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9 ✧ Precious stones, mineral beings:
performative materiality in
fifteenth-century northern art

Brigitte Buettner

EVERYTHING in the painting is seductively lustrous (Figure 9.1). Our gaze glides over the ruby-red seraphim and sapphire-blue cherubim, then latches on to the marmoreal flesh of the child and mother. Other high-gloss, swelling forms demand our attention, like the satiny pearls dotting the textured crown and the gilded throne where they surround globular finials and sharply cut plaques. Of a luminous black, these are animated by white, red, and orangey veins, which re-direct our eyes toward the Virgin's pensive, slit-eyed head. The artist applied those lines with a restless brush, lodging a moment of pure paint into an otherwise congealed environment. That geological energy must have mattered to him because he duplicated it in the almost-but-not-quite identical sardonyx revetment with which he lined the perspectival room in the pendant panel, now several hundred miles away in Berlin.¹ There, the patron, presented by St Stephen, prays – across the frame and the vertiginous gap between the terrestrial and the celestial – to the object of his devotion. Étienne Chevalier was a high-ranking court official, trusted advisor of Charles VII, and, from 1452 to his death in 1474, Treasurer of France. While the exact circumstances of the commission are not documented, it is likely that Jean Fouquet created the gutsy diptych for public display above Chevalier's family tomb in the collegiate church of Notre-Dame in Melun.² Seizing the opportunity to memorialize himself, he demonstratively etched his name next to a penetrating self-portrait on a copper roundel, interpolated among other medallions and love-knots in the frame once draped in lush blue velvet strewn with pearls.

While playing up the contrasts – spatial, chromatic, material – between the two panels, Fouquet ensured that they remain dialectically linked. Hence the reciprocating gestures, the repetition of the sardonyx stone, or the reflected windows on the two visible finials, a conceit that allowed him to unsettle temporal and spatial incommensurability, to incorporate the contingent into the absolute. The painted windows may



9.1. Jean Fouquet, *Virgin and Child*, Melun Diptych, right wing, c. 1452–55, Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten

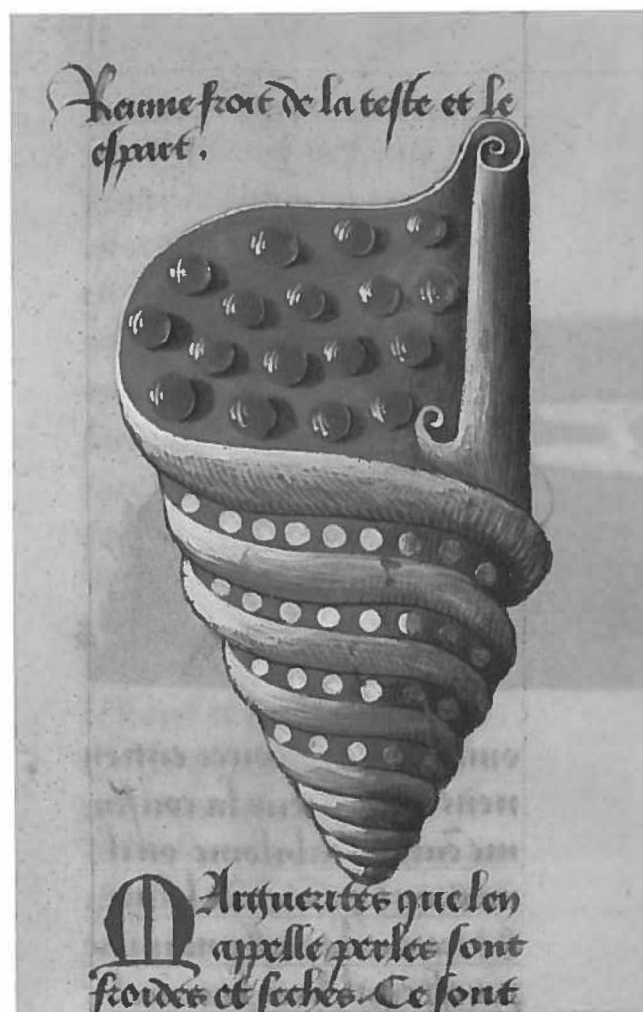
have signalled meanings more specific – Chevalier's Parisian residence was famed for its generous fenestration. Certainly, their semantic reach was broader: cross-mullioned, they functioned as a time-worn metaphor for the Incarnation, the Virgin's undefiled body intact like glass hit, but not broken, by light. Contemporary viewers had ample opportunity to internalize such translated meanings from scriptural exegesis, hymns and Mariological poems, heard during sermons and read in devotional tracts. They also would have effortlessly joined the patron in savouring the Virgin's life-giving, spiritually regenerating milk. Maternal, maidenly, and sexual all at once, she is (un)dressed in a fashionable, tight-fitting blue gown framed by an ermine-lined mantle, its ghostly tint merging with her bleached flesh, its pyramidal shape extended by the virtually transparent veil. The bodice's contour-revealing cut is accentuated by

the rolled-up fabric (which bulks up an impossibly thin waist), the delicate chemise and the laces that for centuries have been loosening in front of viewers' eyes to reveal that unforgettably spherical breast. The painting's measured stereometry is consonant with its restricted colour palette. The whites, reds, and blues are only relieved by splashes of gold and black, and punctuated by more discrete green pauses, the lace, a few emeralds, and, most puzzling, two leek-green stones prominently positioned on the crown's left fleuron. Are these a restorer's mistake? Or a clue about the twinned structure of the entire painting, Virgin and Child, seraphim and cherubim, human and divine, breasts, diptych? Most of the stones serve, however, to cement the painting's dominant chromatic range: balas rubies, polished into cabochons, and plump pearls affixed on to unobtrusive stems. One could have expected to see sapphires; yet the rectangular, table-cut stones are darker, of a shiny obscurity. Both that form and tint would indicate that these are diamonds, which by the middle of the fifteenth century had started their inexorable ascent toward the top of the hierarchy of gemmed value.

