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Visual culture

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In the later Middle Ages visual culture – and access to it – was an expensive business. The end of the period witnessed the rise of a flourishing culture of reproduction, with widely affordable images in woodcuts and printed books.¹ But the most eye-catching developments in the visual arts remained the preserve of those with significant means – royalty and the upper nobility. Spectacular complexes involving a fusion of the arts (architecture, sculpture, painting and stained glass) – such as Edward III's completion of St Stephen's Chapel at Westminster (1350–63) or the Beauchamp tomb and chapel at St Mary's, Warwick (1441–52) – evidently required resources far beyond the means of most landed families.

The gentry, however, certainly aspired to such projects. Their interests were the conventional ones of the period – devotional, commemorative or charitable concerns, decorative schemes for the places where they lived and worshipped, and visual programmes for education or amusement – differentiated from those promoted by the higher nobility in scale alone. The gentry's ability to exercise patronage may have been limited, but this did not necessitate compromising standards. After all, they felt themselves, on account of their ancestry, to belong essentially to the same social fabric as the peerage; and they recognised that one of the most effective ways of expressing this was through material possessions. The visual arts therefore played a part in providing the gentry with an identity. Several factors contributed to forge this construction, distinguishing it from developments abroad.

In England, unlike in some Continental countries, there existed strong suspicions of the value of visual creativity, which arguably inhibited the development of a system of artistic patronage based on mutual respect between artist and patron. Any discourse on the visual arts, permitting

assessments of the gentry's attitude to the visual arts and motivation for their artistic preferences, was limited; where it exists, it is often negative in character. Whilst pictures were traditionally recognised as useful for drawing the faithful closer to God and to educate the illiterate, imagery for its own sake, as in the sumptuous decoration of books or buildings, was often regarded as a dangerous diversion. The power of the eye, it was thought, had the potential to lead the beholder into temptation. Images were also mistrusted because they persuaded beholders to give to the Church, the more ornate the greater their authority.²

By the later fourteenth century these ideas had been given a coherent voice in arguments made by John Wyclif and his Lollard followers, with contemporaries considering that opposition to images was Lollardy's most conspicuous feature.³ The Biblical prohibition of graven images prompted Wyclif to argue that an image could lead people astray when 'undue delight was taken in its *beauty, expense or connection to external circumstances*'.⁴ Furthermore, there was the danger of mistaking the divinity of holy figures with the form of their pictorial representations, an error leading to idolatry. Most Lollards therefore avoided images and denied devotional practices associated with them, advocating the notion that expensive items, like sculptures, merely served to impede mankind's spiritual progress.

Although the Church condemned Lollardy, many knights and their followers were sympathetic, with consequences for artistic patronage.⁵ Whilst holding to the path of orthodoxy, the gentry were often drawn to the movement's puritanical aspects partly because they provided sanction for economic restraint. A reluctance to engage with images when deemed unnecessary is therefore a prominent feature of English patronage. For example, except for commissions from leading nobles and clergy, books made in England tend to be sparingly decorated, with few pictures. The gentry were also unable to support a culture of panel painting, such as developed in the Netherlands. The correspondence of the Pastons provides useful insights into this deep-rooted prejudice. Only infrequently are artistic projects mentioned, occasionally hinting at a reluctance to engage with them – as in Sir John's embarrassing delay in ordering a tomb for his father, unimaginable in the higher nobility.⁶

On the other hand, Lollardy also had positive artistic consequences. Ecclesiastics sought to counter the heresy's appeal by devising ever more opulent schemes of decoration to reinforce the attraction of orthodoxy for the laity. One reflection of this is the large number of decorated missals commissioned in England during the period between c. 1380 and c. 1430. This had repercussions for the gentry who imitated the clergy's lead. The

Lapworth Missal (1398), given by Thomas Ashby (d. 1443) to the parish church of Lapworth in Warwickshire, is probably an example of this.⁷ Its full-page Crucifixion miniature is close in style to illuminations in a yet more elaborate missal made for the London Carmelites in the 1390s.⁸ Though this magnificent volume was for use in a religious house, it features donor representations of a kneeling couple, identifiable as gentry from their dress.

