

## THE BURGUNDIAN COURT AND THE URBAN MILIEU AS PATRONS IN 15TH CENTURY BRUGES

by  
Wim Blockmans

The relationship between art and society belongs to the most ferociously debated issues in history. We should not be too surprised about the difficulty of bridging the gap between *ars et ratio*: we have to attempt to make artistic taste and freedom rationally comprehensible, but we must be on our guard against over-rationalising. After all, emotions and sensibilities have their place in Western society, however rational it may consider itself to be. While it had been commonly accepted that artistic production developed generally during periods of economic well-being, the famous economic historian Robert Lopez inverted this correlation by stating more than forty years ago that 'hard times' furthered 'investment in culture'. Every detail of his argument has been scrutinized since then. Economic historians diversified their concepts of business trends but retained the overall notion of an 'age of depression' as applied to the Late Middle Ages in Europe at large. Regional developments previously viewed as contradictory are now often seen as complementary: shifts of activities created depression in one region but growth in another.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the relation between economy and culture is more complex. In a thorough evaluation of the matter, the economic historian Wilfrid Brulez concluded that the whole discussion rested on a 'faux problème', i.e. posed the problem in the wrong way.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will argue that, indeed, a solid analysis requires more than a crude correlation between general business trends and investment in culture. In fact, the reduction of the problem of artistic production to one of investment strategy, is simply unacceptable. Other factors, such as the structure of production and demand

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent summary of the debate, see M. North, *Kunst und Kommerz im Goldenen Zeitalter. Zur Sozialgeschichte der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Köln/Wien/Weimar 1992, pp. 3-23.

<sup>2</sup> W. Brulez, *Cultuur en getal. Aspecten van de relatie economie-maatschappij-cultuur in Europa tussen 1400 en 1800*, Amsterdam 1986, pp. 84-88.

have to be considered as well. These imply notions of the form and function of the products, which are related to values and taste. Not only economic, but also social, political and cultural dimensions are required for an adequate theory of the relation between art, economy and society. Leaving aside these aspects cripples any discussion on the factors influencing artistic production. The tendency of some economic historians and sociologists towards such a reductionist approach explains the limited response they received from art historians. However, since the questions raised are absolutely fundamental, we cannot leave the discussion as it now stands. Historians have to refine their questions; art historians have to enter into matters of market and patronage. We in particular have to try to bring the two approaches closer together. I will concentrate on 15th century Bruges, the core of the north-western economic system at that time and undoubtedly also the most proliferous and diversified artistic production centre. The central question thus is whether the city's economic function helps to explain its role as the most international market for artistic products north of the Alps.<sup>3</sup> I will try to evaluate the relative share in artistic patronage between the court, the local élites and foreign merchants. This social and institutional dimension was, on the whole, neglected by previous economic historians dealing with the subject, while art historians tended to deal with it only on an individual basis, in relation to one artist, patron or object.

To start with, it is fundamental to be fully aware of the social and mental context within which both producers and buyers of works of art operated. With the exception of the courts of princes and bishops,<sup>4</sup> the production structure was corporate, authorized by the city government which bestowed on the crafts a constitution and an organizational model. It provided for the training of apprentices, prescribed entrance fees, which were different for a master's son, a burgher of Bruges, a Fleming or a foreigner. Prices, wages, production techniques, the duration of training and the requirements for admission to the master's rank were regulated in the same manner for all crafts.<sup>5</sup> No special provisions were made for artists. Moreover, in the 15th

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<sup>3</sup> I relied on the exemplary studies by L. Campbell, *The Art Market in the Southern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century*, Burlington Magazine 118 (1976), pp. 188-198 and J. M. Montias, *Le Marché de l'Art aux Pays-Bas. XVe et XVIe siècles*, Annales. Economies - Sociétés - Civilisations 48 (1993), pp. 1541-1563. See also R. Van Uytven, *Le Grand Héritage, Les Primitifs Flamands et Leur Temps*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1994, pp. 16-49.

<sup>4</sup> Brulez, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-33 considered the activity of some institutional features in cities, viz. bishops' seats, universities and central administrations; his survey did not lead, however, to an other conclusion than that these conditions were mostly necessary, but not sufficient and underrepresented in the case of the Low Countries.