But in truth, these stones are illegible, hovering somewhere between sapphire and diamond. I like to think that this indeterminacy was purposeful, a means for Fouquet to invite multiple interpretations. Following long-standing allegorical explanations, the sapphire connoted the celestial and the regal, while the rare, most precious diamond of adamantine strength symbolized Christ himself. This surprising equivalence between god and mineral had been proposed as far back as the early Christian *Physiologus*, an influential Alexandrian compilation that inaugurated the tropological deciphering of things-of-nature. Systematically engineering links between the visible and the invisible, it hitched salient characteristics of animals and a handful of stones to divine beings, basic tenets of faith, moral truths, licit and illicit behaviour. And to the Virgin, signified by unblemished pearls.³

According to the *Physiologus* and the medieval and Renaissance bestiaries and lapidaries it inspired, pearl oysters dwell on the ocean floor. Except in the morning when they rise to the surface where, valves opened, they absorb drops of dew, a gossamer semen which eventually coagulates with their mucous core to form large single pearls or aggregates of smaller specimens (Figure 9.2). Should a sudden thunderstorm frighten the animals, it is a miscarriage, and pearly freaks the result.⁴ But the pious *Physiologus* refuses to entertain that possibility: monstrosity is not part of its vocabulary insofar as the copulation of heaven and earth cannot but yield a flawless Incarnate.

Because things have a habit of dispersing in the quicksand of competing significations, such figurative readings were predestined for the multivalent. Red stones, whether sards, rubies, garnets, carnelians or the



9.2. Pearl shell, Matthaeus Platearius, *Le livre des simples médecines*, Burgundy, 1470s, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Fr. 9137, fol. 204

much admired if entirely fictional carbuncle, could evoke the Passion and the sacrificial blood of martyrs; but also fire, though that could be unravelled as the spiritual love imparted by the Holy Ghost, the burning desire for charity, the scorching flames of Hell, and much more besides.⁵ Such ready-made interpretative keys are attractive, especially when confronted with something as intractable to discourse as the mineral. I want to take a different route, however, and attend to what lies beyond textually based meanings. The aim is to restore stones' being, and, in the same move, mine their potential for variegated symbolic practices so as to show that mineral materiality was as loquacious as it

was performative. From this vantage point, Fouquet's radically mineralized panel looks even less conventional; it's as if an alchemical operation had solidified ethereal flesh, and patches of utmost physical density had been summoned to embody non-human corporeality. This paradoxical communion of subjects and objects, here engendering rocky creatures, there procreating stones, is only conceivable against a background in which the absolute divide between the organic and the inorganic, the gelid boundaries between matter alive and dead were attenuated, perhaps altogether inoperative, certainly anachronistic. Foucault has taught us that these are modern certitudes. And to see the early modern 'prose of the world' instead as a system that ceaselessly wove strands across discontinuous orders of beings, powered by similitudes that encouraged animals to echo with stones, stones to rhyme with plants, and both to converse with humans. Similitudes, it bears stressing, are no more metaphors than analogies are allegories.⁶ Stimulated by things' tangible fibres, they delved into the very thingliness of creatures: a pearly Virgin, imagined by an insightful painter who mused on the uncertain limits between metaphor (the Virgin as if a gem) and literalism (the Virgin is a gem).

Hyper-material and hyper-feminine, Fouquet's Madonna is a dual being through and through, especially if we accept the interpretation that she is a (not so) veiled portrait of an actual woman, Agnes Sorel, the first recorded official French royal mistress, and as much the stuff of legend as Joan of Arc, the other heroine who rescued Charles VII from gloom and doom.⁷ Scholars have long debated the merits of this identification, first put forward by the antiquarian Denis Godefroy after his visit to the church of Melun in 1661. While it could be a romanticizing backformation, several copies of a sketch Fouquet drew of Sorel leave little doubt that he consented to his patron's wishes to fold the courtesan into the Virgin.⁸ Virginal, Sorel was not. By the time of her death in 1450, caused by an overdose of mercury (either by accident or crime), she had given the king three daughters and was buried with a stillborn foetus.⁹ Chevalier was one of the executors of her will, had been her close friend, and may have offered the Melun Diptych as a posthumous tribute. Nicknamed Dame de Beauté, a pun on both her beauty and the residence near Paris that she had received from the king, Sorel was unanimously extolled by her contemporaries for her physical charms. With regard to her character and social standing, opinions were considerably more divided. To some, she was a charitable saviour of the nation, rumoured to have pawned her jewels to pay for the king's soldiers; to others, she behaved like a Marie-Antoinette squanderer, depleting royal funds to finance her spendthrift habits. Georges Chastelain, the official Burgundian chronicler, subscribed to this latter view. Though he could be impartial when describing members of the opposite

royalist camp, his pen-portrait of Sorel is vitriolic. A seductress of lowly birth, she had the presumption to keep a queenly estate, demanding the best in cuisine, furniture, linens, plate, and gems. It was her sartorial extravagance, however, that in Chastellain's view drove her off the map of acceptable norms. Showy and wasteful, her gowns were overly long, the headgear inordinately high, and, as Fouquet's portrait confirms, the cuts of her bodices, revealing her breasts down to the nipples, overtly provocative. But whereas the painter lifted his brush in fascinated attention, the writer took the path that maps legible surfaces on to a person's interiority, inevitably spiralling downward into an abysmal vision of moral turpitude, vanity, dissoluteness, promiscuity, all fuelling the general corruption that was pushing the French kingdom toward disaster.¹⁰