Such lavish commissions may be understood as one manifestation of an aesthetic ideal upholding the beautiful as an expression of divine grace, advanced by St Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), the great Dominican. Later Dominicans continued to advocate it in their writings, largely because their order had been founded to eradicate heresy, and the principle provided tangible opposition to Lollard ideas. Since Dominicans frequently acted as spiritual advisers to prominent gentry the philosophy played a part in interpreting their visual experiences as well. By the later fifteenth century a secular equivalent to this line of argument had established itself in privileged society. The principle is articulated in Sir John Fortescue's *The Governance of England* (c. 1460–70), which describes the kinds of expenditure a king should make. These include: 'magnificence and liberality' ('necessarie ffor the worship off his reame'); new buildings; rich clothes; furs; jewels; and ornaments 'conuenient to his estate roiall'. Should a king not display himself in this manner, 'he lyved then not like his estate, but rather in miserie, and in more subgeccion than doth a *private person*'.⁹ Although Fortescue was concerned principally with perceptions of kingship, his theory of the social function of magnificence, stemming from notions of display at Continental courts, implies a kind of pre-ordained gradation of show and splendour, needed across the whole spectrum for the stability of the realm. Fortescue partly had in mind the national conflicts of the 1460s. From the gentry's point of view display was indispensable, but only when set within bounds.

One sphere in which this operated was in entertaining. Feasts provided opportunities for displaying expensive plate, the value of its metal being one means of emphasising a household's status. Bequeathing items of plate was a way of ensuring that all loved ones benefited from the estate of a deceased, so that even sets of smaller items, such as spoons, were divided to satisfy this purpose. Only occasionally are such items described in wills to indicate appreciation of their artistry. In the will of Elizabeth Poynings (1487) all her plate and 'other juelles' were bequeathed to her daughter to help secure a husband.¹⁰ Despite listing all items, few are described with decoration. One silver gilt cup was 'chased with plompes [plums]', and

another 'chased with flowres'. The list runs directly into precious items of devotional significance. Here the descriptions are more revealing. There was, for instance, an 'Agnus [Dei] with a baleys, iij saphires, iij perlys, with an jmage of Saint Antony apon it'; and 'a tablet with the Salutacion of Our Lady [Annunciation] and the iij Kingis of Collayn [three Magi]'.¹¹ These items were clearly of religious value; but this was potentially the case with all items of plate. For Elizabeth, they contributed to the promotion of her daughter's marriage, a sacrament. Because feasting was an aspect of religious celebration, they also served to honour God and His saints.¹²

Sumptuary legislation of this period also attempted matching ranks of society with forms of consumption. More extensive legislation was frequently attempted for personal appearance.¹³ The main consideration was that the dress of any particular social category should not surpass that worn by the category immediately above; all classes should be recognisable from their dress. Clothes were undoubtedly important to the gentry. An inventory (1484) of William Catesby, esquire, member of a Northamptonshire family who held office under Richard III, shows that much of his material wealth resided in his clothes; they are all listed at the beginning of the document.¹⁴ The first item was 'a long gowne of purple velvet' lined with sheepskin, followed by several further velvet gowns in black and purple, all expensively trimmed. Catesby was at the peak of his career when these garments were listed and would have been asserting his standing to its limits. In 1465 legislation had been introduced ordaining that knights below the rank of lord should wear neither cloth of gold, nor any cloth decorated with gold, nor with sable (an exclusive fur), nor any kind of double velvet. Nor could they dress in purple. Those below the rank of knight were forbidden, on pain of a sizeable fine, to wear patterned velvet, satin, damask or any silk stuff made in imitation of such fabric unless they were royal officials or had possessions worth more than £40 a year. In 1483 legislation attempted still greater restrictions, forbidding all subjects (except royalty) to wear cloth of gold or purple silk. Excepting esquires of the king, no one below the rank of knight was permitted to wear velvet, damask or satin in his or her gowns.

Sumptuary legislation was not new in Catesby's time. An intricate law of 1363 details a series of prohibitions on types of clothing for different classes, an early instance of gentlemen being treated on a par with esquires. Interestingly, the legislation permitted wealthy merchants to dress like esquires and gentlemen. It cannot have been very effective since the statute was repealed in 1364. No further attempt to legislate for apparel was made until the reign of Henry IV. In the interim, dress became so extravagant

that it often attracted unfavourable comment. 'The Parson's Tale', Chaucer's sermon on penitence and sin, includes a section on the 'superfluitee of clothyng', listing many excesses of late fourteenth-century fashion that made (according to the text) clothes so expensive, 'to the harm of the peple'.¹⁵ In 1402 the House of Commons instigated a petition to deal with the situation, advocating that only bannerets and above should be permitted to wear certain costly fabrics and great hanging sleeves. Chaucer's description of his Squire 'with sleeves longe and wyde' is clearly apposite in this context.