<sup>5</sup> For the most recent insights see P. Lambrechts, J.-P. Sosson (eds.), *Les métiers au moyen âge. Aspects économiques et sociaux*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1994, especially the

century Low Countries artists did not even have their own guild, but were incorporated in various other craft guilds. In Bruges, the painters belonged to the same guild as the sculptors, cloth painters, glaziers, mirror makers, saddlers and horse collar makers. The woodcutters and organ-builders were incorporated with the carpenters, who quarreled bitterly with the cabinet-makers, who had a craft of their own, over matters of demarcation. In Ghent, the woodcutters formed one craft with the painters, while the stonecutters were grouped with the masons. All these formations differed locally, making it very clear that no one conceived of 'the artist' as an occupation different from that of other artisans.

In contemporary Italy, the word *arte* had equally designated crafts in industry and in the arts and crafts, in line with the scholarly terminology distinguishing the *artes liberales* from the *artes mechanicae*. In the 15th century, Northern Italian cities saw the gradual professionalization of the artist trained in the academies. This new concept of training went along with the systematic reorientation of style toward the imitation of classic models and a more sophisticated, self-conscious vision of the role of the artist.<sup>6</sup> Isolated elements of the Italian Renaissance concept, such as the introduction of the one-point perspective by Petrus Christus in the 1470s, penetrated in the Low Countries in the course of the 15th century.<sup>7</sup> Only during the first decades of the 16th century did all of the Renaissance concepts, including stylistic features and a distinct preference for humanistic themes, become prevalent as a coherent system.

In the Low Countries, neither the training nor the self-consciousness of the artist differed from the general rule for crafts; even their wages were equal to those of other trained craftsmen such as masons or carpenters.<sup>8</sup> As early as the beginning of the 15th century, the Bruges building industry saw the emergence, within the corporative system, of entrepreneurs operating on a larger scale and a capitalistic basis.<sup>9</sup> In the Bruges tax lists of 1394-96, nine members of the image-makers and saddlers craft belonged to the lowest tax category and two to the next lowest, a social stratification identical to that of

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contribution by H. Verougstraete and R. Van Schoute, *Cadres et supports dans la peinture flamande aux XVe et XVIe siècles. Organisation du travail et contexte socio-économique*, pp. 349-359; J.-P. Sosson, *Une approche des structures économiques d'un métier d'art: La corporation des Peintres et Selliers de Bruges (XVe-XVIe siècles)*, *Revue des Archéologues et Historiens d'Art de Louvain* 3 (1970), pp. 91-100.

<sup>6</sup> B. Kempers, *Kunst, Macht und Mäzenatentum: Der Beruf des Malers in der italienischen Renaissance*, München 1989.

<sup>7</sup> M. W. Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus: Renaissance Master of Bruges*, New York 1994, pp. 33-53.

<sup>8</sup> J.-P. Sosson, *Les travaux publics de la ville de Bruges, XIVe-XVe siècles. Les matériaux. Les hommes*, Brussels 1977, pp. 300-303.

<sup>9</sup> Sosson, *Travaux publics*, pp. 167-201.

the total population.<sup>10</sup> This shows the absolute similarity of the social position of artists with that of other craftsmen in Bruges around 1400. The system of production and training in workshops formed a typical part of this corporate structure.

