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## The Golden Norm: The Persistence of Gold in the Painting of Latin Christian Europe

I would like to thank the organising committee for giving me the opportunity to present this paper and to all of the contributors for a fascinating conference.

It's a slightly daunting thing to be the final speaker in such a rich symposium. The papers have covered a great deal of ground and I'm acutely aware of the limitations of my own expertise. I am relatively inexperienced in the ways of Gold and certainly cannot hope to adequately cap this gathering. However, I hope that my remarks may serve as an apt conclusion by acting as an encouragement to pursue the implications of the research that we've been involved in. In particular, as I will explain, I would like to encourage an expansion of geographical scope.

I only began thinking about Gold in detail a few years ago when my attention was caught by the work of the late 15th century Barcelona painter Jaume Huguet. I've published on this so I won't repeat my points in any detail, but I'd like to highlight one or two observations as a way of introducing the reason for my intervention today.

Huguet was perhaps the most prominent painter active in the late 15th century in Barcelona. His work is by no means unknown, but I think it is fair to say that his output does not find a place in the conventional canon of Western European art. That is partly because to get a good sense of his work one has to go to Barcelona - with a handful of notable exceptions, his work is not represented in international collections. The exceptions are three panels attributed to Huguet in collections here in Paris

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And I'm showing you here the panel of the Flagellation in the Louvre which can be identified with an altar frontal recorded in visitation reports from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Chapel of St Mark in Barcelona Cathedral patronised by the Guild of shoemakers.

But the withholding of canonical status is arguably also related to the techniques that he employs. Along with other artists working in the Crown of Aragon in the late 15th century, Huguet used copious amounts of gilded relief ornament. It's present in the Louvre panel in the framing elements and in the halos of the holy figures, but this turns out to be a relatively restrained example.

In Barcelona my attention was caught initially by this panel

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Of the Consecration of St Augustine in the collection of the National Museum from the dismembered retable commissioned in 1463 for the high altar of the church of St Augustine in Barcelona patronised by the Guild of tanners.

As my own handheld raking light shot shows,

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the jewels on the mitres and liturgical gloves of the principal figures, their rings and the embroidery of their rich vestments along with the heads of three croziers and the background are modelled in relief, built up from the ground of the painting, and gilded.

(As has already been discussed,) this doesn't sit well with conventional expectations of progressive late 15th century art - what Michael Baxandall called 'decent commercial practice'. There is a suspicion of a prejudice against shiny things.

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But standing in front of this picture in the museum, I was captivated by the prominent motif of the fold in Augustine's cope as it catches on his lap.

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To clarify, the highlight you can see here on the border of the fictive embroidered panels is not a painted highlight but the result of light catching on a protruding shiny surface - gilded relief articulating rich fabric.

This got me thinking about the artist's use of materials. Here is an artist evoking the stiffness and resistance of the heavy cloth of gold using the application of gilded ground and paint – themselves resistant materials - to the surface of the panel. This seems to me an inevitably self-conscious process, and undercuts any idea that such works are simply 'paintings' adorned as a kind of opulent afterthought with abundant gilded decoration. The use of these materials, I would argue, is integral to the conception of the image. This kind of surface ornament is often thought of as disrupting the innovative illusionism in this period of painting by emphasizing the surface of the panel. But here is an artist carefully evoking a motif in pictorial space using materials that have discernible extension in our space.

This set me thinking about Huguet's use of gilded relief ornament, as I wandered around the room in the Museu Nacional I came across more instances of what seemed to me manifestly thoughtful interaction with the materials used.

Perhaps the most striking use of gilded relief among Huguet's panels in the Museu Nacional is on this panel

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from a now dismembered retable made for the church of St Vincent in Sarrià. St Vincent of Zaragoza is shown before the Roman governor, Dacian, who commands him to sacrifice to the pagan gods, exemplified by the idol atop a column in the centre, but, at a gesture from Vincent, the idol begins to topple from its setting and the governor and his retinue look on open-mouthed and with hands raised in surprise. The gilded relief is concentrated around the saint's head in his halo and in details of the dress of the figure's surrounding him, but it is also crucially employed to represent the idol:

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the image of the sculpted idol is itself a piece of gilded low-relief sculpture.