In describing the Squire, Chaucer mentions his proficiency in music, dancing and writing – well-documented skills for the nobility by c. 1400 – and adds that the Squire could also 'weel purtreye'.¹⁶ It has sometimes been assumed that this refers to some literary expertise in observation, but an alternative interpretation is that Chaucer meant that the Squire had learned to draw, an artistic skill. A sense that some gentry received training in basic draughtsmanship comes from a rough sketch of Thomas Froxmere and his wife (datable to c. 1484–98) with instructions for realising it in some unspecified memorial; the drawing is reasonably attributed to Froxmere himself.¹⁷

However, there is only limited evidence that the gentry were actively engaged in the practice of artistic creativity. An exception is the case of John Siferwas, one of the most prominent and best-connected illuminators in early fifteenth-century England. Manuscripts on which he worked may be identified today through his 'signatures', rare for artists during this period and suggestive in Siferwas's case of social confidence. In the most lavish manuscript he illuminated, the Sherborne Missal, he even included his personal coat-of-arms: 'azure, two bars gemelles, a chief of the last or, all within a bordure engrailed ermine'.¹⁸ Comparison of this with heraldry relating to the family in heraldic rolls suggests that the artist was a scion of a branch of the Siferwas family established in Buckinghamshire and Hampshire.¹⁹ In 1380 Siferwas appears in the register of William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester when, as a Dominican friar in their convent at Guildford, he was ordained acolyte in Farnham Castle. Later documents show him to have been a member of the Dominican house in London. With the London book industry located nearby (near St Paul's Cathedral), and also the King's Great Wardrobe, where artists were employed, it seems likely that Siferwas's artistic training was in this environment. Dominicans particularly promoted the use of pictorial material in furthering their aims. The decision to enter this order is therefore understandable for a son of the gentry showing aptitude in visual creativity. How such aptitude was identified at a formative age, however, is unclear.

One possibility is suggested by the connection with William of Wykeham, whose interests in education and visual creativity are well-documented.²⁰ Siferwas could not have attended Wykeham's College at Winchester (founded in 1382), but he may have benefited from Wykeham's educational schemes of the 1370s, qualifying for patronage as a junior member of his family. Wykeham treated artists who worked for him in ways uncharacteristically respectful, entertaining them alongside noble guests, and providing for their children's education. One beneficiary was the 'architect' William Wynford, probably the son of a manorial family in Somerset.²¹ Siferwas's artistic inclinations were perhaps first encouraged within this circle.

One of Siferwas's artistic activities may have been the illumination of books of hours, or 'primers' as they were called in England. Unlike the Psalter, the standard devotional book customarily receiving illumination in the fourteenth century, primers were generally smaller, with shorter, more focused texts. They were better suited to personal use and the rise of more private forms of devotion favoured by the gentry. Primers are commonly mentioned in wills, though the only decoration usually described in these entries is the bindings, their most visible element, where perceptions of value often also lay. The heiress Anne Harling (d. 1499), for example, left one primer to her son 'whiche kynge Edward [IV] gauffe me', perhaps with royal arms on its cover, and another to her god-daughter 'clasped w^t silver and gylte, for a remembraunce, to pray for me'.²² Pictorial decoration was integral to the main contents of books of hours. Given the likelihood that many among the gentry were unable to read Latin texts, it seems probable that pictures were crucial to the use of such volumes, stimulating devotional responses. One rare fourteenth-century survival, the Carew-Poyntz Hours, has an extensive and unique pictorial programme with many narrative scenes independent of the text.²³ The illumination is in various styles, suggesting several campaigns over a prolonged period. The earliest style, c. 1350, shows knowledge of contemporary work in France. A late fifteenth-century inscription apparently written by Elizabeth Poyntz mentions the name Carew, indicating that the book then belonged to the wife of Sir Edmund Carew. It seems likely that the manuscript, a valued item, was begun for the wife of Sir John Carew (d. c. 1363) and then passed down through the wives of his descendants. Iconographical choices reflect what may be surmised about the devotional interests of successive generations of Carews. Sir John, for instance, had been on campaigns in France and might have had the opportunity to develop Frenchified tastes reflected in the earliest work.

During the fifteenth century, however, whilst royalty and the upper nobility readily commissioned elaborate books of hours from English artists, others seldom followed their example. The main explanation for the paucity of surviving primers illuminated by English artists for the gentry lies in their expense; it was cheaper to import. More than 200 Flemish hours designed specifically for English use have survived, many made in Bruges during the first half of the century, and often revealing evidence of bulk production, the pictorial programmes being rather limited.²⁴ The English gentry, it seems, were more concerned with acquiring such books, which served to project their status, than with high standards of presentation. During the English occupation of northern France (1415–50), however, several distinguished French illuminators also produced hours for Englishmen.²⁵ Their clients were usually English knights serving in France who, perhaps through direct familiarity with French work, were more discriminating. One example is Sir John Fastolf, the celebrated soldier and leading figure of the gentry, who commissioned an artist temporarily active in English-occupied Rouen to illuminate a manuscript containing texts by Christine de Pisan.²⁶ The workshop of this particular artist, known as the Fastolf Master, illuminated a number of hours for English clients, including an ambitious volume for the Lincolnshire knight William Porter, probably before 1431.²⁷