The recruitment of the Bruges crafts reflected rather precisely the demand for specific types of labour. The city accounts registered each year the inscription fees of new *poorters*, the fully privileged citizens. Not every new inhabitant could afford the payment of the fee or wanted to obtain full citizenship, but all new members of the crafts had to comply. During most of the 15th century, the amount of the fee was six pounds *parists* for Flemings and twelve for foreigners, or the equivalent of ten-and-a-half or twenty-one daily wages of a skilled craftsman respectively.<sup>11</sup> In 1441, Duke Philip the Good ordered a severe reduction for four years of the inscription fees both as a citizen and as a craft member, as a clear incentive to revitalize the city after the great revolt of 1436-38, the economic blockade, the famine and the subsequent plague. At the end of the four year period, in January 1445, completely new legislation was imposed on the crafts.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that the four year fee reductions were closely connected with other measures concerning the regulation of the crafts in general. A striking aspect is the temporary elimination of the discrimination against foreigners and other outsiders. Understandably, the duke's measures had a strong effect on the immigration to Bruges in those years. During the catastrophic years from 1436 to 1440, an average of 80 new citizens were registered each year. From 1441 to 1444, under the regime of reduced fees, an average of 403 persons were registered as new citizens. During the next four years, when the fees were raised again, the yearly average dropped to 158.<sup>13</sup> During the four years' reduction, a total of 1614 new citizens immigrated to Bruges and they were all, in accord with the ordinance, craftsmen. Among those artisans attracted to Bruges by the temporary reduction of entry fines were such famous artists as the painter

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<sup>10</sup> I. De Meyer, *De sociale structuren te Brugge in de 14e eeuw, Studiën betreffende de sociale structuren te Brugge, Kortrijk en Gent in de 14e en 15e eeuw, Standen en Landen* 54, Heule 1971, pp. 18-24, 36-42, 52-56.

<sup>11</sup> Summer wages were raised from 10 to 12 groats per day for most crafts in the building industry at different moments: in 1429 for the slaters, in 1434 for the pavers, in 1442-50 for the masons, in 1446 for the carpenters, in 1450 for the thatchers. I calculated an average day-wage in the middle of the century on the basis of 2/3 summer- and 1/3 winter-wages, resulting in 11 1/3 groats; see Sosson, *Travaux publics*, pp. 300-303.

<sup>12</sup> Sosson, *Travaux publics*, pp. 58-60, 136-141.

<sup>13</sup> Calculated from A. Jamees, *Brugse poorters*, II,1, Handzame 1980, p. ii.

Petrus Christus. Born in a village in northern Brabant, some 150 km from Bruges, he reacted to the reduction in fees just as other craftsmen did.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the averages of immigration to Bruges per decade, the 1420s and 1440s marked the absolute apex of the attractivity of the Bruges labour market. In the 1430s, the economic difficulties with England, the revolt of 1436-38, the blockade by the German Hanse, the revolt and the plague struck the city severely. The whole period from 1410 to the early 1470s showed a strong immigration.<sup>15</sup> This coincided with a general tendency towards increasing the wages in the crafts by about 10%. Immigrants were attracted, even from long distances, by high wages: in 1465, a mason in Bruges might have earned in real terms 2.4 times as much as his colleague in Haarlem.<sup>16</sup> The proportion of immigrants from outside the county of Flanders or from a distance of more than 50 km is remarkably high: 53% during the period 1440-59 and still 44.5% in 1460-78. Thus, the higher the number of immigrants, the greater the distance the migrants traveled. The comparison with the secondary town of Oudenaarde, located some 50 km southeast of Bruges, reveals how exceptionally attractiv Bruges was. During the 15th century, 50% of the migrants to Oudenaarde traveled less than 10 km and only 11.6% traveled more than 50 km or came from abroad.<sup>17</sup> No wonder that the Bruges corporations flourished and that their members were prepared to invest in culture. After the revolt of the 1480s, however, the evolution went steadily downward.

The distribution by professional sector of the immigrants to Bruges can be computed for the period from 1331 to 1375 and compared to a series of samples of the total population available for the 14th century. Table 1 displays these figures and shows that the share of luxury arts and clothing crafts amounted to double their share in the total population (as calculated on the samples), while the textile industry was fairly underrepresented.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The actual villages Baarle-Hertog and Baarle-Nassau on the Belgian-Netherlands border. I hereby eliminate the doubts still expressed by Ainsworth and Martens whether Petrus Christus did not come from Baarle-Drongen near Ghent: Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 and 55.

<sup>15</sup> E. Thoen, *Immigration to Bruges during the Late Middle Ages*, *Le Migrazioni in Europa secc. XIII-XVIII. Atti della 20a Settimana di Studi*, Prato 1994, pp. 335-353; in Table 2 on p. 339, I had to correct the entrance fee for foreigners in 1441-45 to 3 *£* parisis. I discuss these data in greater detail in *The Creative Environment*, Symposium Petrus Christus, Turnhout 1995.

