, hand expressions were utilized by artists to instruct the spectator in more abstract themes, specifically matters of faith, for gestures clearly communicated to the observer the premise of the artwork as well as directed his or her eyes to the heart of the subject matter. Baxandall gives examples of the various hand expressions that were used to artistically communicate emotions, actions, and subject matter. For grief, the hand is pressed against the chest, and for shame, the eyes are covered with the fingers (see fig.

---

4. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 64. The primary source for Baxandall’s argument is the following: Jacobus de Fusignano, Henricus de Hassia, and Thomas de Aquino, *Tractatulus solennis de arte et vero modo predicandi* (Strasbourg: Heinrich Knoblochtzer, not after 1482).
Reception is indicated by the raising of the hand and the extension of the fingers (see fig. 15). Affirmation and the discussion of a holy topic are demonstrated by the raising of the hands (see fig. 16). With these customs in mind, I propose that the Campin Group and van der Weyden’s gesture could have also assisted in communicating to the viewer not only the subject of the painting but also abstract, theological teachings.

Many of the hand expressions that are employed to convey these Christian concepts, such as the aforementioned blessing gestures, originate from ancient Roman speaking gestures, such as *adlocutio* (see fig. 17) and *acclamatio* (see fig. 18). In the former, the right hand is simply raised, while in the latter the thumb, index finger, and middle finger are extended upwards with the two remaining fingers touching the palm.

---


7. Augustus of Primaporta, 20 BC, Vatican Museums, Rome; *Acclamatio Scene from the Column of Trajan: Welcoming Sacrifice in Trajan’s Honor* (Scene LXXXV), AD 112, Forum of Trajan, Rome; Barasch, *Giotto and the Language*, 17-8. *Adlocutio*, or address, is the emperor’s speech to his army that would have commenced with him raising his right hand to call for silence. *Acclamatio* is the gesture that was carried out by the general population to convey their emotions. According to Barasch, these two hand expressions carried over into Christian worship where they were transformed into gestures of benediction: the *benedictio latina* and the *benedictio graeca*. He writes, “In Roman life and art there were two situations *[adlocutio and acclamatio]* which became speaking themes *par excellence*, and which left their imprint on the shape and expressive quality of speaking gestures in European art….In medieval artistic language, as revealed both in works of art and in highly formalized social acts, movements indicating speech played a central part, surpassing the status of such gestures in ancient art, and probably overshadowing all other gestures in the Middle Ages themselves. It is not surprising that they are among the motifs most frequently found in the sacral art of the period….The specific speaking gestures, as crystallized in the Middle Ages, can still be observed today in Christian worship, mainly as the ritual signs of benediction: the *benedictio latina*...the *benedictio graeca*.” Barasch, *Giotto and the Language*, 17-8. In addition to noting the physical resemblance between these ancient Roman and Christian expressions, especially the *acclamatio* gesture and the *benedictio latina*, he also references ancient literary sources to demonstrate the antique nature of the benediction expressions. For example, Barasch cites Lucius Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* in which Apuleius describes a gesture that closely resembles the *benedictio latina*. In the twenty-first line of the eleventh chapter, Apuleius writes in reference to the actions of Thelyphron, “He [Thelyphron]…held out his right hand in the manner of an orator, shutting down the two smaller fingers and stretching out the other three, and pointing up with his thumb a little.” For this quoted passage and the original Latin, see Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apelius*, ed. S. Gaselee, trans. W. Adlington, The Loeb Classical Library 44 (London: William Heinemahn, 1915), 80-1.
Interestingly, the Campin Group and van der Weyden’s gesture resembles the one described by the first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian, in the third chapter of the eleventh book from the *Institutio oratoria*, as the hand expression most frequently used by orators to indicate that they were about to speak. Written after Quintilian’s retirement from serving as a teacher of rhetoric and as an advocate, this text consists of twelve books that focus on the orator’s education and character along with the rules of rhetoric, which are divided into five parts: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. The *Institutio oratoria* is intended for instructors as well as for students who wish to learn about the theory of speaking, particularly in the political and judicial arenas.\(^8\) In terms of this particulae, Quintilian writes in line ninety-two, “One of the commonest of all the gestures consists in placing the middle finger against the thumb and extending the remaining three: it is suitable to the *exordium*, the hand being moved forward with an easy motion a little distance both to right and left, while the head and shoulders gradually follow the direction of the gesture.”\(^9\) At least on a purely visual level, we can make a connection between Quintilian’s gesture representing speech and the hand expression employed by the Campin Group and van der Weyden in the paintings already considered. Moreover, in each work, the placement of Christ’s hand as well as his head and shoulder positioning are similar to that described by Quintilian.

---


In addition to the physical resemblance of the signs, I propose also a similarity of signification, that of speech, which is operative in the function and role of rhetoric within art and its critical observation during the fifteenth-century. Humanism gained a strong footing beginning in Italy in the latter half of the fourteenth-century. The *studia humanitatis*, as it came to be known, refers to the study of “grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and usually ethics…in classical Latin and sometimes in Greek,”¹⁰ those who focused on these academic areas even described themselves as *orator or rhetoricus* since their studies centered on rhetorical skills.¹¹ Humanism and its concentrations expanded beyond Italy into the northern European regions. These areas naturally had no desire to recapture the classical Roman past, for this was not their cultural history; rather, their need to study humanism primarily stemmed from the goal of producing texts and possessing skills that were comparable in nature to the great scholars of antiquity. Such skills were also applied to the study of the Christian faith. Evidence of the humanistic expansion can be seen as early as the fourteenth-century at the court of Kaiser Karl IV in Prague, where the talent for virtuoso and elegant speaking was a must. During the fifteenth-century, French translations of classical and Italian humanist writings were read at the Burgundian court of Philip the Good and his son Charles the Rash. In addition, scholars, prelates, and copyists of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries, such as Radulphus or Rolandus de Rivo, Dominicus de Flandria, Anselmus Fabri of Breda, and Theodoricus Nicolai Werken de Abbenbroek, frequently traveled to Italy where they cultivated an interest in humanism that they subsequently brought back to northern

---


¹¹. Ibid.
Europe. Some academics, though, chose to stay closer to their native lands, for instance the Belgian Ludovicus Sanctus of Beringen who in 1329 began studying at Avignon numerous humanist texts as well as ancient Roman writings such as Cicero’s *De Inventione* and the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*. Italians additionally traveled to northern Europe. Bruges and Antwerp saw an influx of Italian merchants who not only possessed a talent for business but also for writing; the fifteenth-century humanist and novelist Francesco Tedaldi was one such example. Moreover, Italian scholars and poets were established at the University of Louvain, founded in 1425, where humanistic practices were taught to the students in the North; the German Rudolph Agricola, who lived from 1444 to 1485, was one such pupil who studied Cicero and Quintilian and resultantly became a distinguished humanist. Furthermore, the fifteenth-century witnessed the flourishing of Latin manuscript production in the Netherlands; however, these texts were mostly restricted to historical narratives, such as Edmund van Dynter’s *Chronica ducum Lotharingiae et Brabantiae*, and devotional texts, such as Gerlacus Petri’s ascetic handbook *Breviloquium* and the *devotio moderna*, or Modern Devotion, mystical treatise *Ignitum cum Deo soliloquium*. According to Jozef Ijsewijn, northern European humanist writings were produced before the 1460s, but due to a lack of records and literary criticism concerning these manuscripts, the bulk of the earliest known humanist texts date to the period between 1470 and 1485 with a majority of them written by Agricola and his friends. The bourgeoisie soon followed suit and began to favor the academic perception that humanistic studies were indeed an art form that must be maintained, and in the second half of the fifteenth-century, town schools in Ghent, Münster, Bruges, and Deventer started to focus on humanism.\(^\text{12}\)

12. Robert Suckale, “Roger van der Weydens Bild der Kreuzabnahme und sein Verhältnis zu
As the study of humanism grew in northern Europe, so too did the textual holdings concerning this area’s interest: classical Latin writings. While the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries saw the popularity of collecting such texts grow, this activity actually had its origins beginning in the late eighth-century where the rulers of the lands north of the Alps desired to emulate the imperial libraries of ancient Rome. A great example is the late eighth and early ninth-century Frankish king and subsequently emperor Charlemagne who advocated the study of antique writings and sought out these items within his ever-expanding kingdom; upon capturing Ravenna, the influx of Latin texts appears to have especially increased. The scribes of the Carolingian Empire set to copying the Latin manuscripts, which were more than likely ancient codices rather than contemporary versions for the copying of classical texts was temporarily halted after the Roman Empire fell in the fifth-century. As the books were duplicated, they were transported along various routes running beside the Loire and Rhine rivers, disseminating throughout northern Europe. Of course, knowing the exact distribution for a given text is impossible due to much of the information being lost; however, scholars believe that the

---

13. Christopher de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1994), 238. In the fourth-century, the Roman Empire had twenty-eight public libraries. After the empire collapsed, these collections passed into the hands of the Christian church, with ecclesiastical centers, such as Rome, Verona, and Ravenna, possessing a majority of them; however, interest in classical Latin writings was lacking for the Christian community perceived such texts to be a threat due to their pagan nature. According to L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, when Latin culture was transferred to the North, classical manuscripts were not seen in such a negative light and were recognized as an opportunity to learn the language of the church and of the great ancient scholars. See L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: a Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 80-1, 85.

14. Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 85, 97. Reynolds and Wilson state that the southern regions, such as Italy, did not have an interest in copying classical Latin manuscripts until after 750.
Netherlands, northern France, and the areas along the Rhine River to Lake Constance were fertile centers for the collection of classical Latin manuscripts due to their close proximity to Charlemagne’s court at Aachen.\(^\text{15}\)

The Abbey of Fleury, located on the Loire River, actually had a vital role in the reproduction and transmission of Quintilian beginning in the ninth-century; however, many of his works were *mutili*, meaning they were incomplete. In this collection, the *Institutio oratoria* was missing portions of the following books: five through eight, nine through eleven, and twelve. Important to note, however, is that the aforementioned passage from the eleventh book in which Quintilian describes the gesture that is used by orators to indicate that they are about to speak was not a part of these absent portions.\(^\text{16}\)

During the ninth- or tenth-centuries, one of the first intact manuscripts of the *Institutio oratoria* was discovered in Germany; yet, it remained largely unknown to scholars who continued to study the *mutili* forms until Poggio Bracciolini’s discovery in 1416 of a complete text in the library at Saint Gall.\(^\text{17}\) Poggio, who lived from 1380 to 1459, was, in addition to being a humanist and a bibliophile, a notary for the papal court in Rome

\(^{15}\) Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 96-8. After Charlemagne’s death, many of the manuscripts in his palace library were dispersed among various monasteries, such as Corbie Abbey and Saint Martin’s at Tours; some of these texts included three Ciceronian speeches. Charlemagne’s successor, Louis the Pious, continued to collect and copy classical manuscripts, such as Seneca’s *Letters* and Pliny’s *Natural History*.