Chastellain and Fouquet agreed on one thing: the only treasure Sorel had to offer was her body. Unlike, that is, legitimate wives, who on top of producing one offspring after another brought copious dowries to replenish their husband's coffers with land, subjects, cash, and things. Precious things above all. To take just one example among many, when in 1389 the Milanese princess Valentina Visconti crossed the Alps to join her fiancé Louis of Orléans, her baggage contained crowns, belts, necklaces, brooches, rings, jewels, garments, books, and lots of money. From the meticulous inventories that were drawn upon receipt, we learn that the objects were loaded with some 125 rubies, 310 sapphires, 150 diamonds, 28 emeralds, and more than 7,000 pearls.¹¹ Two crowns are listed first, the larger of which must have been similar to the one rendered by Fouquet, and not very different from the one owned several decades later by Margaret of York (Figure 9.3).

This is one of the rare survivors of gem-encrusted luxury objects, produced in great quantity for wealthy consumers. Contemporaries categorized them as *joyaux*, a term that encompassed regalia, jewellery, and costly plate as well as fancy liturgical objects and relic containers. Far from registering as minor or decorative arts, such prestige objects had to satisfy sophisticated technical demands and aesthetic expectations. Yet crafted of metals, easy to melt, and bestrewn with gems, easy to detach, reuse or sell, they were vulnerable to destruction, and hardly any have survived the blows dispatched by later cash-strapped owners or by those who wanted something stylistically more *au courant*. If Margaret of York's crown escaped obliteration it is because it had become inalienable: the duchess had deposited it in the celestial bank vault by gifting it to a miracle-working image of Our Lady while on a pilgrimage to Aachen in 1474.¹² Whether the crown had been purpose-made for the sculpture (hence its small size) or refitted from the one Margaret wore at her wedding to Charles the Bold (hence the Cs and Ms tied by a love-knot and the quartered arms of Burgundy and England) remains



9.3. Crown of Margaret of York, 1460s, silver-gilt, enamels, precious stones, h. 13.2 cm, d. 12.5 cm, Aachen, Cathedral Treasury

a matter of debate. On the crown's body, white enamelled Yorkist roses harbour large sapphires and rubies; they alternate with the letters that spell out the owner's name, executed in opaque white, and translucent red and green enamel. The best stones, showing the most advanced cuts, each nestling within a double-petalled flower mark the frontal axis: a voluminous balas ruby hedged in by three multifaceted diamonds; a large natural pearl; and, on the circlet proper, an exquisitely wrought trefoiled diamond cross with a shield-shaped twinned diamond (*macle*) placed at the crossing of the arms.

It matters little for my purpose if this particular crown's first function was bridal or votive. Resplendent trappings were coterminous with any elite creature. Human or divine, Margaret or Mary had to abide by the same rule, and exude what Gaston Bachelard, who has written some of the best pages on the poetics of the mineral, nicely called 'droplets of concentrated ostentation'.¹³ Failing to do so was tantamount to losing the most incontrovertible sign of distinction, meant being demoted to the level of those whose existence was, quite literally, lacklustre. The rapidly expanding market economy of the late medieval period did not fundamentally alter that class-specific logic; its terms simply shifted as new thresholds of prestige investment were devised, tested, enforced, transgressed. Though a persistent if inaccurate view has it that Sorel was

the first to wear diamonds, she may have been the first commoner to do so openly. Middle-class buyers were asked to be content with cheaper jewels adorned with locally mined stones or glass imitations in lieu of the prized Oriental gems, so prominently foregrounded by Fouquet and which sumptuary laws endeavoured to earmark for the upper echelons.¹⁴

Not that there was no room for individual variation. Gemmophiles were free to embrace the dictates of jewelled existence, gemmophobes to distance themselves, and the majority that fell somewhere in between to modulate their materialism according to their means and preferences, provided that consumption and display remain commensurate with rank. No surprise, then, that fifteenth-century princely inventories list gem-set objects almost *ad nauseam*. And nowhere more so than in the vast material archive of the four Valois dukes of Burgundy, uncontested masters in the manipulation of courtly pomp, experts in overcoming friend and foe by the evidence of exalted materiality. When writing about Louis XI's official entry into Paris in the late summer of 1461, Chastellain cannot refrain from lingering on the unequalled opulence of the Burgundian delegation, its materials and colours so choreographed to throw Philip the Good into maximum relief:

The duke of Burgundy wore a plume on his hat of inestimable price; it was garnished with nine large rubies, five large diamonds, three of the largest and clearest pearls on earth, and sixty-two other pearls of great value; and on the chamfer of his horse there were likewise nine large rubies interspersed with pearls without number. And on the sallet, carried behind him, was set a rich ruby of Flanders, the marvel [*outrépas*] of Christendom.¹⁵

Note the emphasis on the stones' large size. Most provocative seems the fact that a gem – simultaneously thing, commodity, and metonymy for the duke – could be hailed as *the* marvel of Christendom.