<sup>16</sup> W. Blockmans, *The economic expansion of Holland and Zeeland in the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries*, E. Aerts et al. (eds.), *Studia Historica Oeconomica. Liber Amicorum Herman Van der Wee*, Leuven 1993, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Thoen, *op. cit.*, pp. 343-349.

<sup>18</sup> Thoen, *op. cit.*, pp. 348-352, De Meyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-37. All samples of the total population are fraught with problems, but this is most particularly true of the 1394-96 tax lists which cover only three of the six sections of the city. This probably

Table 1: Largest professional groups as percentage of immigrants and of the Bruges population as a whole.

	immigrants	t o t a l   p o p u l a t i o n			
	1331-75	1302	1338-40	1379	1394-96
textile	18.7	44.63	37.15	41.62	15.09
building	11.9	11.28	10.93	9.19	14.47
clothing	26.2	10.10	12.62	10.95	12.49
arts	13.4	7.89	7.90	6.82	7.32

Again from 1466 to 1496, 31% of the new masters of the image-makers craft were immigrants.<sup>19</sup> The specialized crafts thus exerted a special attraction to migrant artisans until the end of the 15th century, while at the same time the building industry shrank. It now recruited 75% to 80% of its workers from Flanders, compared to 20% to 25% during the first half of the century.<sup>20</sup> The effect of the decrease in the immigration figures, which reflects the economic regression after 1475, can be observed in detail from the registration of new members in the craft of the image-makers, thanks to the studies by Sosson and Martens.<sup>21</sup> The yearly average dropped from 8 to 4 for the masters from 1454-75 to 1476-1530; for the apprentices the fall was even more dramatic, from 10 to 3. While 60% of the masters of the period 1454-75 taught at least one apprentice in their workshops, this proportion fell to a mere 23% afterwards. The obvious effects were: 1. an overall decrease of more than 50% in the number of image-makers active in Bruges after 1475; 2. the near doubling of the workshops consisting of only one master; 3. the concentration of apprentices from an average of two per master having apprentices at some time in his career in 1454-75 to 3.25 in 1476-1530. In this picture, the position of the journeymen remains unclear. Following Martens' observation that a large majority of the apprentices did not reach the status of master, one has to note that most masters employed one journeyman. This leads to the conclusion that during Bruges' 'golden age' the typical workshop included besides

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led to a serious underestimation of the textile crafts, whose numbers lie far below those in the three other examples. For the clothing and arts crafts, the data are remarkably consistent in all four instances and thus allow us to notice their sharp contrast with the professional division of the immigrants.

<sup>19</sup> A. Schouteet, *De Vlaamse Primitieven te Brugge: Bronnen voor de schilderkunst te Brugge tot de dood van Gerard David*, Brussels 1989, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Sosson, *Travaux publics*, pp. 205-216, 225-227, 236-256, 333-336.

<sup>21</sup> Sosson, *Approche*, p. 99; M. P. J. Martens, *Artistic Patronage in Bruges Institutions, ca. 1440-1482*, Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Barbara 1992.

the master, one journeyman and an apprentice during some years, while about 40% of the masters worked alone. After 1475, less than a quarter of the masters employed a journeyman and an apprentice. Considering the high numbers involved (227 new masters in 1476-1530), it is very unlikely that all those one-master workshops were owned by first-rate painters. Many of them must have formed part of some kind of putting-out system, as was the case in the textile industries, and have limited themselves to decorative tasks.

These data obviously offer interesting possibilities for the interpretation of the technical and artistic quality of the works. The increased differentiation between one-master workshops and those including a journeyman and apprentices must be recognizable in the characteristics of their products and possibly also in their prices.