\(^{16}\) Paul Lehmann, “Die Institutio Oratoria des Quintilianus im Mittelalter,” *Philologus* 89 (1934): 357; Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 99-100; Priscilla S. Boskoff, “Quintilian in the Late Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 27, no. 1 (January 1952): 72; Michael Winterbottom, “Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts of Quintilian,” *The Classical Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (November 1967): 339n3. According to Boskoff, scholars are uncertain as to how the Abbey of Fleury came to own *mutili* forms of Quintilian’s writings. Winterbottom states that the missing portions of the *Institutio oratoria* are as follows: the text begins at 1.1.6 while 5.14.12 to 8.3.64, 8.6.17 to 67, 9.3.2 to 10.1.107, 11.1.71 to 2.33, and 12.10.43 to the end are omitted. He further adds that these *mutili* manuscripts are all descendents of one text known as the Bernensis (B).

\(^{17}\) Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 101; Boskoff, “Quintilian Late Middle Ages,” 71, 76; de Hamel, *History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, 238. While Reynolds and Wilson state that a complete text of Quintilian had been found in Germany in the tenth-century, Boskoff claims that by the ninth-century Quintilian’s writings were known in a complete form in Germany.
beginning in 1403. He moved to Germany in October of 1414 for the Council of
Constance, where the opportunity to visit monastic libraries near Lake Constance was
presented to him. During these travels, he managed to examine as well as remove many
classical Latin texts; however, the monks of Saint Gall would only allow him to copy
their Quintilian manuscript. Poggio’s reproduction of the complete *Institutio oratoria* as
well as the other classical texts he found became an integral part of the humanist
education not only in his native Italy but also in northern Europe.18

Even though the study of the *Institutio oratoria* did not gain momentum until the
fifteenth-century, which Priscilla S. Boskoff and James J. Murphy note as the result of it
primarily being known in its *muti* state before that time, this text’s influence can
actually be traced back to the Middle Ages when, unbeknown to scholars, it was already
playing a role in the teaching methods of the educational system.19 Murphy explains that

By the end of the Middle Ages…it was clear that the basic teaching methods
survived even though their Roman background was not generally recognized.
The pragmatic value of efficient instruction was great enough by itself, with no
need to seek sources in Quintilian or anyone else. Nevertheless the influence was
there, even if not identified.20

The techniques described in this text center on a systematized, coherent curriculum that
advocates the daily study and practice of the skills of the orator: speaking, listening,

18. de Hamel, *History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, 238; Winterbottom, “Fifteenth-Century
Manuscripts,” 365; Boskoff, “Quintilian Late Middle Ages,” 76. The *Institutio oratoria* discovered by
Poggio is now located at the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich under the call number Ms. C 74a; see Leo Cunibert
Mohlberg, “Katalog der Handschriften der Zentralbibliothek Zürich. I. Mittelalterliche Handschriften.
codices.unifr.ch/en/description/zbz/C0074a (accessed January 18, 2010).

19. Boskoff, “Quintilian Late Middle Ages,” 71; Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 176.

20. Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 176.
reading and writing. Quintilian perceived such skills to be interrelated, which is reflected in the first chapter of the tenth book from the *Institutio oratoria*. He states in lines one and two:

But these rules of style [invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery], while part of the student's theoretical knowledge, are not in themselves sufficient to give him oratorical power. In addition he will require that assured facility which the Greeks call ἔξις. I know that many have raised the question as to whether this is best acquired by writing, reading or speaking, and it would indeed be a question calling for serious consideration, if we could rest content with any one of the three. But they are so intimately and inseparably connected, that if one of them be neglected, we shall but waste the labour which we have devoted to the others. For eloquence will never attain to its full development or robust health, unless it acquires strength by frequent practice in writing, while such practice without the models supplied by reading will be like a ship drifting aimlessly without a steersman. Again, he who knows what he ought to say and how he should say it, will be like a miser brooding over his hoarded treasure, unless he has the weapons of his eloquence ready for battle and prepared to deal with every emergency.

The teaching methods that directed the study of these rhetorical abilities were the following: precept, the set of rules that govern speaking, which are invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery; imitation (*imitatio*), the studying of models to learn how other scholars use language; composition exercises (*progymnasmata* or *praexercitamenta*), the demonstration of a student’s knowledge of writing and speaking through application activities; declamation (*declamatio*), the practice of giving fictitious political or legal speeches; and sequencing, the structuring of classroom activities with

---


22. Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, 3. The original Latin for lines one and two is as follows: “Sed haec eloquendi praecepta, sicut cogitationi sunt necessaria, ita non satis ad vim dicendi valent, nisi illis firma quaedam facilites, quae apud Graecos ἔξις nominatar, accesserit: ad quarn scribendo plus an legendo an dicendo conferatur, solere quaeris scio. Quod esset diligentius nobis examinandum, si qualibet earum rerum possemus una esse contenti. Verum ita sunt inter se conexa et indiscreta omnia ut, si quid ex his defuerit, frustra sit in ceteris laboratum. Nam neque solida atque robusta fuerit unquam eloquentia nisi multo stilo vires acceperit, et citra lectionis exemplum labor ille carens rectore fluitabit; et qui sciet quae quoque sint modo dicenda, nisi tamen in proinctu paratamque ad omnes casus habuerit eloquentiam, velut clausis thesauris incubabit.” Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, 2.
the goal of moving from simple to more complex exercises and of reinforcing the elements in each exercise. These techniques were so effective that they outlasted the collapse of the Roman Empire and were perpetuated in the medieval educational system. For example, Matthew of Vendôme in his *Ars versificatoria* from 1174 describes a French school’s curriculum that follows Quintilian’s methods, such as *imitatio* in which the students were required to present their own compositions based upon models they had studied. He writes:

> In school exercises they paraphrase the poetical fables and work out an expression after each word as if they intended a metrical commentary on the authors. But since undisciplined transgression should gain forgiveness, and perhaps when they are being misled by misleading teachers, their good interests should be looked to so that in the treatment of material they may try to imitate the customary outcomes, namely, so they may speak the truth or the probable. Nor should anyone attempt to render word for word as a steadfast translator.

John of Salisbury in his *Metalogicon*, or *Metalogicus*, from 1159 notes a similar educational program administered by Bernard of Chartres, which included the daily practice of reading, writing, speaking, and listening through the techniques of *imitatio*, *progymnasmata* or *praexercitamenta*, and sequencing. Bernard of Chartres actually makes mention of Quintilian and his idea of how *imitatio* exercises should be performed; yet, despite the reference to Quintilian, the Roman rhetorician was not officially acknowledged as the source for these educational practices. John of Salisbury writes:

> Realizing that practise strengthens memory and sharpens faculty, he [Bernard of Chartres] urged his pupils to imitate what they had heard…Each pupil recited the next day something from what he had heard on the preceding. The evening

---

23. Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 162-3.

exercise, called the declinatio, was filled with such an abundance of grammar that any one, of fair intelligence, by attending it for a year, would have at his fingers’ ends the art of writing and speaking, and would know the meaning of all words in common use….For those boys who had to write exercises in prose or verse, he selected the poets and orators, and showed how they should be imitated in the linking of words and the elegant ending of passages. If any one sewed another’s cloth into his garment, he was reproved for theft, but usually was not punished….For, he said (quoting from Quintilian) that to follow out what every contemptible person has said, is irksome and vainglorious, and destructive of the capacity which should remain free for better things….But since in school exercises nothing is more useful than to practise what should be accomplished by the art, his scholars wrote daily in prose and verse, and proved themselves in discussions.  

The medieval school was thus based on Quintilian, and after Poggio’s discovery of a complete Institutio oratoria, these teaching methods were not only recognized as coming from Quintilian but were also reaffirmed particularly by passages, such as the one quoted from the tenth book, which until that time had been unknown. There was now a “justification for the relation between writing, reading, and speaking; justification for the relation of rhetoric to education.” Accordingly, the use of these techniques continued in the humanist curriculum during the Renaissance.

25. Translation from Henry Osborn Taylor, The Mediaeval Mind: a History of the Development of Thought and Emotion in the Middle Ages (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919), 2:157-8; Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 171. For the original Latin, see John of Salisbury, Metalogicus, vol. 199 of Patrologia Cursus Completus Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844-64), column 853-6. While the specific passages of Quintilian to which Bernard of Chartres was quoting is not noted in John of Salisbury’s text, I believe that Bernard of Chartres was drawing from the second chapter of the tenth book from the Institutio oratoria. This passage was available in the mutili forms of the text. See Quintilian, The Institutio Oratoria, 65-79.