Heraldry was another preoccupation of the gentry that generated artistic activity.²⁸ The Sherborne Missal includes coats of arms signifying those responsible for its patronage, their allies, and also a series of blazons reproducing in effect an extensive heraldic roll, including monarchs and members of the English nobility.²⁹ Heraldic display, involving series of shields, suggests the solidarity of the armigerous classes throughout their ranks. It appears in many contexts, from large glazing programmes to most categories of illuminated manuscript.³⁰ Since knights, esquires and gentlemen were all entitled to coats of arms, they aligned themselves visually with the higher social classes wherever displaying their arms. Women were equally versed in the significance of heraldry, as the will of Anne Harling indicates. Items are repeatedly identified exclusively through reference to the family 'scochen' or 'armys'.³¹ One example of Anne's patronage survives in the rebuilding and glazing of the church at East Harling (Norfolk). The glass, datable between the deaths of her first two husbands in 1462 and 1480, features figures of both husbands, dressed in military garb with heraldic trappings.³² Nearby is the elaborate monument to Anne's first husband, like so many tombs of this period, covered in shields from top to bottom.³³

The proliferation of heraldry that took place during this period meant that measures of control were soon felt necessary. In 1416 Henry V ordered that – with minor exceptions – only those with ancestral rights or by grant from someone with authority could now take arms.³⁴ But the chief purpose of the measure was to guard against the practice of any persons serving for the king devising arms for themselves, thus devaluing the entire system. This, of course, was intended to have social implications for those aspiring to gentry status, setting conditions for inclusion as perceived by the Crown. From then on heralds were required to register the arms of gentlemen in their provinces. In practice, however, many whose income justified such status were granted rights to arms in the fifteenth century, especially merchants (and their organisations).

The heralds who regulated this were themselves influential in promoting the development of heraldic display in artistic schemes. Sir William Bruges (d. 1450), the first Garter King of Arms, is a good example.³⁵ A representation of him kneeling before St George occurs in the book he had made to record portrayals and armorials of the original members of the Order of the Garter.³⁶ This book has been considered the prototype of several classes of heraldic manuscript developed later in the century. In St George's, Stamford, where Bruges was buried, he commissioned stained glass, including the life of St George, representations of himself and his family, and more representations of Garter knights, and his will reveals a painstaking attitude towards visual creativity.³⁷

Another notable manuscript where heraldic devices prominently feature is a Gospel Lectionary commissioned by John, Lord Lovell (d. 1408), significant also for its inclusion of a large miniature depicting Lovell being presented with a book by the artist, himself identified by an inscription as Siferwas.³⁸ Presentation scenes are uncommon in English art; generally they depict authors before their patrons. Since this is the only known example involving an artist, Siferwas's family origins help to explain its acceptability. The image is arranged in such a way that it suggests Siferwas's lower status in relation to Lovell, a baron; but the mere fact that the artist was permitted to portray himself suggests some kind of closer relationship, at the level of family ties, between artist and patron. This is emphasised by the portrait-like characterisation of the two figures, opening up the possibility that physiognomical accuracy is a factor here. The features Siferwas gave himself show the same Dominican who appears in profile in the Sherborne Missal. If these are indeed examples of portraiture based on life, they are unusual for this period. Outside royal circles, lifelike portraiture within England seems to have been negligible, perhaps

because few artists were trained to achieve it,³⁹ but this did not prevent Edward Grymston, esquire, of Suffolk, from being painted by a major artist, Petrus Christus, during a trade mission to the Continent in 1446, or the production c. 1478 of a triptych portraying Sir John Donne and his family.⁴⁰

The circumstances of Siferwas's miniature depicting himself and Lovell show it to have been painted after Lovell's death. Siferwas presumably executed it at his widow's request after Lovell bequeathed the book to Salisbury; she belonged to a confraternity in the Cathedral. Widows, obliged by circumstances, were often responsible for commissioning works of commemoration for their husbands. War in France and civil conflict resulted in many knights, esquires and gentlemen losing their lives before making appropriate arrangements. Of course, religious and family requirements and traditions compelled those of this class to make such arrangements; and many certainly did so, or expected to do so, during their lifetimes. Sir Henry Pierrepont, for instance, indicated in his will, made in 1489 a decade before his death, that he desired an alabaster tomb 'graven by the discessions of myne executors, *if I make it not in my lif daies*'.⁴¹ In the standardised brasses that some chose for their memorials, the part of the inscription mentioning date of death is sometimes left blank or completed later, indicating that the monuments were ordered before death.