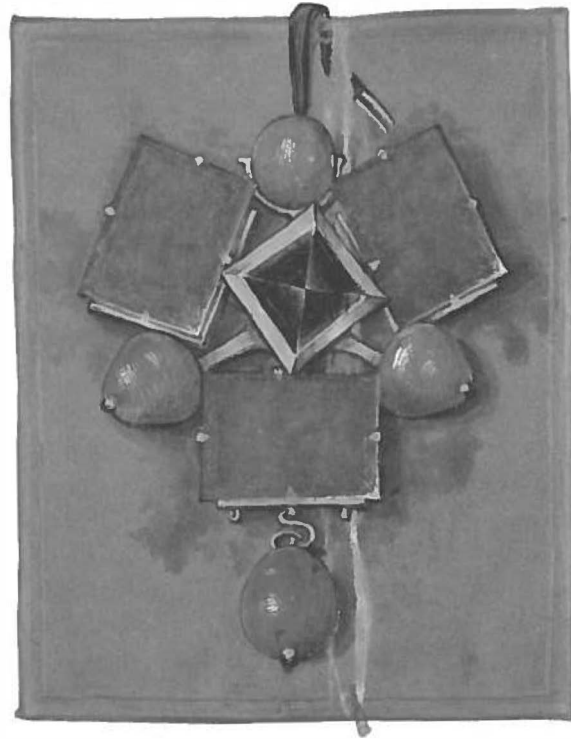
Whatever political motivation pushed him to accumulate more and more, Philip the Good was a passionate gemmophile. Permanently clad in black in memory of his murdered father, the third Burgundian duke interspersed the silks, damasks, and velvets he wore on ceremonial occasions with a sea of nacreous pearls, tender balas rubies, cerulean sapphires, verdant emeralds and, above all, sparkling diamonds. Of the seventy-two carts that transported his belongings from Dijon to Lille in 1435, five were requisitioned for his *joyaux*, equal to the number required by the kitchen.¹⁶ Chastellain goes a step further, implying that the duke's passion bordered on lithomania: preferring to toy with his stones, 'of which he had more than anyone else', he refused to touch money because he considered it venal and vile.¹⁷ The picture drawn by Leo of Rozmital, a Bohemian nobleman who in the 1460s travelled on a Grand

Tour to visit courts and shrines and beautiful women, is equally telling. When he and his companions stopped in Brussels, the protocol included a viewing of the host's jewels. While other courts reserved the same treat for distinguished guests, it is doubtful that Philip's peers were as fastidious in asking that a table be appointed upon which to exhibit a selection of 'clothes adorned with pearls and gems' as well as 'all the precious stones, arranged according to their various names'.¹⁸

The 'various names' may have designated classes of gemstones. Alternatively, they may have been given to discrete items since it was standard practice for princely collectors to salvage objects from worthless anonymity by subjectivizing them. The inventories of Jean de Berry list no fewer than twenty-five individually named stones, the majority of which are rubies and balas rubies – the Ruby of the Quail, the Ruby of the Mountain, the Balas of the Pope, and, as expected, the Ruby of Berry, labels clearly devised to particularize a shape, disclose a provenance, memorialize a donor.¹⁹ When Berry's brother, Philip the Bold, the first duke of Burgundy, commissioned a pendant (later transformed into a brooch) from the fashionable goldsmith Hermann Ruissel, the inventories baptized it the Three Brothers, promptly anthropomorphizing the three 70-carat balas rubies that dominated its streamlined composition (Figure 9.4).²⁰

Like most of its kin, it has been lost; more fortunate than others, its two-dimensional shadow survives in a handsome coloured drawing. It confirms that Ruissel used a discreet golden armature to foreground the stones, and that, in a studied contrast of colours, lustre, and volumes, he arrayed the table-cut rubies (simplified and darkened in this rendering) and four substantial pearls (one dangling) around a huge point-cut diamond octahedron, at that time the *ne plus ultra* of lapidary art and must-have things.²¹

Small size and mobility explain why gems were prone to vanish without a trace in the rubbish heap of history, except when their size, purity, or unusual mineralogical features marked them out for preservation. Thus equipped, they had a better chance to be singled out with a proper name, increasing the likelihood that they be viewed as memorials of affective bonds and dynastic heirlooms. Passing from hand to hand, generation to generation, gems and jewels not only accrued value but also crossed into the enchanted realm of things endowed with a 'cultural biography'.²² Coated with this kind of transpersonal charisma, the Three Brothers' brooch weathered the Burgundian demise, and resumed its mineralizing work on Tudor bodies once Henry VIII bought it from the Fuggers in 1543. The Augsburg banking powerhouse had acquired it along with other prominent Burgundian *joyaux* some forty years earlier from the civic authorities of Basel, in whose hands they had landed as



9.4. Watercolour of the *Three Brothers' Brooch*, before 1504, 21 × 18 cm, Basel, Historisches Museum, Inv. 1916.475

war spoils, retrieved after the crushing defeat of Charles the Bold at the battle of Grandson in 1476. Burgundian self-fashioning mandated that the duke enter the battlefield wielding a sword studded with gems, his body protected by a carapace of metal flashing with more.²³ Not content with these droplets of concentrated ostentation, he also brought along several loose stones, including his most eminent diamond, which in the words of Philippe de Commines was 'perhaps the largest and finest jewel in Christendom'. Never mind the historian's hyperbole. The bauble failed to impress the Swiss ignoramus who drew it from its protective case, threw it back under the wagon mistaking it for glass, then thought better of it, and sold it to a priest for the risible sum of one florin.²⁴ That casual attitude short-changed (and unwittingly critiqued) the duke's attachment to the stone not only in an economic and social sense but also because it negated a quality that would have been paramount to its erstwhile owner: the diamond's talismanic role, its ability to render its owner invincible. Though it obviously failed to shield Charles from the realpolitik of iron-blows, common knowledge, reinforced by authoritative texts, the encyclopaedias and lapidaries with which his library was

well stocked, had maintained it would – did not its very name, *adamas*, meaning invincible or indomitable, hold the promise to steel him down to his core?