27. Ibid., 177. Quintilian’s influence would be long-lived throughout Europe. The sixteenth-century writers Etienne Dolet and Erasmus Sacer were known to have respected Quintilian’s techniques. In addition, Milton and Shakespeare were strongly influenced by Quintilian’s writings and teaching methods. The fact that one hundred editions of the Institutio oratoria had been printed in seven countries eighty years after its initial edition in 1470 is a testament to the importance of this text. See Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 181. Murphy also cites the following for more information: Kees Meerhoff, Rhétorique et poétique au XVe siècle en France: du Bellay, Ramus et les autres (Leiden: Brill, 1986); Joachim Dyck, “The First German Treatise on Homiletics: Erasmus Sacer’s Pastorale and Classical Rhetoric,” in Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric, ed. James J. Murphy, 221-37 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Donald Lemen Clark, Milton at
The rhetorical knowledge gained from the study of the *Institutio oratoria* and other classical manuscripts was applied to various endeavors including art criticism, which resulted in the use of Latin words and phrases that were initially from the oratorical realm, such as invention (this term will be expanded upon later). As a result, there was “a linguistic component in visual taste.” Rensselaer Lee, in explaining the function of the connection between art and rhetoric, writes that Renaissance art critics did not produce new, or original, treatises that focused on the fundamentals of art, good taste, and the effective presentation of a work. Rather, in the humanist spirit, they turned to antique writings to formulate their theories; however, no treatise strictly on art survived. Critics instead discovered that art was discussed in relation to the written word, such as in Horace’s *Ars poetica* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, due to the fact that both of these artistic forms were perceived by the ancients as similar in their “fundamental nature, in content, and in purpose.” Such a close relationship is made evident from a famous simile of Horace in line 361 of the *Ars poetica*, “ut picutra poesis”—as is painting so is poetry. Another source to which art critics looked was Quintilian who in the tenth chapter of the twelfth book from the *Institutio oratoria* argues that both the pictorial and the textual center on the act of effectively communicating to an audience and should therefore be

---


30. Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 58. Suckale also comments on the connection between art and poetry by referencing Leon Battista Alberti’s *Della pittura* [On painting] in which Alberti advises painters to study in the same manner as poets. For additional information, see Suckale, “Bild der Kreuzabnahme,” 22; and Leon Battista Alberti, *Della pittura* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1950).
examined in a similar fashion. He explains in lines one and two that art, like the written word, comes in a variety of styles geared towards different persons:

The question of the “kind of style” to be adopted remains to be discussed. This was described in my original division of my subject as forming its third portion: for I promised that I would speak of the art, the artist and the work. But since oratory is the work both of rhetoric and of the orator, and since it has many forms, as I shall show, the art and the artist are involved in the consideration of all these forms. But they differ greatly from one another, and not merely in species, as statue differs from statue, picture from picture and speech from speech, but in genus as well, as, for example, Etruscan statues differ from Greek and Asiatic orators from Attic. But these different kinds of work, of which I speak, are not merely the product of different authors, but have each their own following of admirers, with the result that the perfect orator has not yet been found, a statement which perhaps may be extended to all arts, not merely because some qualities are more evident in some artists than in others, but because one single form will not satisfy all critics, a fact which is due in part to conditions of time or place, in part to the taste and ideals of individuals.  

As a result, Renaissance art critics began to compare art with the written word, such as the northern humanist Agricola.  

Echoing Quintilian in his *De inventione dialectica* from 1479, Agricola states that art, in a similar fashion to writing, relied on a creator to construct a product that would effectively convey a message to an audience:

As no one would call a painter or sculptor perfect who represented all the individual members of a body precisely, but was not up to combining them and composing them into an attitude that would represent the movements and actions of whatever image he wished: so dialecticians do not deserve the name if they are not up to arranging and putting in right order all the elements of creating belief.

---

31. Quintilian, *The Institutio oratoria*, 449, 451. The original Latin for lines one and two is as follows: “Superest ut dicam de genere orationis. Hie erat propositus a nobis in divisione prima locus tertius; nam ita promiseram me de arte, de artifice, de opere dicturum. Cum sit autem rhetorices atque oratoris opus oratio pluresque eius formae, sicut ostendam, in omnibus his et ars est et artifex. Plurimum tamen invicem differunt; nee solum specie, ut signum signo et tabula tabulae et actio actioni, sed genere ipso, ut Graecis Tuscanicae statuae, ut Asianus eloquens Attico. Suos autem haec operum genera, quae dico, ut auctores, sic etiam amatores habent; atque ideo non est perfectus orator ac nescio an ars ulla, non solum quia aliiuid in alio magis eminet, sed quod non una omnibus forma placuit, partim condicione vel temporum vel locorum, partim iudicium cuiusque atque proposito.” Quintilian, *The Institutio oratoria*, 448, 450.

32. Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 143; Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 114, 118.

Art in northern Europe during the fifteenth-century was thus perceived as a mute form of the spoken word, and for this reason, artists worked in an environment where their art was conceived in accordance with rhetorician rules and resultantly examined through an oratorical lens.\textsuperscript{34}

At the focus of these rhetorician rules resided invention, or \textit{inventio}, “a term that regularly included the choice of subject as well as general planning of the composition.”\textsuperscript{35} When applied to speech and writing, \textit{inventio} pertains to the importance of word choice and sentence structuring with the intention of conveying the proper meaning that would assist humanity in the search for Divine Truth; this required that the reading of texts, especially the Bible, be an attentive process in which the reader was to carefully scrutinize and search throughout the content for the hidden meaning.\textsuperscript{36} In regards to imagery, this function of \textit{inventio} resulted in the creation of elements that would assist the viewer in “reading” an artwork in order to more easily seek out its underlying

\begin{scriptsize}
\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{34} Suckale, “Bild der \textit{Kreuzabnahme},” 23; Baxandall, \textit{Giotto and the Orators}, 17.
\bibitem{35} Suckale, “Bild der \textit{Kreuzabnahme},” 26; Lee, “\textit{Ut Picutra Poesis},” 211.
\bibitem{36} Suckale, “Bild der \textit{Kreuzabnahme},” 26-7; Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 167-8. A great example is given by Saint Augustine, a scholar of rhetoric, who not only gave careful thought to each Biblical passage but permeated through the various levels of meaning, which is reflected in his \textit{De doctrina christiana}. He also argued that the study of rhetoric permitted a greater understanding of the scriptures and provided a better means by which to transmit Christian teachings. For more information, see Suckale, “Bild der \textit{Kreuzabnahme},” 26-7; Murphy, “Quintilian’s Influence,” 170; and Augustine, \textit{De doctrina christiana}, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
\end{thebibliography}
\end{scriptsize}
message. At the instruction of Horace, these elements were to be derived from subject matter and pictorial arrangements that came from traditional themes rather than newly created topics and designs. Subsequently, the Bible and other ancient writings supplied much of the material needed by artists to craft their works in such a fashion, and over time, knowledge of the scriptures and antique writings became quite crucial for superior invention. While portions of the twenty-first century population may find the combining of the biblical and the antique to be puzzling due to their apparent mutual exclusivity, this was certainly not the case in the mindset of the northern humanist. In contrast to Italians, who were primarily interested in uncovering and promoting their antique heritage, according to Ijsewijn, the main goal of northern humanists was to improve and reform the transmission and presentation of Christian theology through the study of classical texts, which were perceived as stated by Agricola in his *De inventione dialectica* to be far removed from error and thus moral examples that should be followed. He writes, “We must have regard for this [moral philosophy] first and foremost….By means of these [moral examples from the classical philosophers and poets] we make a step toward sacred literature, and we must direct our way of life to their teaching….The rest of the things that have been handed down have something more or less of error mixed into them.” Hence, as the northern humanists looked to classical manuscripts to


39. Translation from Ijsewijn, “The Coming of Humanism,” 223. The original Latin is as follows: “Huius prima nobis et praecipua habenda est ratio….Per haec gradus ad sacras literas faciendus est et ad illarum praeceptum dirigendus vitae nobis ordo….Reliqua omnia aliorum tradita plus minusve erroris tamen habent admixtum aliquid.” Agricola, *De inventione dialectica*, 194-5. The northern European humanists were neither the first nor the last to turn to classical writings for assistance in better conveying Christian principles. The apologists of the early church, such as Peter Abelard, Saint Anselm of Canterbury, and Saint Thomas Aquinas, looked to the orators of ancient Rome and Greece for direction.
improve the communication of Christian teachings, I would argue that northern artists could have drawn upon both biblical and antique texts for mechanisms that better aided the observer in finding the hidden meaning of an image.

Taking into account the obviously important role that rhetoric played within fifteenth-century art and education, it is possible that contemporary viewers could have connected the gesture of Quintilian to the expression represented in the Campin Group and van der Weyden paintings. In addition to the clear physical resemblance, the presence in northern Europe of rhetorical texts, including the *Institutio oratoria* in its *mutili* and complete forms, and of schools that promoted the study of humanism creates the possibility that theologians, scholars, artists, and educated, urban, lay Christians may have had knowledge of Quintilian, the *Institutio oratoria*, and other oratorical manuscripts and practices; this possibility is also strengthened by the role that the *Institutio oratoria* played in medieval and Renaissance education. Furthermore, the method of constructing and critically examining artworks through an oratorical lens was clearly a common method at the time of the Campin Group and van der Weyden; therefore, even if there was no conscious awareness of Quintilian, the presence of the “oratorical lens” constructs a habit of viewing that could have understood the hand expression as signifying speech. 40 Finally, the gesture possesses the “*inventio*” quality

40. I make this statement not to doubt my argument, for even though I have demonstrated that Quintilian’s writings were present in northern Europe during the time of the Campin Group and van der Weyden and that his teaching methods from the *Institutio oratoria* were instrumental in education, I cannot say with certainty if the patrons for whom these three paintings were created knew of or had studied Quintilian.
that was so essential for rhetoric. The hand expression is found in the *Institutio oratoria*, which meets the *inventio* requirement that artists look to the Bible or antique writings for their subject matter and compositional arrangements. Of course, this point is only speculative given that one cannot know if the Campin Group and van der Weyden looked to ancient texts to aid in the construction of their works; however, the possibility of these artists drawing from the *Institutio oratoria* is bolstered by the fact that Christ’s hand placement as well as his head and shoulder positioning resemble Quintilian’s subsequent directions after the description of the gesture.\(^{41}\) As I will show in the following chapters, the gesture also relates to the subject matter and general planning of the compositions by assisting the spectator in delving deeper into the meaning of the artworks, for hand expressions were intended by artists at this time to communicate abstract, theological teachings. Thus, the presence of an oratorical gesture seems logical as well as appropriate. In addition to these points, I will expand on the hand expression as a representation of speech, particularly in the context of the paintings themselves. The fact that a gesture of speech offers insight into the overall theology of the images is, in the end, the most plausible reason for connecting the hand expression under consideration with that of the rhetorician Quintilian.

---

\(^{41}\) I have examined the corpora of the Campin Group and van der Weyden and have yet to find a similar fusion of the antique and the biblical; however, this conclusion may very well change as I continue to research and become more acquainted with ancient writings, a subject area that is still fairly new to me.
CHAPTER 3

FUNCTION

In the following, I will consider preceding scholarship concerning the Eucharistic theme of the three paintings; a theme that fits well with a gesture associated with speech. Each work demonstrates the dual nature of Jesus Christ, and when examined in this light, I will show that Christ’s gesture of speech could be interpreted as signifying the theological doctrine of Christ as the physical incarnation of God, as the word of God made flesh.