But often this was not possible. The contract for the alabaster effigies of Ralph Greene, esquire, and his wife Katherine, on their monument at Lowick in Northamptonshire show that they were commissioned from sculptors in Chellaston (Derbyshire), close to the alabaster quarries, two years after Ralph's death in 1417.⁴² It was Katherine, with executors, who entered into the agreements and made the iconographical decisions stipulated in the contract. If this is representative, then women of Katherine's status were evidently skilled in negotiating and making artistic judgements. Several aspects of the development of funeral monuments may have been shaped by women's preoccupations. For instance, Katherine specifically requested that her own effigy and that of her husband should be shown holding hands, implying partnership between the two, abandoning older conventions implying the woman's subservience to her husband. By 1400 there were several variations on this theme, particularly in brass memorials.⁴³ At Little Shelford in Cambridgeshire brasses to two generations of Frevilles and their wives suggest, in an earlier pair (c. 1400), coy intimacy and, in a later pair, who turn to face each other, undisguised affection. The role of women in binding the family together perhaps also accounts for the appearance of children on gentry tombs. This type rarely occurs before the fifteenth century, but had become increasingly popular by c. 1500.⁴⁴

'Family' memorials for the gentry were probably prompted by the grand tombs made for the upper nobility, where family members are represented through 'weeper' figures.⁴⁵ But it would be misleading to imply that a clear and consistent distinction in tomb types existed between the gentry and their social superiors. Although brasses were the favoured medium for gentry memorials, there is one royal brass (Queen Anne Neville, d. 1485), and they were sometimes the preferred option for noble families over generations, as in case of the Cobhams. Their mausoleum in the collegiate church at Cobham in Kent is essentially one formed by a family belonging to the peerage. A collateral branch of the family, which by the fifteenth century had declined to gentry status, established another mausoleum at Lingfield in Surrey, with a further set of family brasses. But the most elaborate monument at Lingfield is the very grand alabaster tomb of Sir Reginald Cobham (d. 1446), who left instructions in his will specifying this material for the monument and its position in front of the high altar.⁴⁶ His widow followed these directions precisely. Reginald clearly wished to distinguish himself, the ostentatious display compensating for his immediate family's social decline. Alabaster tombs were more expensive than brasses, at least those made in English centres of production such as London and York. Ralph Greene's alabaster tomb cost £40; the near-contemporary brass of Sir Arnold Savage at Bobbing in Kent, with two figures and a canopy, cost £13 6s 8d.⁴⁷ Brasses also became increasingly affordable, broadening the market but decreasing the prestige in ordering them.⁴⁸

The concern gentry showed with positioning their tombs is as informative in assessing their visual alertness as their instructions for design and materials. Thomas Windsor, who held the manor at Stanwell (formerly Middlesex), requested in 1479 his memorial on the north side of the choir of the local parish church: 'afore the ymage of our lady wher the sepulture of our Lord stondith'.⁴⁹ He intended the tomb to double as an Easter sepulchre. John Baret made even more elaborate arrangements for his chantry and memorial in St Mary's in Bury St Edmunds, specifying burial 'before the ymage of oure Sauyours'.⁵⁰

Such instructions are, of course, closely dependent on the piety of those concerned; but unlike the piety of the primer, this is a facet of its public manifestation – the kind of display that essentially encourages prayers for the deceased as an adjunct of devotion associated with a pre-existing image. Baret's delight in the visual aspects of his faith is evident from several bequests. One was for a new painted altarpiece showing 'the story of the Magnificat (the Visitation)' explained with his own verses – he had in

mind a folding triptych. Another identifies a particular 'ymage of oure lady' by the name of its painter, Robert Pygot, evidence that personal artistic creativity was taken seriously by those of Baret's status.⁵¹

The fashion for strategically placed tombs and chantries often necessitated extensions to the parish churches the gentry considered their spiritual homes, where their rights and patronage were locally taken for granted. A rare surviving contract (1476), between Sir John Say and Robert Stowell, mason, gives an indication how this was arranged.⁵² Stowell was to extend an aisle of the church at Broxbourne (Hertfordshire) eastward, creating a new arch into the chancel, beneath which was to be a tomb-table. Proximity to the high altar, the focus of the spiritual life of the community, was clearly crucial. The work still exists, together with the brasses that were commissioned separately. An analogous arrangement survives at North Leigh (Oxfordshire), where Elizabeth, widow of Sir William Wilcote, received licence to found a chantry chapel in 1438.⁵³ She went to much trouble to secure a structure of the highest standards, including an intricate fan vault and elaborate mouldings, attributable to a leading mason, Richard Winchcombe.