In addition to preventing military defeat, lapidaries assured readers, stones could be deployed to blind enemies and split their lungs, detect spies, rout entire armies. Generally, however, their conduct was less bellicose, though it remained sufficiently vigorous to act on tissues and organs, influence minds, change the course of nature, interfere with the natural, meddle in the preternatural. Of immediate efficacy or predictive value, stones were capable of averting diseases or, if too late, of curing them; of making one clever and handsome; of multiplying crops and offering protection during trips; of scaring ghosts away and even of conjuring up the shadows of the dead. At Grandson, Charles the Bold also left behind a ring set with a *selenites* (not our moonstone), a gem reputed to bring relief to people afflicted with a wasting disease and to reconcile lovers, rekindling passion where it had dwindled. Such multi-tasking was typical, often facilitated by interconnected similitudes: given that the *selenites*, or at least a spot imprinted on it, seemed to wax and wane in synchrony with the phases of the moon, it made sense that its reach spread into disorders in which volume and intensity play a role. A striking illustration of a prose of the world premised on incessant exchanges between the astral, the earthly, and the human, the therapeutic energies of the *selenites* were far from metaphorical. Regulated by the underlying principles of sympathy and antipathy, they tapped into the forces that inhered in the entire cosmos, the same that emboldened red stones to operate as styptics and empowered wine-coloured stones, such as the amethyst, to prevent drunkenness. Of the virginal pearls, beautifully depicted in the Burgundian copy of the herbal known as the *Livre des simples médecines* (see Figure 9.2), one would have appreciated the cleansing properties, able to flush the body of excessive fluids as well as to bring solace to a heart heavy with sorrow.²⁵ Rippling from the animal to the human, coursing from the bodily to the mental, pearls additionally lessened bouts of melancholy and tamed bursts of anger – neither of which was foreign to Charles the Bold.

This is the crux of my story: the lapidary vulgate was concerned with what it called stones' virtues (*virtutes*). Accordingly, getting a grip on minerals' workings imposed itself as urgent a hermeneutic task as explicating their doctrinal significance. The ability to affect and effect was deemed so key that it was taken as the touchstone by which to determine whether a clump of earth was or not precious. Although it need not be the case, the aesthetic and the performative conveniently coincided in the most highly valued gemstones. Those, invariably, hailed from the East. There, far away, close to the sun, the earthly paradise

within reach, nature bestowed her gifts with unmatched prodigality while the impoverished West was essentially bereft of her most accomplished masterpieces. Natural rarities hauled for a hefty price half way across the globe proved even more irresistible with this veneer of Edenic exoticism. Short of that, other mythologizing tales about minerals' origins kept gemmophiles both satiated and always craving for more, bigger, and better. Lapidaries tend to shy away from geographic information. Travel literature filled that gap, offering a respectable selection of stony Shangri-Las: Taprobane (Sri Lanka) awash in sapphires and rubies of dimensions that strain belief; mysterious Scythia, blessed with emerald-filled crags, cursed with fierce griffins to guard them; India and the Valley of Diamonds of Sinbad and Marco Polo fame; and the much searched-for though by definition always-elusive realm of Prester John watered by the gem-packed Idonus, a textual tributary of one of the four rivers of Paradise.

Genesis states that the Phison circles the land of Havilah 'where gold groweth' and that it carries in its waters 'bdellium and the onyx stone' (Genesis 2:11–12). Not only did that become shorthand for gems in general but it also provided the foundational proof that the mineral kingdom had been brought into being by God himself. In the Ghent Altarpiece (Figure 9.5), this river has been represented with thoughtful attention. Still a rivulet, channelled through a devilish spout, it trickles around the panelled marble basin of the Fountain of Life before emptying out, beyond the frame, on to the actual altar next to which we can imagine the kneeling patrons Jodocus Vijd and Elizabeth Borluut. Prayers and visual contemplation guided them toward the redemptive waters, following in the footsteps of the endless mass of adoring righteous – martyrs, prophets, judges, knights, hermits, pilgrims – that pour in from the sides. These are the 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5) that constitute the Heavenly Jerusalem, the metaphoric twins of the twelve precious stones that provide its foundation (Revelation 21:19–20). Eight being the number of Resurrection, the octagonal fountain is at once primeval and apocalyptic, its vivifying contents both the river of the Garden of Eden and the 'water of life, clear as crystal' that proceeds from the divine throne (Revelation 22:1). Barely perceptible to the unaware eye, a dense scattering of sapphires and rubies, crystals and pearls lines the streambed. Far fewer than the specimens mentioned in the Bible, they correspond to the ones we have seen all along, and that here continue to blaze, now in full sight, from the jewel-laden celestial court in the upper register painted by Jan, the younger and more famous of the two van Eyck brothers.²⁶

But let us first move sideways, to the panel on the right where the approaching hermits are about to tread upon other stones. As our eyes



9.5. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, open position, completed 1432, Ghent, Cathedral of St Bavo

crawl around the dried-out geological matrix, crystalline pebbles and a smattering of coral branches emerge while a burly pumice stone imposes itself toward the foreground where it hugs the tormented bedrock littered with wispy fossils.²⁷ Why crystal, coral, pumice? Keeping in mind that all were classified as minerals, and leaving aside whatever other significations (pictorial, allegorical, medicinal, magical) they may have conveyed,²⁸ I would suggest that van Eyck planted them there because he knew that all were brought into being through transmutation – ice frozen into crystal, underwater plant stiffened into coral, foam hardened into porous rock.²⁹ Rock crystal reappears in the compellingly illusionistic prayer beads fingered by St Anthony, which visually align with the hexagonal quartz underneath his left foot, one end chipped, as if damaged and yet capable of plenitude. Since it also provides the material for the most exalted object, the near-diaphanous, tubular sceptre held by the Almighty, one could say that the mineral universe of the Ghent Altarpiece has been calibrated so that the protracted transformation of the naturally rugged into the artfully contrived correlates with the long march from antediluvian creation to the ceasing of time.