In the *Virgin and Child in an Interior* (see fig. 1), the Child is lying upon the lap of Mary gazing to the viewer’s left. The pair is situated next to a hearth containing a small fire while behind them is a window looking out over a townscape. Scholars, such as Nash and Purtle, agree that the focus of this image is the bathing of Christ, which can be discerned from the water pitcher and basin resting on the table against the wall, the fire in the hearth, the cloth beneath the Child, and what can be interpreted as a towel hanging from a rack above the pitcher and basin. This understanding is based upon the presence of similar objects in other Campin Group paintings, such as the *Mérode Altarpiece* (see fig. 19) and the London *Virgin and Child in an Interior* (see fig. 20). In the former, a towel hangs from a rack next to a kettle that is situated within a niche. In the latter, a basin filled with water has been placed on the floor in front of a fire, and the Child rests upon a cloth.\(^1\) Returning to the St. Petersburg *Virgin and Child in an Interior,*

Nash believes that the bath has been completed since no water is being heated in the fireplace. Nash also argues that the cloth underneath Jesus serves as a shield for the Virgin’s dress who does not want to become soaked with the water that could still be clinging to the body of the Child. In addition, the positioning of Mary’s right hand strengthens the idea that the bath has already taken place for she could either be making certain that the fire is still emitting enough heat to keep the recently bathed Jesus comfortable or that her hand is warm before touching him. Moreover, her gesture could be understood in a metaphorical sense to be protecting Christ from the earthly dangers the fire symbolizes.

In conjunction with the domestic interpretation, the various royal attributes found throughout the work demonstrate that this is much more than a household interior; it is a scene depicting Mary, the embodiment and queen of the church, as well as the divinity of the Christ Child. The Virgin is seated upon several cushions, which was a sign of status at this time; Nash mentions how a similar positioning can be found in a miniature that depicts the ladies in the court of Queen Isabel of France (see fig. 21). Mary’s unbound hair gently falls beside her shoulders and down her back further signifying her as queen and virgin. If such details are to go unnoticed by the viewer, though, one need only see Mary’s beautiful garments, which cascade to the floor, gathering in numerous drapery

---


folds. Two gold clasps hold her robe in place, and the pattern that can be found along the front opening of her blue dress is possibly animal fur, which further demonstrates her importance and the majestic character of the scene. Moreover, her jeweled head adornment could be perceived as a crown suggesting that she is the mother of God’s son and therefore of the Christian church.

Christ’s humanity and divinity are simultaneously emphasized when the act of bathing is more deeply considered. Bathing is a process that those of the flesh must perform, and the fact that he is physically clean illustrates his spiritual pureness and subsequently his holiness. Purtle also argues that bathing can be correlated to the cleansing of humankind from original sin.6

An additional way in which these two aspects of the Child are revealed is in his lack of clothing and body positioning. Jesus’ nudity and pose unveil that he is indeed human while the white cloth and Mary’s lap can be interpreted as components of the Eucharist. First, this fabric can be associated with the corporal that is used to present the host during mass while the Virgin’s flattened lap can be perceived as the altar. The altar reference comes from the presentation in the temple, as found in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, in which Christ is presented to God upon Mary’s lap and is recognized by Simeon and Anna as the messiah:

> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they [Mary and Joseph] brought him [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord…It had been revealed to him [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus…Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for

revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”…There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher….At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.  

In addition, scholars show that this connection stems from the sixth-century legend of the *Ara Coeli*, popularized in the thirteenth-century by Jacobus da Voragine, in which a vision of the Virgin and Christ Child was revealed to the Emperor Augustus. According to the legend, when Augustus witnessed this spectacle a voice cried out that Mary was the *Ara Coeli*, the altar of Heaven. Furthermore, Byzantine texts, such as the seventh-century *Sermo de Simeone et Anna XIV* by Pseudo-Methodius of Olympus, refer to the Virgin “as the living altar of the bread of life” for Christ was conceived in her womb.  

Second, the cloth can further symbolize Jesus’ burial shroud, thus alluding to the crucifixion and resurrection. His death may also be referenced through the unnatural way he lays on his mother’s lap, for one could purport that this positioning foreshadows the Pietà image in which Mary clings to the body of her dead son. Third, the Virgin is

---


11. Purtle, “Campin’s Madonnas in Interiors,” 177. Other fifteenth-century Northern Renaissance paintings in which the Christ Child is presented in such a way that his birth and death are simultaneously indicated include the following: Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, before 1432, The National Gallery, London (see fig. 20); Rogier van der Weyden, *St. Columba Altarpiece* (Center Panel), ca. 1455, Alte Pinakothek, Munich (see fig. 22); and Jan van Eyck, *Madonna and Child at the Fountain*, 1439, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp (see fig. 23).
additionally seen as the tabernacle, which holds the elements of the Eucharist, and the chalice due to her conceiving the Christ Child; as the tabernacle and chalice contain the body and blood of Jesus so too did Mary’s womb.\textsuperscript{12} Clearly, the Child is being offered to the viewer as a holy sacrifice, as an offering of salvation, just as the consecrated elements, the body and blood of Christ, are presented to the congregation in remembrance of the crucifixion and resurrection. The Christ Child is thus being shown as the divine son of God, as the incarnation of the Lord’s word.\textsuperscript{13} The idea is biblical.

For instance, the first chapter of the Gospel of John states,

\begin{quote}
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people….And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth….The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John also refers to Christ as the word of the Lord made flesh:

\begin{quote}
Jesus said to him [Thomas], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} Purtle, \textit{The Marian Paintings}, 100n8; Lane, \textit{Altar and Altarpiece}, 35.

\textsuperscript{13} Hand, Metzger, and Spronk, \textit{Prayers and Portraits}, 62.

\textsuperscript{14} John 1:1-4, 14, 17-18.

\textsuperscript{15} John 14:6-11.
Viewed in relation to these biblical references, the gesture performed by the Christ Child with his left hand functions to visually present a theological idea; a gesture of speech, of the mobilization of words to communicate and emphasize that he is God’s word incarnate. Moreover, he performs this hand expression in relation to Mary, the vehicle through which the word is made flesh and in whom the Holy Spirit was spoken into existence by the Angel Gabriel.

Recent scholarship has revealed that the Virgin and Child in an Interior may have been the right panel of a diptych, with the left panel being entitled Holy Trinity (see fig. 24).\textsuperscript{16} Holy Trinity depicts God the Father on a massive throne wearing billowing drapery and a jeweled crown. In His arms, He holds the body of the crucified Christ whose wounds are on display for the viewer. Above Jesus’ left shoulder is a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The carved figure on the proper right arm of the throne is a woman who is intended to personify the church; she holds a cross and the Eucharistic objects of the ciborium and wafer. The proper left arm carving is a female who is meant to signify Judaism by way of the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments and the broken staff in her hands.\textsuperscript{17} Atop the arms of the throne are images of a pelican and a

\textsuperscript{16} Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Holy Trinity, 1430s, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

\textsuperscript{17} Hand, Metzger, and Spronk, Prayers and Portraits, 62. The depiction of these two female figures on either side of the Trinity is medieval in origin. The woman to the proper right is symbolic of Christianity’s victory through Christ’s resurrection, which will be remembered through the Eucharist, hence the depiction of the ciborium and wafer. The Ten Commandments and the broken staff shown with the proper left figure are intended to represent the Synagogue and thus Israel, the opposition of the Christian church. When these symbols are coupled with the female figure, they represent the Synagogue as defeated. The Jews no longer have their covenant with God due to them rejecting and crucifying Christ. Therefore, they have not only lost the Ten Commandments, but the staff, which in the hands of Moses led them out of Egypt and bondage, is now broken. Statues of the defeated Synagogue were common in medieval churches and were intended to spread contempt for the Jewish community. Isidore of Seville’s De fide catholica ex veteri et novo testamento contra iudeos was a popular text that perpetuated such imagery; see Isidore of Seville, De fide catholica ex veteri et novo testamento contra iudeos, vol. 83 of Patrologia Cursus Completus Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844-
lioness with her cubs, animals popularized in medieval bestiaries, such as the thirteenth-century *Bestiaire divin* by Guillaume le Clerc. The pelican, a well-known symbol for Christ as the redeemer, is shown pecking her chest, drawing blood that she will give to her offspring for sustenance. The figure of the lioness makes reference to the legendary belief that lion cubs were born not alive but dead and that after three days they were brought to life by their mother’s roar. Such imagery is intended to symbolize the Eucharist and the resurrection respectively. The pelican voluntarily sheds her blood to save her young from hunger just as Christ willingly surrendered his life so that humanity may not spiritually starve; moreover, the lioness is able to breathe life back into her offspring after three days just as Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, resurrected on the third day, subsequently providing eternal life for humankind.

When the *Virgin and Child in an Interior* is examined as a companion to the Holy Trinity, the idea that the Christ Child’s gesture represents speech, thus referencing him as the word of God made flesh, is even more theologically consistent. The Trinity illustrates that the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit are one in the same; therefore, as the Child in the right panel performs a gesture of speech, indicating the animation of words, and

---


glances to the left panel of the Trinity, the artwork as a whole is communicating to the spectator that Christ is the incarnation of the Lord’s word (see fig. 26).

The *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* (see fig. 7) strongly parallels the *Virgin and Child in an Interior*. Once more, the Christ Child is situated on Mary’s lap in front of a hearth whose flames are barely visible above a wicker firescreen. The Virgin sits upon a bench that is adorned with two lions and covered with a green blanket and red pillow. A window opens to an urban landscape in which a church is the dominant building. As in the former, this artwork centers on a maternal task; however, here the act is nursing. Mary, who has been reading, pauses to feed the Child. As she holds him in her arms, Jesus gazes towards the viewer.