Equally elaborate is the Easter sepulchre tomb surviving at Long Melford in Suffolk, an exceptionally well-documented church of the later fifteenth century, conceived to a large extent as a single entity, with important stained glass, brasses and other images.⁵⁴ Here the visual features and traditions of the church were so strong that after the Reformation one local gentleman recorded his recollections of them for posterity.⁵⁵ The Easter sepulchre tomb is that of John Clopton, the most generous of the local donors who contributed to the church and its decoration. Clopton was not nobly born, but a wealthy cloth merchant.⁵⁶ The evidence of his appointments, his associates and executors indicates, however, that in all key respects he behaved like, and was accepted as, country gentry. An insight into Clopton's piety and that of men like him comes from a series of thirty-two stanzas from two poems by John Lydgate, painted within his chantry.⁵⁷ One striking aspect of these verses is how they invoke the sense of sight in drawing spectators towards contemplation. 'Behold o man lefte up thyn eye & see/ what mortall payne I suffred for your trespase' speaks Jesus to fix the audience's attention on his suffering. Several other poems by Lydgate invoke images even more directly. One, for example, deals with indulgences to be gained from worshipping in front of a copy of a painting in Rome of the Virgin, claimed to be by St Luke.⁵⁸ One indication that verses offering 'explanations' for pictures held special attraction for the gentry comes from the same poem: Lydgate says that it was made for 'a gentylman'.

Lydgate's secular verse also contains many powerful visual elements that probably appealed to the same audience. These works lent themselves well to illustration. A manuscript of Lydgate's *Troy Book* in Manchester, illuminated in the 1440s, is especially sumptuous.⁵⁹ The narratives, which spill across the margins of the page very effectively, are set against landscapes capped with hill-top castles, very similar in effect to pages in the Sherborne Missal. Lydgate began writing the *Troy Book* for the Prince of Wales in 1413, so the possibility exists that Siferwas may have illuminated a lost copy that acted as a model for the later artist. The Manchester manuscript bears the arms of two gentry families from the West Country and features in gentry wills of 1492 and 1503. Exclusive manuscripts like this, however, were more likely to be made for aristocratic patrons. The only other substantial manuscript illuminated by the same artist was made for a major magnate, Lord Grey of Ruthen.⁶⁰ In other words, the gentry often followed the higher nobility in taste in illuminated manuscripts when resources permitted; otherwise they acquired books better suited to reading than to looking.

A similar argument applies to the most costly of all secular projects, domestic residences. Castles were traditionally the power-bases of the nobility. From the later fourteenth century, licences to 'crenellate' (build) castles were also granted to wealthy knights. Their experience of serving in France resulted in several features derived from near-contemporary castles on the Continent.⁶¹ Examples include Sir John Delamare's castle at Nunney (Somerset), begun in 1372, and Sir Edward Dalyngrigge's castle at Bodiam (Sussex), licenced in 1385 and built on a scale intended to rival that of the nobility.⁶² Its symmetrical plan, its setting and its heraldic decoration all contribute to present Dalyngrigge as a man to be reckoned with. The same is true of Fastolf's castle at Caister (Norfolk) begun in 1432. Here the surviving accounts give insights into Fastolf's conception of the structure as a fortified residence, lavishly decorated, but offering all the comforts of the day, such as extensive provision for large fireplaces. Worcester described it as a 'ryche juelle'.⁶³

These and other castles, built by former soldiers, naturally took account of military considerations in their planning.⁶⁴ But the fortified aspects of these mansions were subordinated to the comforts sought by the wealthy in old age, a trend followed in manors built by the lesser gentry. The most conspicuous aspect of this change was increasing emphasis on better fenestration, promoted by decreasing glass prices. For example, substantial bay windows were regularly included in the designs for the great hall, the focus of social activities such as feasting, to emphasise the area at the head of the

table. But even when larger windows became fashionable, panes continued to be removed when a building was not in use. An inventory of items left by the Pastons at Caister at the time that the duke of Norfolk took it over includes many '[removable] panes of glasse', several with heraldic decoration.⁶⁵ At Ockwells Manor in Berkshire, built by Sir John Norreys (d. 1467), the heraldic shields in the hall windows survive.⁶⁶ Fenestration in halls was also carefully designed to allow for interior decoration. At Wardour Castle, begun by Lord Lovell in 1393, the hall has a series of untransomed windows set high to allow for hangings below, a feature subsequently used in manors throughout the country.⁶⁷

Unfortunately, hangings of English provenance from this period rarely survive, and documentation provides limited information. Fastolf's inventory, however, lists many hangings; some also feature in an inventory drawn up by John Paston I in 1462.⁶⁸ Most of the items were probably versions of designs originally created for commercial purposes, purchased through merchants. Others were evidently acquired when Fastolf served in France, spending part of his career in Arras, a leading centre for tapestry production. Arras products were extremely costly and generally beyond the means of most gentry. One of Fastolf's hangings, representing the Siege of Falaise, a celebrated English victory, was possibly especially commissioned, an indication of the extent of his wealth. This is exceptional since surviving tapestries designed for English clients were made for noble or royal patrons.⁶⁹

