



A Prayer Nut in a Silver Housing by 'Adam Dirckz'*

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More than forty years ago, Jaap Leeuwenberg, then curator of sculpture at the Rijksmuseum, drew attention to a group of prayer nuts – extraordinary, tiny examples of late medieval carving (figs. 1, 2).¹ They are not real nuts, of course, but large beads about the size of a table tennis ball made of turned wood.² The outsides of the beads are decorated with carved openwork Gothic tracery with spaces behind it. These may have been designed to hold sweet-smelling substances that spread their fragrance when the beads were used. This would make these objects directly akin to the pomanders that came into fashion at around this time.³ The Gothic tracery could, however, also be intended to suggest the presence of a small relic, so that the object took on the character of a talisman and was deemed to have an apotropaic effect.⁴ As their name implies, however, prayer nuts were intended first and foremost as convenient devices for the personal meditation of the medieval citizen; they were part of the intimate world of the private devotions of laymen and clerics alike, and could be carried in a case, on a belt, and above all on rosaries or paternosters.⁵

Leeuwenberg's article focused on the only prayer nut then in a public collection in the Netherlands, albeit originally as a loan to the

Detail of fig. 4

Fig. 1
Prayer Nut, Northern
Netherlands,
c. 1500-1525, closed.
Boxwood,
diam. 4.7 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
BK-1981-1.

Rijksmuseum. It was acquired by the museum in 1981.⁶ It is an exceptional example because the accompanying brass case and velvet pouch have been preserved with the bead itself. Thanks to the inscription 'eewert janz van(n) bleiswick' and the family coat of arms, we also know that the first owner of this prayer nut was the Delft patrician Eewert Jansz van Bleiswick (1460-1531). Last year, with the generous assistance of the Rijksmuseum Fonds, the Rijksmuseum was able to buy a second prayer nut from a Dutch private





Figs. 2
Prayer Nut, Northern
 Netherlands,
 c. 1500-1525, open.
 Boxwood,
 diam. 4.7 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 BK-1981-1.



collection (fig. 3).⁷ This one is both more refined and more expensively executed than the first. The two carved boxwood scenes inside are contained in a silver sphere covered in detailed engraving all over the outside (fig. 4).

Provenance

The silver prayer nut must have been in Dutch private ownership for several centuries. At the end of the eighteenth century, the then owner had a box made for it, covered with red leather embossed in gold (fig. 5). The bead was stored open in a little drawer at the bottom of the box, and in the top was a magnifying glass (now lost) to examine it more closely. The owner at the time also added a brief description. Sadly we do not know who wrote this note, but the handwriting tells us that he lived in the late eighteenth century (fig. 6). It has been possible to reconstruct some of the provenance since this unknown owner on the basis of information provided by the last owners of the prayer nut. It is certain that the trinket was owned by Jonkheer Johannes Beelaerts van Blokland

(1877-1960), the grandfather of the last owners, from whom the Rijksmuseum acquired the object. It seems highly likely that the piece belonged to the Dutch author Johannes Kneppelhout (1814-1885), better known under his *nom de plume* Klikspaan, who was an art lover and collector. Kneppelhout owned an estate called De Hemelsche Berg near Oosterbeek, where he kept his art collection. He and his wife were childless, so the house, property and art collection were inherited by a niece, Johanna Maria Kneppelhout (1851-1923), the daughter of Klikspaan's brother Karel Jan Frederik Cornelis ('Kees') Kneppelhout van Sterkenburg (1818-1885). Johanna Maria's father was also an art lover; his collection included drawings, prints, coins and medals.⁸

Through Johanna Maria, who was married to Gerard Jacob Theodoor Beelaerts van Blokland (1843-1897) – the great-grandfather of the last owners of the prayer nut – the piece passed down, with De Hemelsche Berg, to the Beelaerts family. The house was burned to the ground during the Battle of Arnhem in 1944,