While the familial nature of this work cannot be denied, royal imagery is once again present, which leads the spectator to consider the painting as more than just a domestic interior. Mary’s hair falls freely down her shoulders and back while her clothing is decorated with intricate beading, gold, and animal fur; upon closer examination, one notices the jeweled accents of her book and the beautiful ring on her right hand. The bench itself is meant to symbolize the Throne of Solomon, which is indicated by the two brass lions. 19 King Solomon’s throne is described as follows:

The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps. The top of the throne was rounded in the back, and on each side of the seat were arm rests and two lions standing beside the arm rests, while twelve lions were standing, one on each end of a step on the six steps. Nothing like it was ever made in any kingdom. 20


20. 1 Kings 10:18-20. The description of Solomon’s throne can also be found in 2 Chron. 9:17-19.
Scholars have explained that the association between the Virgin and Child and King Solomon is based upon the fourteenth-century text *Speculum humanae salvationis*. Lines fifty-three through fifty-eight in the ninth chapter are as follows:

Thronus veri Salomonis est Beatissima Virgo Maria,  
In quo residebat Jesus Christus, vera Sophia.  
Thronus iste factus erat de nobilissimo thesauro,  
De ebore videlicet candido et fulvo nimis auro.  
Ebur propter sui candorem et frigiditatem  
Designat virginalem munditiam et castitatem…

The throne of the true Solomon is the Most Blessed Virgin Mary,  
In which sat Jesus Christ, the true Wisdom.  
That throne had been made of the most noble treasure,  
To wit dazzling white ivory and exceeding ruddy gold.  
Ivory, by reason of its intrinsic candescence and coolness  
Represents virgin purity and chastity…

The Virgin and Christ Child are hence prefigured by the Throne of Solomon and King Solomon respectively. Another sign of Mary’s regality is possibly the firescreen, which some scholars argue is symbolic for a halo. In addition, the floor is constructed of beautifully colored stone that was considered quite valuable at the time. If such iconography is to be overlooked, though, the image of a church in the background certainly emphasizes that this painting is of the majestic Holy Family, for it symbolizes

---


Jesus’ role as savior and his earthly connection with humankind.\textsuperscript{26} This interpretation may also be relevant to the \textit{Virgin and Child in an Interior} for the window in the background very likely opens to a view of a church.

As with the previous work, the symbolism of the Eucharist is also present in this painting for Christ’s humanity and divinity are concurrently demonstrated. The Child’s nudity and pose as well as his nursing reveal that he is human while his placement upon a white cloth resting in the Virgin’s lap indicates that he is being presented to the observer as a sacrificial offering of salvation. The circumcision is also suggested through the exposure of his genitals, which is of importance for it was the first shedding of Jesus’ blood and prefigures the crucifixion as well as the Eucharist; in the former, Christ sacrifices his blood in order to redeem humankind while in the latter this sacrifice is reenacted. As a result, there is an allusion in this imagery to the consecrated elements of the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus.\textsuperscript{27} Such an understanding can be applied to the \textit{Virgin and Child in an Interior} in which the genitals are also revealed.

Mary’s act of nursing additionally indicates Christ’s role as savior. According to Williamson, the Virgin’s breast milk and the Child’s blood were originally perceived as the same substance and sustenance. In medieval physiology, the blood in the mother’s womb created the body of the child, and when the infant was born, the blood from the

\textsuperscript{26} Craig Harbison, “Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting,” \textit{The Art Bulletin} 66, no. 4 (December 1984): 591-3.

\textsuperscript{27} Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 305. The genitals of the Christ Child were actually covered in a nineteenth-century restoration. This alteration was discovered when the National Gallery cleaned the artwork in the early 1990s. See Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 304-5.
womb would be converted into milk. Therefore, Mary’s milk nourishes life in the same manner as Jesus’ blood sustains life and salvation for the Christian.

Another Eucharistic element is the open book, very likely a Book of Hours, which rests beside the Virgin and Child. Since it is placed upon a white cloth in a similar fashion to Christ, the book can be interpreted as an offering of salvation; in addition, the fact that it is a written account of Christ’s life makes such a proposition even more likely. The presence of the text and its adjacent location to Jesus also reiterate that the Child is the word of God made flesh. One may recall the first and fourteenth chapters of the Gospel of John, which discuss the incarnation of the Lord’s word through the birth of Christ. An additional observation concerning the book is that the upturned page signifies the Holy Spirit coming into the world. This same motif is also found in the Campin Group’s aforementioned Mérode Altarpiece as well as in the Campin Group’s Brussels Annunciation (see fig. 27). As Gabriel seeks Mary’s attention, the Holy Spirit passes through the window and pierces the pages of the book resting on the table. The book that is held by the Virgin in the Brussels Annunciation is additionally animated with a page

---

28. Châtelet, Robert Campin, 118; Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 303, 306. Another facet of this nursing scene is the Virgin’s role as intercessor, which is indicated by the exposure of her breast and the unnatural manner in which she holds it; she would be more comfortable if she held her right breast with her left rather than her right hand. Williamson believes that the intention of this scene is not to realistically depict the act of breast feeding but to illustrate Mary offering her milk to the viewer as another path to deliverance for she has the power to intercede on behalf of sinners and to ask Christ for their forgiveness. For more information, see Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 308; and Purtle, “Campin’s Madonnas in Interiors,” 175.


32. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, Annunciation, 1420s, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.
folding back onto her hand. According to Shirley N. Blum, the text is of the Old Testament and the disturbance of the pages symbolizes the nullification of the old law through the birth of the new. Moreover, the Holy Spirit passing through the pages en route to Mary signifies that the Old Testament prophecy of the incarnation has been fulfilled. Therefore, as the “active pages” in the annunciation images indicate the existence of the Holy Spirit among humankind so too does the upturned page in the *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen.*

Expanding upon this idea, Williamson suggests that the flames behind Mary’s head additionally allude to the physical presence of the Lord on Earth. Interestingly, the fire’s brightness pales in comparison to that of the light coming through the window, which can also be seen in the *Virgin and Child in an Interior.* Perhaps the strong, natural light symbolizes the incarnation and its promise of deliverance; this is referenced in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus from the third chapter of the Gospel of John, which reads,

> Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do

---

33. While the presence of the Holy Spirit is implied in both paintings, it is certainly more obvious in the *Mérode Altarpiece* for it is indicated by a white figure holding a cross.


37. Purtle, “Campin’s Madonnas in Interiors,” 175, 177.
what is true come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.\textsuperscript{38}

Thus, the light shining through the window overpowers the flames of the fire for it is emanating from the Lord whose presence on Earth will bring the world out of darkness. This same motif is also presented in the \textit{Mérode Altarpiece} and the Brussels \textit{Annunciation}. The flames of the candles located on the tables and in the wall sconces along with the fires in the hearths have been extinguished by the entrance of the Holy Spirit whose “flame will…be kindled” within Mary.\textsuperscript{39} In the Campin Group’s Dijon \textit{Nativity} (see fig. 28), emphasis is placed upon the rising sun, which signifies the dawning of new days due to the birth of a new light on Earth.\textsuperscript{40} This natural light overpowers the flame of the candle held by Joseph once again symbolizing that God’s light outshines man-made sources of illumination.\textsuperscript{41} Light also emanates from the Christ Child referencing the above mentioned scriptural passage: “that the light has come into the world.”\textsuperscript{42}

The most noticeable reference to the Eucharist, though, is the chalice placed on the cupboard to the proper left side of the Christ Child. Unfortunately, this item along with the strip running the length of the right hand side of the painting, which includes part of the Virgin’s left shoulder and a portion of the firescreen, is a later, eighteenth-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[38.] John 3:17-21.
\item[39.] Blum, \textit{Early Netherlandish Triptychs}, 9.
\item[40.] Attributed to the Campin Group, \textit{Nativity}, ca. 1420, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon; Purtle, “Campin’s Madonnas in Interiors,” 177.
\item[41.] Purtle, “Campin’s Madonnas in Interiors,” 177.
\item[42.] John 3:19.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
century addition;\textsuperscript{43} the joint is clearly visible in the image (see fig. 7). Art historians are uncertain if the added section is similar to the original composition; however, there is no evidence demonstrating that the restorer took creative liberties. Since the image of a chalice would be in keeping with the already mentioned Eucharistic elements, it may very well have been an original component of the piece, accordingly adding to the theme.\textsuperscript{44}

When considering each of the aforementioned facets of the \textit{Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen}, it is again consistent to consider the Christ Child’s gesture as one indicating speech. The Child’s hand expression, as in the \textit{Virgin and Child in an Interior}, further reinforces the transubstantive miracle of the Eucharist references and communicates to the observer that he is the word made flesh. Moreover, the gesture is once again performed in correlation to Mary.

The themes presented in the Campin Group’s \textit{Virgin and Child in an Interior} and the \textit{Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen} culminate in van der Weyden’s \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} (see fig. 9). This triptych visually communicates the theme of the Christian Bible in its entirety, the coming of salvation through the incarnation, by way of New Testament accounts and typological prefigurations in the Old Testament. Each panel has a main scene that is accompanied by depictions of saints along with New Testament vignettes within the border, Old Testament stories on the column capitals in the middle-

\textsuperscript{43} Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 304. Technical examinations have dated this section of the painting to being no earlier than the eighteenth-century due to the fact that Prussian blue pigment was found; this was first used in artistic compositions at the beginning of the eighteenth-century. See Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 304.

\textsuperscript{44} Williamson, “Liturgical Image,” 304. Another possible feature of the Eucharist subject matter is the cupboard, which I suggest can be interpreted as a private devotional altar. The body and blood of Christ are presented to the viewer by way of the chalice and the physical presence of Jesus just as the consecrated elements would have been placed upon the altar and offered to the congregation in a church. Since this section of the painting is not original to the composition, though, this statement cannot truly lend itself to the overall argument.
and backgrounds, and a hovering angel bearing the crown of life and an inscribed banderole.

In the left wing (see fig. 10), a scene similar to that of the nativity is shown. The nude Christ Child lies on Mary’s lap as she and Joseph pray. The room in which the figures are situated resembles a chapel due to the presence of Gothic arches and tracery. An ornate tapestry hangs in the background indicating the royal stature of the family. On either side of the tapestry are two black-colored columns while two white pillars are behind them. The capital of the darker column on the proper right contains an image of the death of Absalom and the proper left capital of the lighter-colored pillar illustrates the sacrifice of Isaac; such scenes are intended to prefigure the passion and the salvation respectively. The border of the Virgin’s beautiful white garment, which symbolizes her purity, has a gold inscription that reads, “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.’” This passage is from the Virgin’s song of praise, also known as the Magnificat, in which she exclaims to

45. Joseph’s actions have also been interpreted as sleeping; see Belting and Kruse, Die Erfindung des Gemäldes, 180.

46. de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 229. The death of Absalom prefigures the passion in that Absalom while hanging from an oak tree was stabbed by a spear just as Christ’s side was pierced while he was on the cross; see 2 Sam. 18:14; and John 19:31-37. The sacrifice of Isaac foreshadows the salvation in that Abraham, like God, was forced to give up his only son. The Lord, seeing that Abraham feared and believed in Him, was merciful and let Isaac live. In a similar fashion, God spared humanity by way of the salvation that was granted through Christ’s sacrifice; however, as with Abraham, deliverance could only be given to those who had faith in the Lord; see Gen. 22:1-19.