From this survey of late medieval visual culture it should be clear that issues of identity and appearance were fundamental for the English gentry. However, it is doubtful that anything intrinsically distinguished their uses of the visual arts by comparison with those of their social superiors. Aspirations were generally curtailed by limited resources and position, not because gentry tastes were essentially different. When the means existed, as in the case of Fastolf, the gentry promoted themselves as the nobility did. When the opportunity arose, as during the English interventions in France, they commissioned works from fashionable Continental artists, as did members of the peerage; only the scale of commission implies any distinction.

This is not to say, however, that an element did not exist in some gentry resistant to lavish display, based on religious conviction and economics. Such restraint rarely touched the nobility. On the other hand, interest in Continental Humanism, which often informed the artistic interests of noble and ecclesiastical patrons in fifteenth-century England, is seldom reflected in the gentry's artistic inclinations. Occasionally evidence indicates the

gentry's direct involvement in artistic practice, as in the case of Siferwas. The gentry also evidently became more articulate in commissioning material goods, conveying a clearer sense of individual preferences.

In their conception of themselves, a key issue was to ensure that the gentry could never be confused with the lower social orders. Dress and heraldry were paramount in this. But as the more prosperous merchants were permitted to adopt the trappings of the gentry, it may be argued that a change took place in attitudes to visual culture. Merchants brought new skills to the gentry: an instinctive eye for value and quality, and an innate sense of acquisitiveness. In this respect, the wills of 'gentlemen' merchants, such as Baret, are informative. They offer detailed textual insights into visual culture of the period. Consumption became an objective in its own right, the gentry setting out to rival in expenditure and display the nobility and each other. Those most adept at keeping abreast of developments were also those socially most successful. If acquisitions and commissions ensured the gentry were noticed, then their chances of appointment to lucrative posts and of maintaining, or advancing, their social rank were increased. Alternatively, if the reward for profitable talents (military or diplomatic) was the ability to spend, then expenditure inevitably embraced the latest goods or the most advanced domestic comforts. Either way, the achievement depended on the gentry keeping firm control over their lands, while keeping a close eye on developments elsewhere, from their neighbours to the leading centres of commerce.

Notes

- 1 William Caxton, for instance, issued his first illustrated book in 1481.
- 2 See Stanbury, 'Vivacity of images', esp. pp. 145-6.
- 3 Jones, 'Lollards and images'; Aston, 'Lollards and images' and *England's Iconoclasts, I: Laws Against Images*, p. 97.
- 4 Ex. 20: 3-4; *Tractatus de Mandatis Divinis*, p. 156.
- 5 McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings*.
- 6 See Bennett, *Pastons and their England*, pp. 203-4.
- 7 Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 394, described in Alexander and Binski (eds), *Age of Chivalry*, no. 717; and in Scott, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 6.
- 8 BL Add. MSS 29704-05, 44892. This missal has been reconstructed from fragments; see Rickert, *Reconstructed Carmelite Missal*, and Scott, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 2.
- 9 Fortescue, *Governance of England*, pp. 123-6.
- 10 *Paston Letters*, ed. Davis, II, pp. 210-14 (no. 123).
- 11 For such Agnus Dei, see the article by E. Manganot in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, I, cols 605-13.