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Again, clarified by my own slightly out of focus hand-held shot.

This emphasizes the idol's brute materiality, but the technique inevitably also emphasizes the materiality of Huguet's picture itself and its extensive use of rich materials. This is a highly charged use of gilded relief, and I would argue that it would be difficult to see it as anything other than self-conscious.

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The heavy use of gilding is often regarded as an old-fashioned preoccupation. A respected commentator on the art of fifteenth-century Spain could write recently (with reference to the work of Tomás Giner) of gilded relief ornament as 'a regressive trait of painting in Aragon and Catalonia'. But in working on the Iberian material, I was very struck by Judith Berg Sobré's observation that the use of gilded relief in the main body of a painting, rather than just on the framing elements, is something that appears in Catalan art only from the 1440s onwards. The implications of that are important: this extensive use of gilded relief is not the continuation of an established tradition, but a new departure in the second half of the 15th century.

More than this, it is not a practice that is pursued in ignorance or incomprehension of what is conventionally regarded as the innovative work of the period in Italy and the Netherlands. One of the best known of all fifteenth century Spanish paintings has come to be

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the so-called Virgin of the Councillors by the Valencian painter Lluís Dalmau commissioned for the altar of the chapel of the city hall of Barcelona by the council's five-man executive committee, who are portrayed in it, in 1443. The work famously shows close knowledge of the work of Jan van Eyck and is regularly cited as crucial evidence of the international impact of that artist's work. It is notably free of gilded relief and indeed, of any gilding at all. Dalmau's painting is uncharacteristic of Iberian work in the period in following Netherlandish practice so closely, and famously we know that Dalmau travelled to the Low Countries and may have seen van Eyck's work first hand. But I mention it here to stress that this was not an import but a painting made in Barcelona for the city council. This type of painting was not just valued by Iberian patrons: it was achievable by Iberian artists. The heavily gilded work produced by such as Huguet later in the century

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was produced and consumed in full knowledge of this tradition and it needs taking seriously on its own terms and the possible sophistication of its use acknowledged.

I know that I'm preaching to the converted here, and we've already heard about the sophistication of the use of gilded relief in the context of painting in the work of Carlo Crivelli in this symposium.

But I'd now like to turn to my encouragement.

Huguet, along with Crivelli, fits comfortably into the rubric of this symposium as a Western European artist, and I have concerns about the scope of that term 'Western': I would like to urge a wider field

of view. I'd like to move now to material which remains radically neglected in the history of art and that is material from central Europe.

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The example I will concentrate on is this: the Altarpiece of the Sorrowing Virgin in the chapel of the Holy Cross in the cathedral on the Wawel hill in Cracow, the ancient capital of Poland.

It is a triptych with a sculpted corpus and painted wings. In its open state the corpus shows the figures of Christ as Man of Sorrows on the right and the dolorous Virgin on the left, both sculpted in the round and with gilded drapery. Above, six bust-length angels hold the instruments of the Passion and in a crowning traceried gable are eight bust-length figures of prophets. The interior of the wings show the Presentation in the Temple and Christ teaching in the Temple on the left, and the Crucifixion and the Deposition on the right. These four panels are surmounted by traceried arches and have tooled gold grounds.

The altarpiece is undocumented, but beneath the figures of Christ and the Virgin three pairs of angels support heraldic shields with the arms of Poland in the centre, the Habsburgs/Austria on the left and Lithuania on the right. That juxtaposition of heraldry gives us a patronal locus: these arms fit King Casimir IV of Poland, 1447-1492, and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1440, and his queen, Elizabeth of Habsburg, the daughter of Albrecht II, King of the Romans, whom he had married in 1454. As I'll explain in a moment this altarpiece adorns their burial chapel.

The chapel, by the way, is a rather confined space and the altarpiece is not easy to photograph – hence the oblique angle of this shot which I take from a recent article by Magdalena Łanuszka. This is not just the best colour photograph of the interior. As far as I can see it the only available colour photograph of the interior. This is not a widely studied object and images of it are not easy to obtain. That goes for much of the art of this part of the world.