47. Luke 1:46-48; de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230. In the Catholic faith, Mary’s purity is believed to have originated at the moment of her conception within the womb of her mother, Anne. This event is known as the Immaculate Conception. This phrase is often mistakenly ascribed to simply the conception of Christ; however, it was through the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception that permitted the Holy Spirit to conceive Christ in her womb. See Peter John Cameron, “What Mary’s Immaculate Conception Means to Us,” in The Catholic Answer Book of Mary, ed. Peter M. J. Stravinskas (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2000), 17.
her sister Elizabeth the happiness she feels after God’s grace had been bestowed upon her during the annunciation. Above the Holy Family floats an angel holding the crown of life and a banderole that reads, “This woman endured more than any in the world and is without blemish; she shall receive the crown of life.” This inscription has been identified as an adaptation from the first chapter of James, which states, “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” This biblical quotation alludes to the promise of eternal life for those who believe in the incarnation and heed the word of God. The border surrounding this scene depicts Saint Peter who holds a key as well as Luke the Evangelist who is pictured with a scroll and an ox. The small vignettes represent some of the joys of the Virgin as well as events from the nativity. Beginning at the top on the proper right and moving counter clockwise, the images are as follows: the annunciation, the visitation, the nativity, the adoration of the shepherds, the adoration of the magi, and the presentation in the temple.


49. James 1:12; de Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden*, 229.

50. Saint Peter is usually considered to be the first bishop of Rome; therefore, he is pictured with one or two keys symbolizing his position as the foundation of the Christian church. The scroll in Luke the Evangelist’s hands signifies his gospel. He is also sometimes associated with the ox, which is one of the four beasts of the Apocalypse; the ox is also one of the four living creatures described in the vision of the chariot as found in the first chapter of Ezekiel. See Margaret E. Tabor, *The Saints in Art* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1969), 72, 161; Rev. 4:6-7; and Ezek. 1:4-10.

51. de Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden*, 229-30. Originally, there were five joys of the Virgin; however, this number was changed to seven in order to match the seven sorrows of Mary. The complete list of the seven joys of Mary is the following: the annunciation, the visitation, the adoration of the magi, the finding of Jesus in the temple, the appearance of the risen Lord to the Virgin, the ascension, and the assumption and coronation of Mary. See Ann Ball, *Encyclopedia of Catholic Devotions and Practices* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2003), 522.
Amidst each of these biblical references that ultimately refer to the incarnation, the Christ Child is shown on a white cloth that is placed upon Mary’s lap. As in the two Campin Group artworks, the Child is presented as a sacrificial offering of salvation with the cloth alluding to the corporal and the burial shroud. Further Eucharist connotations include the Virgin symbolizing the tabernacle and chalice with her lap serving as the altar. One could also purport that the manner in which Jesus rests on Mary’s lap is reminiscent of him lying in the manger. Lane additionally makes such a suggestion and states that the Virgin’s lap can also reference Christ’s tomb.\textsuperscript{52} Taken as a whole, this panel demonstrates that Jesus is both human and divine. His nudity reveals his acceptance of his physical form while the Eucharistic iconography and inscriptions exemplify his role as savior and insinuate the forthcoming crucifixion and resurrection. The gesture he performs with his left hand adds to the visual portrayal of his divinity; by interpreting this hand expression as representing speech, the painting further communicates to the observer that the Child is indeed the word of God made flesh. Furthermore, as in the two Campin Group paintings, the gesture is carried out in relation to Mary.

The lamentation is the focus of the center panel (see fig. 29). The Virgin cradles her dead son in her arms while John the Evangelist and Joseph of Arimathea comfort her. The cross looms behind them silently referring to the events that have taken place. Mary is now clad in a red robe to indicate her state of suffering. The gold lettering of her hem reads, “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord…He has shown strength with his

\textsuperscript{52} Lane, \textit{Altar and Altarpiece}, 95.
arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”

This excerpt from the Virgin’s song of praise reveals the outcome for those who do not have faith in the incarnation and in the promise of deliverance through the forthcoming resurrection. The banderole above them proclaims, “This woman was the most faithful to Christ’s sacrifice; therefore, she shall receive the crown of life.”

This passage was more than likely inspired by the tenth verse from the second chapter of Revelations, which states, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

These verses foreshadow the suffering that both Jesus and the Virgin will endure during the crucifixion as well as the salvation they will receive afterwards. Rather than being situated in a chapel-like setting, the figures have been placed in an almost completely open-air environment with a view of a country landscape. The only indication of a structure is the column-supported roof over their heads with the proper right capital containing a scene of the expulsion; this is the first component of the salvation story for this was the moment of man’s fall from grace, thus prompting God to send his only son to save humanity from sin.

John the Evangelist and Matthew the Evangelist are the bottom left hand and right hand figures respectively; both are shown with a book in addition to their attributes of the eagle and

---

54. de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230.
55. Rev. 2:10; de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230.
56. de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230. Christ has often been identified as the second Adam for he was sent to annul Adam’s sinful act. There is also a parallel between the Virgin and Eve. Eve’s sin and disobedience brought about humanity’s death; however, this was changed through the life—the Immaculate Conception—and obedience that came from Mary. See Cameron, “Mary’s Immaculate Conception,” 17.
the face of a man.\textsuperscript{57} The border imagery displays several of the sorrows of Mary along with events from the passion. Starting at the top of the proper right side and moving counter clockwise, the depictions are the following: Christ saying farewell to his mother, Mary learning of her son’s arrest, the carrying of the cross, the raising of the cross, the crucifixion, and the entombment.\textsuperscript{58}

A unique feature of this panel is the lowered floor, which gives the impression that the rendered figures are intruding into the space of the viewer; this is emphasized by the Virgin’s robe and the feet of Jesus, which almost cross the picture plane. The manner in which Mary holds her son also provides a feeling of intrusion; his body is angled in such a way that causes a sense of personal infringement for the spectator. Due to this close proximity, the emotional undertone of the painting becomes quickly apparent, stressing to the observer the physical and emotional suffering that is required for humanity’s salvation. A similar sentiment is also echoed in the second chapter of Revelations that is alluded to in the previously mentioned banderole inscription. Another possible aspect of this pictorial device is for the viewer to be able to kiss Christ’s feet as a sign of gratitude for his sacrifice.\textsuperscript{59} The Eucharistic iconography foreshadowing Jesus’ role as savior in the left wing therefore comes to a partial fulfillment in the center panel. The spectator is witnessing the purpose of the Eucharist, to remember Jesus’ sacrifice; in

\textsuperscript{57} The books are intended to represent their gospels. The eagle and the face of a man are associated with John the Evangelist and Matthew the Evangelist respectively for they a part of the four beasts of the Apocalypse as well as the four living creatures of Ezekiel. The face of a man actually symbolizes Jesus Christ as human. See Tabor, \textit{The Saints in Art}, 72; Rev. 4:6-7; and Ezek. 1:4-10.

\textsuperscript{58} de Vos, \textit{Rogier van der Weyden}, 230. The seven sorrows of the Virgin are as follows: the presentation in the temple, the flight into Egypt, the loss of Jesus for three days, the way to Calvary, the crucifixion, the descent from the cross, and the entombment. See Ball, \textit{Catholic Devotions and Practices}, 525.

addition, the rite itself is depicted: Christ’s lifeless body rests on his mother’s lap, the altar, and is wrapped in the burial shroud, the corporal.  

In the right wing, Jesus’ final appearance to his mother before his ascension into Heaven is shown in the foreground (see fig. 30). Similar to the left panel, the figures are in a space that resembles a chapel only rather than the presence of a tapestry the room has a doorway that opens into the distance to a scene of the resurrection in the background (see fig. 12). As Christ steps out of his tomb, the guards tremble in fear at the sight of him. The three women who brought spices to anoint his body are also frightened, but an angel explains that they should not be afraid for their Lord has risen as promised. In the foreground, the Virgin, who has been reading from her devotional text, recognizes her son and raises her hands in an expression of praise for the resurrection has taken place. The blue garments she wears symbolize her faith and her royal stature as the mother of God’s son and as the queen of the church. The gold inscription of her hem repeats her song of praise that is found on her robes in the other two panels; it states, “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.’”  

This quote refers to the Virgin’s faith in Christ being the messiah, the incarnation of the Lord. Her faith is additionally emphasized in the bordering images. Beginning at the top on the proper right and moving counter clockwise, the scenes are as follows: the three holy women with the Virgin, the assumption, Pentecost, the announcement of Mary’s death, the death of the Virgin, and the coronation of Mary in

60. Lane, *Altar and Altarpiece*, 95.
Mark the Evangelist and Saint Paul are shown at the bottom of these vignettes respectively pictured with a winged lion and a sword; they each also hold a book. The angel above the Virgin carries a banderole that reads, “This woman endured and conquered all; to her was given the crown.” This statement is thought to allude to the sixth chapter of Revelations, which says, “I looked and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.” This passage suggests Jesus’ victory through his resurrection and his role as savior for humankind. In the middle ground are four columns, two of which have scenes of David and Goliath, Samson and the lion, and Samson opening the Gates of Gaza; these events prefigure Christ’s triumph over death and the opening of his tomb.

62. Mary’s faith is focused on in this panel for she is the model by which all humankind should follow. She was the first to receive the Lord’s “divine goodness” through the Immaculate Conception and was therefore the first “adopted child of God.” The events pictured in the border of this panel demonstrate her special status. See Romanus Cessario, “Mary at Nazareth and Cavalry,” in The Catholic Answer Book of Mary, ed. Peter M. J. Stravinskas (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2000), 26.

63. The book held by Mark the Evangelist represents his gospel while the winged lion refers to the four beasts of the Apocalypse and to the four living creatures of Ezekiel. The sword clasped in Saint Paul’s right hand alludes to his martyrdom in which he was beheaded, and the book held in his left hand references his biblical writings. See Tabor, The Saints in Art, 72, 158; Rev. 4:6-7; and Ezek. 1:4-10.

64. de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230.