In the Melun Diptych, Fouquet achieved something similar. He too resorted to geological transfiguration to lead us from the superbly

rendered rough silex that features at the centre of the Berlin panel as St Stephen's lapidation stone to the room's manufactured marbles and – further up and away in time – to the gemmed celestial court in the Antwerp wing.³⁰ In Jan's handling, that place enjoys the same monopoly over brilliant *artificialia*, gems polished into rounded cabochons and chiselled into rectangles, lozenges, and pyramids; in short, perfection extracted from the evolving sublunar domain of *naturalia*. With unsurpassed phenomenological patience, he noted the patches of white on each of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of stones. And admitted the outside further by imprinting a stately Gothic window on to the bulging sapphire that anchors the cluster brooch worn by the first singing – and mediating – angel, a reflection in line with his better-known self-referential devices in other paintings. But, astute court artist that he was, he knew how to marry such peaks of visual gratification with the politics of representation. He therefore graduated his *joyaux*, saving the heftiest for the thoroughly mineralized King of Kings. On the clasp that fastens his ample vermilion cap, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, and pearls, in claw, box, and bowl settings, are massed around a sizeable point-cut diamond set in a slick box mount. Pared-down versions embellish the Virgin's glorious crown and the angels' circlets. All of these are viewed from an angle. Close scrutiny reveals that God's is not strictly frontal either: the painter rotated it ever so slightly and inclined the Holy Face ever so gently, thus allowing mineral apotheosis and beatific vision to jointly include the viewer's point of view.

Showing how things look and how we perceive them, how they obey or transcend physical constraints, was not enough for an artist of Jan's pictorial stamina. Though not alone in adapting his brushstrokes and pigments to the structure and texture of things, he did so more methodically, as if to imply that in yoking the optical to the tactile, he and his viewers could gain access to an object's essence, attain its inner truth, unlock the very soul of the matter.³¹ His material imagination and medial sophistication are such that his signs turn into the hammer of the goldsmith, the needle of the seamstress, the weft of the weaver, the pipe of the glassblower, the quill of the scribe, and indeed the diamond point of the lapidary. Panofsky got it right when he said that the Flemish master 'builds his world out of his pigments as nature builds hers out of primary matter' and that his paintings can therefore claim 'to be both a real object – and a precious object at that – and a reconstruction rather than a mere representation of the visible world'.³² Centuries earlier, Albrecht Dürer had expressed the same sentiment when writing that 'Jan's picture' struck him as *köstlich* (most precious) and *hoch verständig gemählt*, which can be translated as 'painted very knowledgeably'.³³

We can press the implication of this intertwining of worth and ingenuity further. For if one wanted to reconstruct rather than merely mimic the real, then more had to be mobilized than shapes and outlines. Artists' fingers had to sink into stuff as they learned how to brew wood, chalk, oil, egg; how to grind, mix, and fire organic and mineral substances into representation; how to test materials' density and viscosity, creating with their demands and against their resistances; in sum, had to make materiality perform *in itself* before it could do so *for something else*. Take the way Jan fabricated his blues. Depending on their destination as sky, flower, cloth, or precious stone, he adjusted the proportions of lead white, azurite, and lapis lazuli. The intensely blue expanse of the Virgin's cloak, for example, consists of a fairly dense base layer of azurite into which some lapis has been injected, topped with a watery glaze of pure ultramarine. But gone is the azurite when we move to the sapphires: van Eyck let those sparkle as unadulterated lapis lazuli, combining in one and the same gesture material practice and mimetic theory. Analyses conducted during the 1951 restoration as well as later examinations have conclusively put to rest the guesswork about the Flemish master's painting technique. There is no wizardry about it; he did not use secret binding agents or a mysterious system of glazes. Its strength derived from the synthesis of unusually fine observational skills and a consummate knowledge of the medium; the virtuoso blending of visible paint particles suspended in invisible pine resin and linseed oil; the gradual shifting from translucent to transparent surfaces or light-absorbing to light-reflecting layers.³⁴ More than imitating everything under the sun, more than materializing things seen and unseen, pleasing patrons and viewers, the 'whole art of painting' must therefore appropriate nature's transformational energies, absorb its atoms to conjure up social subjects and desirable objects.³⁵ In its own way, this is an art of similitudes.

Notes

With my thanks to Michael Gorra, Craig Harbison, and Dana Leibsohn for their incisive comments. And to Nicola Courtright and Cynthia Hahn for having invited me to share an earlier version with their students.

- 1 Those plaques are sometimes identified as marbles, often as onyx. In lapidaries, the sardonix is the only three-coloured stone with a black base. The most popular lapidary in the fifteenth century was Book 16 of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum*, written in the mid-thirteenth century after earlier sources (such as Pliny, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Marbode), and translated into several vernacular languages.
- 2 Most extensively examined by: C. Schaefer, 'Le Diptyque de Melun de Jean Fouquet conservé à Anvers et à Berlin', *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (1975), pp. 7–100, shortened and revised in *Jean Fouquet an der Schwelle zur Renaissance* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1994), pp. 139–51; A. Châtelet, 'La Reine Blanche de Fouquet: Remarques sur le Diptyque de Melun', in A. Châtelet and N. Reynaud (eds), *Études d'art*