When closed

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the altarpiece shows four more narrative scenes: the Annunciation top left, the Nativity top right, the Adoration of the Magi bottom right and the Circumcision bottom left. The exterior is largely free of gilding.

I'm going to use this altarpiece as my main example because we have a reasonably well defined context in terms of patronage and original location. You can see some tantalizing elements of that intruding in this image, and I'll come back to those.

Before I look at this altarpiece more closely, I want to take a moment to observe that the extensive use of gilding is by no means unusual in this region. Survivals of altarpieces from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are not abundant in Poland, but enough survives to show that extensive gilding was common well into the sixteenth century. I'm not going to attempt a review – partly because the photographic record is not good and it wouldn't be very visually satisfying – and I'll confine myself to one example from the early sixteenth century

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An altarpiece with a painted central panel this time in the parish church at Bodzentyn near Kielce which was a collegiate foundation of the bishops of Cracow. This altarpiece with the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin on the central panel was commissioned by Jan Konarski, bishop of Cracow 1503-1525, whose portrait appears along with his arms at the bottom left of the central panel. The altarpiece has been associated with a payment to the Cracow artist Marcin Czarny in 1508. Once again, we have tracery framing each compartment and tooled, gilded backgrounds.

I have chosen Polish examples because I have become familiar with them through other work that I've done but a related point could be made about other regions of central Europe. I was recently introduced to the remarkable body of fifteenth and sixteenth century altarpieces surviving in Slovakia and abundant gilding is also the rule there.

The simple point I wish to make is that if we adjust our field of view to include these regions, often almost wholly overlooked in art historical terms, then in the period highlighted in the call for papers for by the symposium – 1450 to 1520 – gold backgrounds didn't 'gradually disappear': the extensive use of gilding in painting emerges as the rule rather than the exception. Hence my title: the Golden Norm.

The symposium avowedly restricted its scope to Western Europe and controlling scope is a prudent research strategy, but I'm concerned that restriction of scope doesn't distort the analysis. My proposal is that the appropriate cultural unit to study is Latin Christian Europe. The culture of Orthodox Christianity and the heritage of Byzantium does raise distinct issues, but the heritage of the cold war makes it easy to forget that Poland, for example, took its Christianity, from the West from the Holy Roman Empire and the popes, and participated in a widely shared culture. I would argue that we stand to enrich our understanding if we remain aware of this wider field, and I'd like to finish by trying to indicate what kinds of issues might emerge if we do.

So I return to the altarpiece of the sorrowful Virgin in Cracow.

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I cannot claim the kind of sophistication in the use of gold as I've claimed for Huguet. Taking the example of the crucifixion scene from the inside of the right wing

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there are gilded relief haloes and above the landscape background rises a tooled gold ground beneath the gilded tracery of the frame. This is not unusual or innovative use of gilding – it is something that you might expect to see in a fourteenth-century Central Italian panel and by late fifteenth century Italian or Netherlandish standards is arguably somewhat old fashioned. It would be very easy to move on after making that point and conclude that this was indeed an unsophisticated, provincial work. But that I think would be to fall into a trap.

But there is a challenge lurking in works like this which, to my knowledge, has not been discussed.

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Quite where the altarpiece was made has occasioned a good deal of debate. Most commentators see it as a local work but all agree that the painting on the wings owes a great deal to Netherlandish painting. This is clearest in the exterior.

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Aspects of some of the compositions appear to show a knowledge of prominent Netherlandish works. The pose of the Virgin in the Nativity is very close to that of the Virgin on the central panel of Rogier van der Weyden's so-called Bladelin altarpiece, now in Berlin. The concern with surface texture, especially the lustre of metal such as the vessels in the Circumcision,

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go beyond anything otherwise seen in contemporary Cracow painting.

The very framing of this scene, which invites the viewer to elide the threshold of the depicted room with the frame of the picture, arguably reveals knowledge of the analogous devices in the work of van der Weyden and Bouts. That perhaps even clearer

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In the Annunciation which also has characteristically Netherlandish still life elements.