So far, we have focused on the production side of the process. If we turn now to demand, we have to stress that Bruges was a really exceptional centre since it combined the presence of a court with that of a wealthy commercial bourgeoisie, an exceptionally large community of foreign merchants, and an extraordinarily well-to-do and broad middle class. A great number of ecclesiastical and caritative institutions was closely linked to the local middle class by personal and administrative bonds. The role of the court was overwhelming at certain moments but should not be overestimated in the long run, especially since the dukes spent only limited periods of time in their 'prinsenhof'. The continuity of art patronage could therefore not depend principally on the court or its personnel. It had to be found among the local élites and institutions. All the available information indicates that around the middle of the 15th century Bruges was the wealthiest city of the Low Countries. As a rule it paid 15.7% of the taxes collected in the county of Flanders by the central government, whereas Ghent paid only 13.8%. If we take into account that the population of Bruges around the middle of the 14th century was 46,000 and that of Ghent 64,000 (the only reliable figures for the Late Middle Ages), and assume that the relative size of these cities remained nearly constant in the next century, then this means that the per capita tax contribution made by a citizen of Bruges was 59% higher than that of a citizen of Ghent. The contrast may even have been sharper, since Ghent often negotiated greater reductions, while one seventh of the revenues from indirect taxes of the city of Bruges also flowed into the treasury of the dukes of Burgundy.<sup>22</sup> It is thus highly probable that the population of Bruges paid substantially more taxes per capita than that of Ghent or any other city in the

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<sup>22</sup> W. Prevenier, *De beden in het graafschap Vlaanderen onder Filips de Stoute (1384-1404)*, *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 38 (1960), p. 365; W. P. Blockmans, *De volksvertegenwoordiging in Vlaanderen in de overgang van middeleeuwen naar nieuwe tijden (1384-1506)*, Brussels 1978, pp. 610-631; A. Zoete, *De beden in het graafschap Vlaanderen onder de hertogen Jan zonder Vrees en Filips de Goede (1405-1467)*, Brussels 1994, pp. 181-182.

Low Countries, and that it could afford to do so since its income per head was so much higher. This again can be explained by its economic structure (more commercial than industrial) and by the fact that its crafts included so many relatively capital-intensive specialized activities.<sup>23</sup>

The pattern of residence may well have been the same for all foreign nations, as it has been demonstrated quantitatively for the German Hanse: a core group residing for some years, and at least as many sailing in for the fair.<sup>24</sup> This combination of continuity and change meant that a great number of foreign merchants regularly spent weeks, months or years in the city and thus found the opportunity to learn about the broad variety of its opportunities. In this cosmopolitan atmosphere, trade negotiations may well have been followed by exchanges about artistic products.

There is indeed proof that wooden sculptures and altarpieces were displayed during the three 'show days' of the fair, since on that occasion even products from outside Bruges were accepted for sale. During the fair, which began on the third Monday after Easter and lasted for 30 days, free trade in raw materials for painters was allowed without intervention of a local broker. Woodcutters and organ-builders were allowed to work on the eve of festivals and during the night to finish the work they had contracted with merchants, if these were eager to sail away.<sup>25</sup> It is unlikely, however, that products of art other than those in wood were offered for sale during the fair, since the image-makers' craft insisted on having their members exhibit their works in shops and counters and the Bruges spring weather is usually cold and rainy.

Two factors may explain these different selling methods. It may be that the standardization of sculpture in wood allowed the production for an anonymous and large market, largely abroad. Even then, the 1432 ordinance for the woodcutters and organ-builders suggests that foreign merchants signed contracts during the 'show days' in the beginning of the fair, for products to be finished within a month before they sailed away. This implies direct personal contact between the artist and the buyers, who based their choices on the models displayed at the fair, but had the products especially made – during 30 days and nights – on their commission. The market may have

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<sup>23</sup> W. Prevenier, *Bevolkingcijfers en professionele structuren der bevolking van Gent en Brugge in de 14de eeuw*, Album Charles Verlinden, Ghent 1975, pp. 269-303.

<sup>24</sup> W. Paravicini, *Bruges and Germany*, and A. Vandewalle, N. Geirnaert, *Bruges and Italy*, V. Vermeersch (ed.), *Bruges and Europe*, Antwerp 1992, pp. 100-114, 182-205.