- français offerts à Charles Sterling (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975), pp. 127–38; D. Thiébaud in F. Avril (ed.), *Jean Fouquet: Peintre et enlumineur du XVe siècle*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris: Hazan, 2003), pp. 121–37.
- 3 F. Carmody (ed.), 'Physiologus latinus versio Y', *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 12 (1941), chapters 24 and 47 for the diamond, chapter 23 for the pearl. The online Aberdeen Bestiary Project (www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/intro.hti; accessed on 14 February 2014) offers convenient access to the English translation of an expanded version plus abundant documentation.
 - 4 The template for subsequent descriptions is Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* 9.106–11, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 234–9.
 - 5 C. Meier, *Gemma spiritalis: Methode und Gebrauch der Edelsteinallegorese vom frühen Christentum bis ins 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: W. Fink, 1977), pp. 147–52.
 - 6 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), pp. 17–45. And, building on it, B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 51–69, for the argument that the Great Divide between sovereign subjects and supine objects is a foundational myth of modernity.
 - 7 In the satirical poem *La Pucelle d'Orléans*, Voltaire was among the first to associate the two. It is evident that his fantasmatic description of Sorel's breast, inviting squeezing hands, voyeuristic gazes and kissing lips, was inspired by Fouquet's painting. For the ways in which the nineteenth century mythologized Sorel, see E. Schwartz, 'À propos du buste dit d'Agnès Sorel conservé à l'École des Beaux-arts: Les Fantaisies de la légende, de la politique et de l'histoire de l'art', *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques* 29 (2002), pp. 81–103.
 - 8 Avril (ed.), *Jean Fouquet*, pp. 149–53. X-ray analysis has shown that Fouquet copied the Antwerp Virgin through pouncing from a model over which he ended up painting, rather bafflingly, a portrait of Charles VII. See N. Reynaud, *Jean Fouquet, Les Dossiers du Département de Peintures* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1981), pp. 12–22 and pp. 34–5; 'La Radiographie du Portrait de Charles VII par Fouquet', *Revue du Louvre* 33:2 (1983), pp. 97–9.
 - 9 Her remains were exhumed in 2004. Extensive scientific analysis revealed high levels of mercury, which was used as a poison, a vermifuge, and to induce labour, all applicable to Sorel. Detailed by Pascal Dubrisay, *Agnès Sorel: Féminité et modernité* (Tours: Concept-Image, 2006).
 - 10 Georges Chastellain, 'Chronique', in J. Kervyn de Lettenhove (ed.), *Oeuvres* (Brussels: Heussner, 1863–66), vol. 4, pp. 365–6, to which one can oppose the posthumous apology, perhaps inspired by the king, penned by Jean Chartier, *Chronique de Charles VII*, ed. Valet de Viriville (Paris, 1858), vol. 2, pp. 181–6. The most complete biography and reception history of Sorel remains Pierre Champion, *La Dame de Beauté: Agnès Sorel* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1931), in particular pp. 37–41.
 - 11 J. Camus, 'La Venue en France de Valentine Visconti, Duchesse d'Orléans, et l'inventaire de ses bijoux apportés de Lombardie', *Miscellanea di storia italiana*, series 3, 5 (1900), pp. 3–63.
 - 12 P.W. Hammond, 'The coronet of Margaret of York', *The Ricardian* 6 (1984), pp. 362–5; E.G. Grimme, *Der Aachener Domschatz*, special issue of *Aachener Kunstblätter* 42 (1972), pp. 111–12; R. Marks and P. Williamson (eds), *Gothic: Art for England 1400–1547*, exhibition catalogue (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2003), pp. 154–5, no. 11; H. van der Velden, *The Donor's Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 215–17. And more generally on the typology of queenly crowns, P.E. Schramm et al., *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte vom dritten bis zum sechzehnten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1954–78), vol. 3, pp. 991–1003.

- 13 G. Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. K. Haltman (Dallas, TX: Institute of Humanities and Culture, 2002), p. 242.
- 14 R.W. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery, with a Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria & Albert Museum* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1992), pp. 79–89.
- 15 Chastellain, 'Chronique', vol. 4, p. 77.
- 16 R. Vaughan, *Philip the Good: The Apogee of Burgundy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), p. 142.
- 17 Chastellain, 'Les Hauts Faits du duc de Bourgogne', in de Lettenhove (ed.), *Oeuvres*, vol. 7, p. 223.
- 18 M. Letts (ed.), *The Travels of Leo of Rozmital through Germany, Flanders, England, France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, 1465–1467* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 38.
- 19 J. Guiffrey, *Inventaires de Jean, Duc de Berry (1401–1416)* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1894–96), vol. 1, lxxxix–xcv; and more generally on the duke's passion for jewels, M. Camille, 'For our devotion and pleasure': The sexual objects of Jean, Duc de Berry', *Art History* 24:2 (2001), pp. 169–94.
- 20 E. Kovács, *L'Âge d'or de l'orfèvrerie parisienne au temps des princes de Valois* (Paris: Faton, 2004), pp. 152–79; F. Deuchler, *Die Burgunderbeute* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1963), pp. 123–4; S. Marti, T.H. Borchert, and G. Keck (eds), *Splendour of the Burgundian Court: Charles the Bold (1433–1477)*, exhibition catalogue (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2009), no. 97.
- 21 The best work on gem cutting and setting techniques during the fifteenth century is Fritz Falk, *Edelsteinschliff und Fassungsformen im späten Mittelalter und im 16. Jahrhundert: Studien zur Geschichte der Edelsteine und des Schmuckes* (Ulm: Kempter, 1975), of which a short English summary was published in *Princely Magnificence: Court Jewels of the Renaissance, 1500–1630* (London: Debrett's Peerage in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1980), pp. 20–6.
- 22 I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: Commodization as process', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91.
- 23 Deuchler, *Burgunderbeute*, p. 98; and for a broader discussion of the Burgundian 'language of splendour', M. Belozerskaya, *Rethinking the Renaissance: Burgundian Arts Across Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 24 Philippe de Commines, *Mémoires* 5.2, ed. J. Blanchard (Geneva: Droz, 2007), vol. 1, p. 327, who concludes that the rich booty taught the Swiss one lesson: the value of money.
- 25 G. Malandin, F. Avril, and P. Lieutaghi, *Le Livre des simples médecines d'après le manuscrit français 12322 de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris* (Paris: Oualid, 1986), p. 280, note 16; M. Platearius, *Le Livre des simples médecines*, ed. Paul Dorveaux (Paris: Société Française d'Histoire, 1913), p. 120, numbers 698–9; and, more generally, M. Collins, *Medieval Herbals: The Illustrative Traditions* (London: British Library, 2000).
- 26 Controversies about the respective contributions of Hubert and Jan are endemic in van Eyck studies, witness the exchange between H. van der Velden and V. Herzner published in *Simiolus* 35 (2011), pp. 5–39, 127–30, and 131–40.
- 27 K. Bé, 'Geological aspects of Jan van Eyck's "Saint Francis receiving the stigmata"', in *Jan van Eyck: Two Paintings of 'Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata'* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1997), pp. 88–95.
- 28 For the medicinal dimension, see P.H. Jolly, 'Jan van Eyck's Italian pilgrimage: A miraculous Florentine Annunciation and the Ghent Altarpiece', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 61:3 (1998), pp. 369–94.
- 29 According to the definitions given by Isidore of Seville in his influential *Etymologies*, trans. S.A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and O. Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): crystal, 16.13.1 (p. 325), coral, 16.8.1 (p. 323), pumice 16.3.7 (p. 319).