An argument has indeed been made that the strong Netherlandish elements might indicate that the paintings at least are from the Netherlands, Brussels being one possibility. I'm not going to attempt to resolve that here, but merely observe the dominant discourse around this works' Netherlandishness. The most recent article on this object has called it 'the most Netherlandish-Influenced work among the artworks founded by the Jagiellons' (that is the dynasty to which Casimir IV belonged.

I mentioned a challenge. The challenge is this: this is all on the outside.

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We have tantalisingly few firm records of when such objects were opened - and I'm not aware of any documentation relating to this object - but the evidence we have that does survive - the most famous being the Mesnerpflichtbuch from St Lorenz in Nuremberg, indicates opening on particularly important feast days. The outside of folding altarpieces is generally understood to be the most mundane part of the object - the part that is most frequently exposed to view. The challenge is that the innovative artistic devices traditionally accorded most prestige by art history are clearest in the altarpiece's everyday state. The prestigious open state seems more old-fashioned.

So I would like to claim for this work what I claimed for the Aragonese work with which I began.

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The extensive gilding which articulates the transition to the higher status parts of the object is employed quite explicitly in the knowledge of what are usually regarded as the innovative traditions manifest on the exterior. This is manifestly not unsophisticated work blindly following an old tradition. This evidences an alternative value system. If we fail to study material like this we risk developing a flawed idea of what might constitute 'decent commercial practice'.

I'd like to conclude by revealing a little more of the context for this work.

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Here is a view of the interior of the chapel of the Holy Cross, looking south west from the entrance, which opens onto the south aisle of the cathedral.

The view of the interior of the chapel is today dominated by the elaborate neo-classical tomb of Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk of 1789, here on the right, but the chapel as an institution was established in 1473 and a very substantial amount remains of the chapel's fifteenth-century furnishings. The most famous of these is the canopied mottled red marble tomb of Casimir IV, a signed work by the Nuremberg sculptor Veit Stoss, bearing the date 1492, which nestles in the south-west corner, in the centre of the image here. The left wing of the altarpiece of the sorrowful Virgin is visible here on the left.

My attention was originally drawn to this chapel by the wall paintings. They bear an inscription specifying that they were commissioned by King Casimir and his Queen Elizabeth in 1470 – which matches the heraldry of the altarpiece.

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That inscription is in Old Church Slavonic in Cyrillic characters confirming the Eastern Christian and East Slav associations of the style and iconography of the paintings. A moment ago I just stressed the Latin Christian basis of Polish medieval culture. These paintings were not produced by local artists but by artists from the east – it has been suggested from Pskov some 1400 km to the north east. The presence of these paintings can only be understood in the rich and complex circumstances of the Polish-Lithuanian union initiated in the late fourteenth century by Casimir's father. It seems appropriate to note, as war rages in Europe, that, in this period, much of the territory of present-day Ukraine was claimed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of which Casimir was then ruler. One of the things that this chapel's decorations does, I propose, is stake a claim to that inheritance. This is part of the world whose history we all need to know much more about.

It is irresponsible, I know, to bring up such a vast cultural and historical issue in the dying minutes of 30 minute paper, especially one that remains somewhat unfamiliar, but I touch on it to reinforce my encouragement to a wider view of European art and as a way of framing the variety of works in this chapel –

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what might be called Ruthenian wall paintings, a German tomb and an altarpiece that shows at least very close knowledge of Netherlandish painting. The art history of this period tends to privilege a kind of aesthetic coherence, and in that context this is a very challenging juxtaposition of objects. Indeed, even in the Polish scholarship this chapel has largely been pulled apart and its elements studied separately by regional and medium specialists rather than as a whole.

I would like to argue, however, that the fifteenth century elements of this chapel do have a distinct coherence but simply one that draws on an unfamiliarly wide range of reference. The elements of this chapel demonstrate an immense and ambitious patronal reach, manipulating elements deriving



from as far apart as the Netherlands and the principalities of what we would now call Russia. The use of gold on the interior of the chapel's altarpiece

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needs to be seen in the context of that range. This chapel may be geographically distant from the conventional 'centres' of European art production, but it is not in any sense a provincial ensemble.

This is still Latin Christian Europe, but it's a part of Europe with a different outlook to say Brussels.