65. Rev. 6:2; de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230.

66. de Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 230. David’s victory over Goliath prefigures Christ’s resurrection for David managed to succeed in what was believed to be the impossible, defeating the Philistines; Christ did the same in conquering death. For the account of David and Goliath, see 1 Sam. 17:1-58. In the story of Samson and the lion, Samson journeys to Timnah to find himself a wife. While he is there, a lion, which is the spirit of the Lord, charges him, and Samson rips the creature apart. Samson leaves, telling no one of what happened. He later returns to Timnah to marry, and it was at this time he came upon the lion’s carcass. He discovered in its body a swarm of bees and honey, which he took and ate. The initial reading of this passage is to focus on the violations of Samson: he married a foreigner and touched a corpse. A deeper meaning can be gleaned from Samson’s riddle that he posed to the guests at his wedding feast; he said, “Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.” While the words “strong” and “sweet” can symbolize “lion” and “honey”, they can also refer to the love of God for it is both incredibly sweet and strong. This story foreshadows the resurrection in that the love of the Lord is what delivers humankind from sin, and the reception of this love is only possible through the belief in the incarnation and the resurrection. See Judg. 14:1-20; and Dennis T. Olsen, “Book of Judges,” in New Interpreter’s Bible: Old Testament Survey, ed. Abingdon Press (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 840. When Samson was in Gaza, the Gazites, wanting to enact revenge upon him for all of the people he
The partial fulfillment of the Eucharistic iconography in the central panel, the depiction of the sacrifice, has now reached completion through the portrayal of Christ’s resurrection and forthcoming ascension—according to the visual theology of the image, he truly is the savior and the incarnation of the Lord. In conjunction with these two events, the proposed gesture of speech makes another appearance. As the hand expression in the left panel is performed in correlation to Mary and communicates to the spectator that Jesus is indeed the word of God made flesh so too does it function in a similar way in the right wing.

When reflecting upon the artwork as a whole, one can clearly see the journey of the viewer through each of the three panels: the left wing foreshadows the coming sacrifice and promise of deliverance; the center panel shows Christ surrendering his life in the crucifixion; and the right wing illustrates the resurrection and the ascension as well as alludes to the resulting salvation. From beginning to end, Christ performs the proposed gesture of speech, a visual device that only serves to strengthen the Eucharistic theme of the Miraflores Altarpiece.

 had slain, surrounded the city outside of its gates and waited until morning to kill him. As soon as Samson learned of their plot, he went to the gates and pulled the door and its posts out of the ground and then carried them to the hill that is in front of Hebron. This event prefigures the opening of Christ’s tomb for as the Philistines were taken by surprise at Samson’s departure so too were the Roman soldiers at Jesus’ resurrection. See Judg. 16:1-3; and Matt. 27:62-66, 28:1-15.
CHAPTER 4
DEVOTION

When considering the multiple occurrences of Christ’s unique gesture of speech in relation to the biblical notion of the word of God made flesh, in addition to examining the paintings themselves, another important feature needs to be given some thought: how the Eucharistic themes would have been mentally received by contemporary viewers. The answer lies in the realm of private devotion, and when the devotional facet of each image is analyzed, the association between Christ’s gesture and that of Quintilian becomes even more coherent.

Scholars have shown that private devotion was an integral part of life in the Netherlands during the fifteenth-century, which was due in part to the devotio moderna, an urban movement that was comprised of priests and lay members whose goal was to educate the lay population on religious matters. This group focused on the state of an individual’s spirit and stressed that each person perform inward “exercises,” meaning meditation through private devotion, which would promote the cleansing of his or her soul.¹ The founder of the movement Geert Grote, who lived from 1340 to 1384, discusses the importance of personal meditation in his A Treatise on Four Classes of Subjects Suitable for Meditation: a Sermon on the Lord’s Nativity. He writes, “If we

wish to rise with Him [Christ] and ascend into the heavens, three things are necessary by which, with God’s help, we may be conformed and made like unto the birth, life, and passion of Christ: preparation of the mind, expression with the mouth, and completion of the work.”

2 The preparation of the mind to which Grote is referring was often made possible through the use of images, whose function was to implicate the viewer and thus evoke a mental and an emotional response within him or her.³ Grote expands upon this concept in the following:

But when a person places himself imaginatively in the presence of Christ and his deeds, it is good at times to juxtapose something contrary to Christ’s presence that may serve to recall us mentally for a moment…For just as we endow Christ’s divinity with forms and figures, deeds and instruments, so we need not fear to ascribe to his humanity and human deeds in our minds things more and other than, though never anything contrary to, what has been written. Indeed we should dare bring it all into our own presence and time, as though we saw him and his deeds and heard him speaking….Nor is there any falsehood in them [images] so long as the mind does not cling to them but rather presumes them to be only something helpful and imagined—much as we take up wooden images to further our meditations, using them to render the deeds more present.⁴

Emotional scenes were typically employed for these would elicit the strongest reactions.⁵ For example, when an individual views a depiction of the Lamentation, such as the one in the central panel of the Miraflores Altarpiece (see fig. 29), the image of suffering and death causes he or she to respond accordingly: first, by meditating on the scene, that of the aftermath of the crucifixion; second, by considering the purpose of this event, that of

---


salvation for humanity and hence for his or herself; and third, by contemplating the effect of this event on Christ and Mary, that of physical and emotional pain, which causes the spectator to feel empathy and to want to seek forgiveness in God.

Although such emotional portrayals are excellent conduits for inspiring private devotion, other methods were utilized, specifically furnishing the various elements in the artwork with additional layers of meaning that would assist the observer in understanding the theological connotations of the image. While one could easily become preoccupied with determining what each item in the considered paintings symbolizes, it is perhaps more beneficial to focus on how the components structure the experience and the interpretation for the viewer. As discussed in the second chapter, gestures had such a function for they were intended to assist the spectator in meditating on the meaning of a work. In addition to hand expressions, there were other elements that were part of this visual repertoire of communicative devices, and these were usually derived from everyday objects, such as candles, brooms, wastebaskets, beds, herbs, flowers, and cloths.

Focusing on items from daily experience stemmed from the desire to easily inspire

---

6. Panofsky was the first to make a connection between pictorial themes and theological teachings, such as the firescreen actually serving as a halo in the Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen or Mary’s humilitas being denoted by her sitting close to the ground; this came to be known as disguised symbolism. See Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, 163. Art historians, though, have recently begun to question Panofsky’s theories and have proposed that while certain items carry specific connotations these would not have been hidden from the viewer who would have easily recognized the underlying meaning. Other scholars have purported that spectators would not have assigned any theological implications to the pictorial motifs due to the fact that they would not have had knowledge of the religious writings to which Panofsky was referring. Falkenburg, however, suggests that the general population did have an awareness of theological manuscripts, particularly devotional texts that were read by both lay and religious audiences, and observers would have accordingly recognized the theological implications of an image. Falkenburg also associates the presence of the devotio moderna with this ability of lay audiences to identify religious meaning in imagery; see Falkenburg, “Household of the Soul,” 2-4. For the current state of research concerning Panofsky’s theories, see Michael Ann Holly, Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Maryan W. Ainsworth, ed., Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads: a Critique of Current Methodologies (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Symposia, 2001).

devotion within the observer who could readily draw upon his or her own knowledge of these objects and apply to them an added level of significance; for instance, the depiction of a broom and a wastebasket signified the necessary cleansing of the soul that would permit the viewer to receive the Holy Spirit within his or her heart.  

Accompanying this visual reading would have been a devotional manuscript that would have instructed the spectator in terms of the connotation he or she should assign to the image and to its various components. The text also served as an additional source of inspiration by directing the individual in visualizing his or her contemplative thoughts that would in some way parallel the artwork. While the Bible was one option, other writings were employed, such as the fifteenth-century *devotio moderna* text *Hier Beghint een Devoet Boecskijn van der Bereydinghe ende Vercieringhe onser Inwendiger Woeninghen* [Here Begins a Devout Book on the Preparation and Decoration of the Dwelling of Our Heart] by Hendrik Mande, which guides the reader on how to make his or her soul a proper dwelling place for the Holy Spirit by comparing his or her spiritual home to the layout of a house and garden as well as explaining the items that should be found in such places and their respective significance. Tapestries representing events from Christ’s life ought to be placed on the walls so that his sufferings may be contemplated, and a lit candle should be present to symbolize one’s love for Jesus. To attract Christ into one’s heart, sweet-smelling herbs, which refer to the “sweet” love that unites one with God, must be growing in the garden.

---


Additional *devotio moderna* manuscripts from the fifteenth-century include *On the Life and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and Other Devotional Exercises* and *The Spiritual Ascents* by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, which provide daily meditative practices intended to elevate an individual’s spiritual state. The former outlines which aspect of Jesus’ life a person must contemplate each day of the week. For instance, on Monday, the reader is instructed to meditate on the incarnation, the beginning of the passion, and the holy angels. On Friday, one is told to speculate on the circumcision—the first sacrificial offering of Jesus—and the recognition of him as the messiah by Simeon and Anna. One is next directed to meditate on the flagellation along with the humiliation and suffering Christ experienced while being led to Calvary. Finally, one must recall the holy confessors and how they offered themselves to God by giving up their family and belongings. The passage then tells the individual to ask the holy confessors to intercede on his or her behalf and to grant him or her perseverance in seeking penance. In *The Spiritual Ascents*, a list of meditative steps is provided that must be completed on a daily basis to ensure spiritual piety. One should first envision him or herself in the natural, innocent state that the Lord had intended for humanity. In order to achieve this condition, the individual must suffer like Christ by depriving and ridding of his or her dignity; this can only be accomplished through the proper preparation of the heart and the asking of God’s support. The text then directs the reader to imagine a ladder to symbolize his or her spiritual journey:

> But before you begin to climb, erect a ladder in your heart, arrange a certain means of advancing, by which you may better climb out. And while still on the foot or some lower rung of the ladder, about to lose heart as you look to the top,

---

raise your arms on high to the Lord, who is leaning down over the highest rung of the ladder, and cry out: “Pull me up after you!”

Only upon completing this treacherous climb with the help of God will a person “become blessed and enjoy everlasting beatitude.”

Interestingly, scholars have equated this cognitive process of devotion to rhetoric in that both rely on the “craft of composition”—mentioned previously in the discussion of inventio in the second chapter—as well as on the recollection of “mnemonic items”—objects intended to aid in memory—to ensure that the proper meaning is conveyed. Mary Carruthers expands upon this association by examining the origination of cognitive practices within devotion, which she concludes to be monastic meditation, for it emphasizes the formation of mental images by way of reading and recalling holy texts. She believes that such a method can be correlated to “the compositional practices of Roman rhetoric,” specifically inventio for monastic devotion centered on invention in regards to how a person was to construct his or her cognitive “pictures” about God and how he or she was to use these images for further contemplation. Rhetoric was thus a conduit that allowed a person to “see” his or her thoughts. The broom and wastebasket illustration from above is an excellent example with the tangible objects and their theological implication respectively serving as the mnemonic items and the crafted cognitive picture. As the spectator’s mind processed the simple image of the broom and


12. Ibid., 245-6.


15. Ibid., 3.
wastebasket and the function they possessed, he or she would apply an additional layer of meaning, the required cleansing of the soul that would allow the Holy Spirit to enter his or her heart, which would have been gleaned from the devotional text he or she was reading. Looking back to the original discussion of *inventio*, one recalls that its purpose as a compositional device was to assist an individual in delving deeper into the hidden connotation of either a text or an image; therefore, applying this term to private devotional practices and subsequently relating this meditative process to rhetoric is certainly appropriate.