- 30 On Fouquet's talent in portraying things as well as people, see Erik Inglis, *Jean Fouquet and the Invention of France: Art and Nation after the Hundred Years War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); on temporal intimations, A. Acres, 'Small physical history: The trickling past of early Netherlandish painting', in C. Heck and K. Lippincott (eds), *Symbols of Time in the History of Art* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), pp. 7–25.
- 31 P. Schmidt, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, trans. L. Preedy (Leuven: Davidsfond, 2005), p. 9. And more broadly, L. Seidel, 'The value of verisimilitude in the art of Jan van Eyck', *Yale French Studies*, special issue: *Contexts: Style and Values in Medieval Art and Literature* (1991), pp. 25–43; 'Visual representation as instructional text: Jan van Eyck and *The Ghent Altarpiece*', in P.H. Smith and B. Schmidt (eds), *Making Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Practices, Objects, and Texts, 1400–1800* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 45–67.
- 32 E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953; New York: Harper & Row, reprint 1971), p. 181; and W.R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).
- 33 It is important to be literal here, as opposed to the painting 'full of thought' proposed by J.A. Goris and G. Marlier (eds), *Albrecht Dürer: Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands, 1520–1521*, trans. P. Troutman (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971), p. 87; for the original see H. Rupprich, *Dürer: Schriftlicher Nachlass* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstgeschichte, 1956–69), vol. 1, p. 168.
- 34 P. Philippot, 'Vision et exécution eyckiennes', in P. Coremans (ed.), *L'Agneau mystique au laboratoire: Examen et traitement* (Antwerp: De Sikkkel, 1953), pp. 94–7, and R. White, 'Van Eyck's technique: The myth and reality, II', in S. Foister, S. Jones, and D. Cool (eds), *Investigating Jan van Eyck* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 101–5.
- 35 This is inspired by the argument put forward by P.H. Smith in *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), pp. 51–5. The 'whole art of painting' comes from the earliest recorded observation on the Ghent Altarpiece made in 1495 by the German humanist Hieronymus Münzer.

10 ✧ Carving life: the meaning of wood in early modern European sculpture

Christina Neilson

WOOD WAS a favourite material for Renaissance sculpture. Because it was readily available across Europe, and because common species were not as expensive as other materials, many scholars have assumed that cost and availability were the reasons it was chosen. The surviving evidence, however, suggests that when wood was selected, often it was *not* because of cost or availability. Moreover, some subjects (such as the Penitent Magdalene) were made almost exclusively of wood in regions that otherwise preferred marble and bronze for sacred subjects. Why then was wood, and wood of particular species, chosen? This chapter examines wooden sculptures mainly of religious subjects from a range of regions, concentrating primarily on figural sculpture from the Italian peninsula. It explores how certain types of wood were chosen for their symbolic properties, properties that were believed to invest a sculpture with a spiritual force. It will be argued that wood was preferred for certain subjects because it was considered a living material that operated like a human body, with veins, humours, blood, and a complexion.¹

The type of wood for sculpture was sometimes stipulated by guilds. In fourteenth-century Cologne, for example, only walnut was to be used for sacred objects, whereas in Lübeck it was oak.² At other times, commissioners demanded a specific wood. In 1389, for instance, the Lucchese artist Domenico di Fazino was ordered to use pearwood or wood from the tree known as 'gatto' (probably white poplar) for an Annunciate Virgin and Saint Michael Archangel.³ On occasion, timber was provided by the patron. When Anton II Tucher, First Losunger (senior civic officer) of Nuremberg, commissioned Veit Stoss's *Annunciation of the Rosary* (1517–18, Saint Lorenzkirche, Nuremberg), he had a lime tree felled for the artist.⁴ On 4 August 1408, Caterino di Corsino, from the *Operai del Duomo* in Siena, purchased wood for four figures to be carved by Francesco di Valdambriano.⁵ Sometimes artists were responsible for selecting their