<sup>25</sup> M. Vanroose, *Twee onbekende 15de-eeuwse documenten in verband met de Brugse "beildesnidders"*, *Handelingen Genootschap Société d'Emulation* 110 (1973), pp. 168-178; J. W. Steyaert a.o., *Late Gothic Sculpture in the Burgundian Netherlands*, Ghent 1994.



been anonymous, but the merchants acted in direct personal contact. On the other hand, book production was equally largely standardized for the external markets but not offered on the fair. Well before 1400 illuminated manuscripts were exported from Bruges to all parts of Europe with which regular trade relations existed. They have been traced back to the Vistula basin, the Lower Rhine valley, Westphalia, Lübeck, South-East England, the valleys of the Seine, Marne, Saône, Rhône and Po, Aragon, Navarre, Portugal and Bohemia.<sup>26</sup> Unless stalls could be used in the great city hall, one should not forget that weather conditions from April to early June, when the Bruges fair was held, could be harmful for paintings on oak, cloth or parchment.

Max Martens has convincingly shown that religious fraternities may have been the organizations where various segments of the Bruges élite, from the court and the nobility to foreign merchants and local officials could meet artists eager to accept their patronage.<sup>27</sup> The same pattern held true for other Flemish cities.<sup>28</sup> The wealth of the Bruges middle classes allowed them to participate very actively in art patronage.

Jean-Pierre Sosson has shown that during the 15th century, the Bruges building crafts went through a process of aristocratization. A small élite combined the political representation of the crafts with large scale entrepreneurship facilitated by their political power. In other words, they used their representative functions on behalf of fellow craftsmen to undermine corporate solidarity for their own profit. In Brussels, a small number of plumbers, blacksmiths, locksmiths and nail-makers attracted all public orders as well as those of religious and charitable institutions. The presence of the Burgundian Court in that city in the 1450s and 1460s favoured not only the building industry, most active in the embellishment of the *Coudenberg* castle and park, but also a wide variety of crafts such as armourers and leather-workers.<sup>29</sup> These social climbers may have been very prone to imitate the behaviour of the established élites and sponsor artistic activities in their turn.

Although the identification of patrons of 15th century Netherlandish art remains very difficult in most instances, recent research has enhanced our insight considerably, especially for Bruges.<sup>30</sup> The considerable number of 94

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<sup>26</sup> M. Smeyers et al., *Naer natueren ghelike. Vlaamse miniaturen voor Van Eyck* (ca.1350-ca.1420), Leuven 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Martens, *Petrus Christus*, pp. 16-19.

<sup>28</sup> P. Trio, *De Gentse broederschappen (1182-1580)*, Ghent 1990.

<sup>29</sup> J.-P. Sosson, *Quelques aspects sociaux de l'artisanat bruxellois du métal*, *Cahiers Bruxellois* 6 (1961), pp. 98-122 and 7 (1962), pp. 225-258.

<sup>30</sup> N. Geirnaert, *Bruges and intellectual life in Europe during the Middle Ages*, Vermeersch, *Bruges and Europe*, pp. 224-251; M. P. J. Martens, *Lodewijk van Gruuthuse*, Bruges 1992; H. J. Van Mieghem, *Gerard David*, Antwerp 1989; Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus*; Smeyers, *Naer Natueren ghelike*; D. De Vos, *Hans Memling, the complete works*, Antwerp 1994; D. De Vos (ed.), *Essays Hans Memling*, Bruges 1994.

works have been attributed to Hans Memling, and patrons can be identified with a reasonable degree of certainty for 23 of them.<sup>31</sup> In 44 cases – nearly half of the known production – the social characteristics of the patrons can be determined. The following breakdown of the data is revealing.

Table 2: Patrons of 44 Works of Hans Memling

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International merchants:	27
Italians	17
Spaniards	8
English	1
Lübeck	1
Bruges burghers:	9
Bruges religious institutions	8

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Among the burghers, patrons included not only aldermen and burgomasters, mostly members of guilds of the mercers or curriers, but also less prominent persons. Among the religious institutions is St John's hospital most prominent, but also numbered among them are a canon, an abbot and the librarians' guild which founded a chapel in the Eekhout abbey. It may well be that this picture is skewed because the individual local buyer or the anonymous foreign merchant may have left no trace in our sources. If that were the case, it would only strengthen the conclusion that one of the major Netherlandish painters of the 15th century worked for a largely anonymous market, partly local and partly international, mostly lay, not noble and even less dependent on any court. If this was the clientele of the most famous Bruges painter of the late 15th century, the dozens of anonymous local painters, known as members of the image-makers craft, surely must have worked for a large and fairly anonymous international art market too.