Alongside the cognitive aspect of devotion, the function of the artwork is also rhetorical in nature for it “speaks” to the observer by visually reiterating the written text that is read in conjunction with viewing the image. The work of art therefore assumes a performance-like role by reenacting for the viewer the devotional manuscript in his or her hands.  

Given the existence of the *devotio moderna* during the time of the Campin Group and van der Weyden, several art historians have applied the concepts of this faction when interpreting these artists’ works; therefore, the considered artworks and the way in which their Eucharistic themes would have been mentally received by the spectator should be examined in a devotional context. Accordingly, I propose that Christ’s gesture of speech aids in structuring the images’ Eucharistic interpretation and experience for the

---

16. Devotional images of the fifteenth-century were certainly not the first to visually communicate a written text. According to Hans Belting, icons beginning in the eleventh- and twelfth-centuries were created as visual repetitions of liturgical writings. For example, Mary’s lamentation for Christ would be sung by the choir to an icon that depicted her as the grieving mother. As the congregation gazed at the mournful image and listened to the choir’s recitation, the Virgin’s lamentation would be visually communicated. For more information, see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 261-2.

observer for it assists the “silent” medium of painting in “speaking” to the viewer. As the spectator gazed at the image, he or she would have been reading the word of God from a devotional text. During this process, the observer would have seen the depicted Christ perform this gesture of speech, which would not only have served as a visual reiteration of the Lord’s word that the viewer would have been holding in his or her hands but would also have acted as a reminder that Jesus was the physical embodiment of the word of God. In conjunction with the “speaking” facet of the paintings, the rhetorical nature of the cognitive process by which the Eucharistic themes and the elements that structure them would have been interpreted certainly strengthens the probable association between Quintilian’s gesture of speech and the hand expression of the Campin Group and van der Weyden.

While the devotional aspect of the artworks makes connecting the considered hand expression with speech even more plausible, it also creates the problem of how the spectator would have known to recognize this gesture in such a manner. Even though one cannot say with certainty if this gesture is mentioned in devotional texts, the fact that throughout the Bible God communicates to humankind by way of the hand must be taken into account. John Bulwer in his study on the language of the hand and on rhetoric writes,

This natural language of the hand as it had the happiness to escape the curse at the confusion of Babel, so it hath since been sanctified and made a holy language by the expressions of our Savior’s hands whose gestures have given a sacred allowance to the natural significations of ours. And God speaks to us by the signs of his hand…when he works wonders which are the proper signs of his hand.\textsuperscript{18}

For instance, Psalm 139 states,

O Lord, you have searched me and known me….Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in She'ol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.19

Thus, God tells an individual which path he or she needs to follow in life by guiding him or her with His hands. Another example can be found in Psalm 18, which reads, “You [God] have given me the shield of your salvation, and your right hand has supported me; your help has made me great.”20 The Lord hence brings deliverance to humanity through His hands. In the twenty sixth chapter of Isaiah, God uses His hands to convey His wrath: “O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them.”21 Jesus also employs his hands as a means to communicate the teachings of God by creating miracles, such as curing the sick and lame. In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Christ heals a leper:

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.22

Jesus additionally cures two blind men in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord,

19. Ps. 139:1, 7-12.
20. Ps. 18:35.
Son of David!” Jesus stood still and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.\(^{23}\)

Therefore, from reading the Bible, the observer would have had knowledge of God and of Christ employing their hands to communicate with humankind. For this reason, as well as all the norms and practices I have already discussed, viewers possessed a habit of mind, whether conscious or not, that would have associated the considered gesture with the act of speech and therefore as a visual sign for the biblical notion that Christ was the word of God made flesh.

\(^{23}\) Matt. 20:29-34.
CONCLUSION

The use of gestures within art certainly adds an additional level of meaning that would otherwise not be possible. Whether communicating emotions or abstract, theological teachings, hand expressions are clearly conduits that allow the viewer to transcend beyond the tangible nature of the painting into a realm of personal reflection and meditation. For this reason, I argue that the gesture employed by Christ in the three considered works of the Robert Campin Group and Rogier van der Weyden possesses such a function even though this hand expression does not resemble the more traditional motifs found in religious imagery but rather is similar in appearance and in meaning to Quintilian’s oratorical gesture of speech.

When understood as a gesture of speech, Christ’s hand expression transforms into a symbolic representation of the word of God made flesh, which is consistent with, and offers insight on, the already established Eucharistic themes of the paintings. In addition, his gesture of speech serves to structure the images’ Eucharistic interpretation and experience for the spectator by assisting the “silent” medium of painting in “speaking” to the observer, thus causing the images to assume a rhetorical function. Moreover, the manner in which these Eucharistic themes and the elements that structure them would have been mentally received by contemporary viewers, meditation through private devotion, is also rhetorical in nature. Therefore, connecting Christ’s hand expression with Quintilian’s oratorical gesture of speech is certainly appropriate.

The possibility of contemporary spectators assigning a meaning of speech to Christ’s hand expression is strong. Quintilian’s manuscripts along with other rhetorical
writings and practices were studied in northern Europe during the fifteenth century. In addition, such studies resulted in rhetoric playing a role in art production and criticism causing the pictorial and the textual to be perceived as interrelated. Accordingly, a habit of mind was constructed that understood art to be a mute form of the spoken word, which relates to the aforementioned devotional function that these artworks possessed. When all of these points are considered, the presence of an oratorical gesture within the three considered paintings is logical as well as appropriate for assigning such a meaning to the Campin Group and van der Weyden’s hand expression would certainly add to their artworks’ roles of communicating to the observer the story and purpose of the incarnation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Boskoff, Priscilla S. “Quintilian in the Late Middle Ages.” *Speculum* 27, no. 1 (January 1952): 71-8.


Figure 1. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, 1430s. Oil on panel, 34.3 x 24.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. 
Figure 2. *Enthroned Madonna and Child*, icon, 13th century. Tempera on panel, 131.1 x 76.8 cm. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 3. Theophanes the Greek and Workshop, *Virgin of the Gift*, Recto of a Double Face Icon, 1392. Tempera on wood. The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Figure 4. *Enthroned Madonna and Child*, Icon (Detail), 13th century. Tempera on panel, 131.1 x 76.8 cm. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 

Figure 5. Theophanes the Greek and Workshop, *Virgin of the Gift*, Recto of a Double Face Icon (Detail), 1392. Tempera on wood. The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. 
Figure 6. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Virgin and Child in an Interior* (Detail), 1430s. Oil on panel, 34.3 x 24.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Figure 7. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen*, ca. 1440. Oil with egg tempera on oak with walnut additions, 63.4 x 48.5 cm. The National Gallery, London.

Figure 8. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* (Detail), ca. 1440. Oil with egg tempera on oak with walnut additions, 63.4 x 48.5 cm. The National Gallery, London.

Figure 9. Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece*, 1445. Oil on oak panel, 71 x 43 cm (each panel). Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
Figure 10. Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece* (Left Panel), 1445. Oil on oak panel, 71 x 43 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.  
Figure 11. Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece* (Detail, Left Panel), 1445. Oil on oak panel, 71 x 43 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. 

Figure 12. Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece* (Detail, Right Panel), 1445. Oil on oak panel, 71 x 43 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. 
Figure 13. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Werl Altarpiece* (Left Panel), 1438. Oil on panel, 101 x 47 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 15. Sandro Botticelli, *A Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts*, ca. 1484. Fresco transferred to canvas, 238 x 284 cm. Musée de Louvre, Paris. 
Figure 16. Fra Angelico, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, ca. 1440-1. Fresco, 184 x 167 cm. Convento di San Marco, Florence.

Figure 17. *Augustus of Primaporta*, 20 BC. Marble copy of a bronze original, 2.04 m. Vatican Museums, Rome.

Figure 18. Acclamatio Scene from the Column of Trajan: Welcoming Sacrifice in Trajan’s Honor (Scene LXXXV), AD 112. Marble, 39 m (height of entire column). Forum of Trajan, Rome.

Figure 19. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Mérode Altarpiece* (Center Panel), ca. 1425-30. Oil on oak, 64.1 x 63.2 cm. The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 20. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, before 1432. Oil on oak, 18.7 x 11.6 cm. The National Gallery, London.

Figure 21. Attributed to the Master of the Cité des Dames, *Detail of a Presentation Miniature with Christine de Pisan Presenting Her Book to Queen Isabeau of Bavaria*, MS Harley 4431, vol. 1, fol. 3, ca. 1410-4. Illumination, 365 x 285 mm (each page). The British Library, London.

Figure 22. Rogier van der Weyden, *St. Columba Altarpiece* (Center Panel), ca. 1455. Oil on oak panel, 139.5 x 152.9 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
Figure 23. Jan van Eyck, *Madonna and Child at the Fountain*, 1439. Oil on wood, 19 x 12 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

Figure 24. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Holy Trinity*, 1430s. Oil on panel, 34.3 x 24.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.  
Figure 25. Ecclesia and Synagoga, double portal, south entrance, ca. 1230. Strasbourg Cathedral, Strasbourg.

Source: King’s University College at the University of Western Ontario, “Ecclesia and Synagoga,” Centre for Catholic-Jewish Learning, http://www.kings.uwo.ca/ccjl/academic_resources/educators_catechists/catechetical_material/ecclesia/ (accessed March 4, 2010).
Figure 26. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Holy Trinity and Virgin and Child in an Interior* (as a diptych), 1430s. Oil on panel, 34.3 x 24.5 cm (each panel). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Figure 27. Attributed to the Robert Campin Group, *Annunciation*, 1420s. Tempera on oak, 61 x 63.7 cm. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. 

Figure 28. Attributed to the Campin Group, *Nativity*, ca. 1420. Oil on wood, 87 x 70 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon.

Figure 29. Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece* (Center Panel), 1445. Oil on oak panel, 71 x 43 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

Figure 30. Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece* (Right Panel), 1445. Oil on oak panel, 71 x 43 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.