- 12 See Canille, *Mirror in Parchment*, pp. 88-9.
- 13 Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation*; Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions*. For dress, see also Newton, *Fashion in the Age*.
- 14 Tudor-Craig, *Richard III*, pp. 97-8. For the Catesby family, see Williams, 'Catesbys 1485-1568'.
- 15 *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 300-1 (lines 416-33).
- 16 *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 25 (line 96).
- 17 BL Landsdowne MS 874, fol. 191, described in Goodall, 'Two medieval drawings', pp. 160-2, pl. L(b).
- 18 BL Add. MS 74236, p. 81; Backhouse, *Sherborne Missal*, p. 7.
- 19 Cf., for example, Greening Lambourne, *Armorial Glass*, pp. 59, 80.
- 20 Hayter, *William of Wykeham*; Moberly, *Life of William of Wykeham*, pp. 209-10.
- 21 Harvey, *English Medieval Architects*, pp. 352-6.
- 22 *Testamenta Eboracensia: A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, IV, ed. James Raine, Surtees Society, 53 (1868), p. 153. Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, pp. 96-106. For primers in general featuring in the wills of the gentry, see Hoskins, *Horae Beatae Virginis*, pp. xv-xvii.
- 23 Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 48; James, *Descriptive Catalogue*, no. 48; Sandler, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 130; Dennison, 'Fitzwarin psalter'.
- 24 Arnould and Massing, *Splendours of Flanders*, pp. 113-31; Rogers, 'Patrons and purchasers'.
- 25 For a survey, see Reynolds, 'English patrons'.
- 26 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud misc. 570, described in Pächt and Alexander, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, no. 695.
- 27 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 105, described in Plummer, *Last Flowering*, no. 22; Alexander, 'Lost leaf' (with a preliminary list of manuscripts attributed to the Fastolf Master); Farquhar, *Creation and Imitation*, pp. 59-60, 82-8.
- 28 Friar, *Heraldry for the Local Historian*.
- 29 Tolley, 'Use of heraldry'.
- 30 For examples, see Kerr, 'East window', esp. pp. 125-6; Michael, 'Privilege of "proximity"'; Goodall, 'Heraldry in the decoration'.
- 31 Raine (ed.), *Testamenta Eboracensia*, no. LXXV.
- 32 Woodforde, *Norwich School*, pp. 42-55; Marks, *Stained Glass*, p. 198. Anne herself was originally included in the programme, but her figure is now lost.
- 33 This is the tomb of Sir William Chamberlain. See Pevsner, *Buildings of England*, p. 146.
- 34 Wagner, *Heralds of England*, p. 36.
- 35 London, *Life of William Bruges*.
- 36 BL Stowe MS 594, fol. 5v, described in Scott, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 84.
- 37 Hebbgin-Barnes, *Medieval Stained Glass*, pp. 272-76; Riches, 'Lost St George cycle'.
- 38 BL Harley MS 7026, described in Scott, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 10.
- 39 Cf. Hepburn, *Portraits of the Later Plantagenets*.
- 40 London, National Gallery, on loan from the Earl of Verulam; Franks, 'Notes on



- Edward Grimston'; Ainsworth and Martens, *Petrus Christus*, pp. 49-53; London, National Gallery: Campbell, *National Gallery Catalogues*, pp. 374-91.
- 41 Raine (ed.), *Testamenta Eboracensia*, IV, p. 44 (my italics). For related alabaster effigies, see Routh, *Medieval Effigial Alabaster Tombs*.
- 42 Hope, 'On the early working'. Cf. Ryde, 'Alabaster angel'; Bayliss, 'Indenture for two alabaster effigies'.
- 43 Coss, *Lady in Medieval England*, pp. 94-105.
- 44 Page-Philips, *Children on Brasses*; Greenhill, *Incised Effigial Slabs*, I, p. 2 (plate 66).
- 45 Gardner, *Alabaster Tombs*, pp. 13-26.
- 46 Saul, *Death, Art, and Memory*, pp. 136-9, 176-8.
- 47 Norris, *Monumental Brasses*, p. 52.
- 48 D'Elboux, 'Testamentary brasses'; Badham, 'Monumental brasses'.
- 49 Heales, 'Church of Stanwell', p. 120; Cherry, 'Some new types', p. 146.
- 50 Raine (ed.), *Testamenta Eboracensia*, IV, p. 15. For Baret, see Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, pp. 72-9.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Salzman, *Building in England*, pp. 537-38 (no. 87).
- 53 Heard, 'Death and representation'.
- 54 Parker, *History of Long Melford*.
- 55 Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, pp. 68-105.
- 56 Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, pp. 79-96.
- 57 Trapp, 'Verses by Lydgate'.
- 58 *Minor Poems of John Lydgate: I*, pp. 290-1. Cf. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, pp. 181-3.
- 59 Manchester, John Rylands University Library, MS Eng. 1, described in Scott, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 93.
- 60 Nicholas Love's *The Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Adv. 18.1.7), described in Scott, *Survey of Manuscripts*, no. 98.
- 61 Platt, *Castle in Medieval England*, pp. 112-25.
- 62 Turner, 'Bodiam, Sussex'.
- 63 Barnes and Simpson, 'Building accounts' and 'Caister Castle'.
- 64 Bodiam's licence mentions its purpose for 'defence of the adjacent countryside and for resistance against our enemies'.
- 65 *Paston Letters*, ed. Davis, I, pp. 434-6 (no. 259).
- 66 Evans, *English Art*, pp. 133-4; Marks, *Stained Glass*, pp. 96-7.
- 67 Wood, *English Mediæval House*, p. 358.
- 68 *Paston Letters*, ed. Gairdner, III, pp. 174-89 (no. 389); *Paston Letters*, ed. Davis, I, pp. 107-14 (no. 64).
- 69 MacKendrick, 'Tapestries from the Low Countries'.