More generally, the following hypothesis may be formulated. The density of the social network in Bruges permitted close contacts between different social categories, from courtiers to deans of crafts. In daily practice the social distance between a nobleman and an artisan was smaller here than in less populated and less cosmopolitan places. In this environment, new information and ideas circulated at high speed, as it was of prime importance for merchants to be aware of the latest developments on the markets and trade routes all over Europe. All Flemings, and the citizens of Bruges and Ghent in particular, had developed a strong self-confidence through centuries of political struggles in defence of their autonomy. They evidently were aware of their economic assets, which often lay at the heart of conflicts. In this en-

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<sup>31</sup> M. P. J. Martens, *De opdrachtgevers van Hans Memling*, De Vos, essays, op. cit., pp. 14-29.

vironment, where different cultures, languages, political forces and economic systems met, the expression of one's individual identity was more important than in a less diversified context. Artistic media allow the expression of status and identity in a more indirect and refined way than crude overawing. The more subtle the message, the more impressive it is for a cultivated observer. Once the climate has turned to such 'cultural' expressions of status and identity, imitations may follow and provoke a multiplier effect. This in turn degrades the original expression to banality and provokes those who have the necessary means at their disposal to stimulate the creation of new forms of expression.

If this hypothesis is accepted, it may offer the answer to a series of deadlocks in the art, economy and society debate. Of course, a high level of capital accumulation is a necessary precondition for any active centre of artistic creation. The investment in added value without any direct utility is to be expected only when a sufficient surplus is available. But this alone is certainly not a sufficient condition: prosperity does not automatically produce art. It is only when an élite chooses to express its status by artistic means, that artistic creativity acquires momentum. Then competing social groups convert productive capital into symbolic capital. A favourable business cycle favours the participation of the middle classes who by imitating the élites enlarge the market for art products and attract more and probably also better artists. The high concentration of artists enhances competition between them and thus the search for conspicuous performances. At the same time, large-scale production reduces the distinctive value of the original artistic forms and provokes the taste for innovation among the wealthiest patrons. The best conditions for artistic creation seem to be found in the socially most diversified and economically most advanced cities; continuity and stability of these characteristics are required, as well as the acceptance in the society of an artistic means of communication. Neither in Bruges nor in any other city in the Burgundian Netherlands was the court a decisive factor because of its mobility and its structurally limited scale. It could never have supported luxury crafts on the vast scale as they existed in Bruges. It did play a role, however, by dominating the scene during particular ceremonies, by commissioning works and by diversifying the taste of all social classes.

What about 'hard times' then? It is obvious that they reduce the demand for artistic production among the middle classes. So the number of producers will have to fall dramatically, as happened in Bruges after 1475. In the arts and crafts, the reactions to the recession were not different from those in the other sectors, such as the textile industry.<sup>32</sup> Concentration in fewer

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<sup>32</sup> See J. Vermaut, *Structural Transformation in a Textile Centre: Bruges from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, and H. Van der Wee, *Dynamics and the Process of Urbanization and De-Urbanization in the Low Countries from the Late Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century. A Synthesis*, H. Van der Wee (ed.), *The Rise*

workshops, some of which employed cheap labour, allowed for specialization and differentiation of production. A limited high quality market existed parallel to one which produced cheaper standardized products. Some economic functions remained active in by-passed core cities, such as Bruges in the early 16th century. Especially banking remained located in the former metropolis for some decades. Moreover, accumulated capital largely stayed in the city, often concentrated in ever fewer hands. Here, Lopez' thesis may apply, albeit for different reasons than those he put forward. As the former commercial élite turned itself more and more into a class of rentiers, it increasingly preferred, for social rather than for economic reasons, to invest in conspicuous artistic consumption, in order to enhance its social status and perhaps to pave the way towards nobility.