Figs. 3 and 4
Prayer Nut, Northern
Netherlands,
c. 1500-1525,
open and closed.
Boxwood, silver and
gold, diam. 4.8 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
purchased with the
support of the Ebus
Fonds (part of the
Rijksmuseum Fonds),
BK-2010-16.

but a few of the family's possessions – including the silver prayer nut – were rescued in time.⁹

Nothing can be said with certainty about the previous history of the piece. It is, of course, perfectly possible that Klikspaan bought the trinket himself, given his activities as a collector. It is also conceivable, though, that it came to him from his father, Cornelius

Johannes (1778-1818), who was known as an enthusiastic traveller.¹⁰ What is more likely, however, is that the prayer nut belonged to Klikspaan's uncle and stepfather Nicolaas Cornelis de Gijselaar (1792-1873) in Leiden.¹¹ He, too, was a great art lover, connoisseur and passionate collector, trained under Humbert de Superville, whose widow he married in 1855.



Fig. 5
Box made for the
Prayer Nut in fig. 3,
Netherlands,
late 18th century.
Wood covered
with red and gold
embossed leather,
h. 8.2 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
purchased with the
support of the Ebus
Fonds (part of the
Rijksmuseum Fonds),
BK-2010-16-2.

Dit zeer konstlyc Silver-balletje, het
Welk uyt twee deelen bestaat, in welk een
Aller Vytmuntende teekening, uyt
gesneede Houwt-werk te vinden is—
en in Zyn Nout en Holligheit, niet
grooter is als $1\frac{1}{2}$ duym in Zyn bewerking
Vind men —
Aan
Deze Schrap ————— J. D. Rouym

Fig. 6
Description (recto
and verso) of the
Prayer Nut in fig. 3,
Netherlands, late 18th
century. Ink on paper,
74 x 107 mm. Amster-
dam, Rijksmuseum,
purchased with the
support of the Ebus
Fonds (part of the
Rijksmuseum Fonds),
BK-2010-16-3 and -01.

Aan de lene Zyde, de geboorte van den
Heiland, met de Wyden uyt het Ootten
de haare vereeringe aanbrenge
Vertoont in 17 menschen beelden
2 koejen in de stal, 6 Paarden enz
De andere Zyde Schiet af den Saligmaker
als in het land door gaande, Prædikerende
en Wondera Doende —
Door 16 menschen beelden, skoe 3 Paal
3 schaapen &c. Vereyende Engeltjes enz
Dit beaadye is de groote van het turkes-leere-
keffertje, daar konst en ver groos geas in beklote is

Images

The eighteenth-century note contains a painstaking summary of the scenes and characters carved into the bead, but the interpretation is rather inaccurate. The writer cannot conceal his astonishment at the minuscule size. On the front he wrote, 'This very artful little silver ball, made in two parts, in which is found a most excellent design carved out of

wood, is no greater than $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in its convexity and depth of carving. One finds — On'. Below that: 'This line is $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches'. And on the back: 'On the one side the birth of the Messiah with the Wise Men from the East bearing their gifts, illustrated in 17 persons, 2 cows in the stall, 6 horses etc. The other side [depicts?] the Saviour going through the [Holy] land, preaching

and performing miracles – through 16 people, 1 cow, 1 ass, 3 sheep & 3 flying angels etc. NB This paper is the same size as the little Turkish leather box in which the work of art and a magnifying glass are kept.¹²

The lower register of the bead does indeed show the adoration of the infant Christ by the three wise men from the east and their entourage (fig. 7). Their meeting is shown in the background. A shepherd with three sheep sits on a rock above the stable. The head of the ass can be seen in the stable, the ox's head is concealed behind a wall and only its horns are showing. The glaring absence here is Joseph. The composition of the adoration scene in the foreground – a balding old king kneeling in worship before the Virgin and Child, who has

placed his gift, a chalice, at Mary's feet, behind him a standing Oriental king in a turban, holding his gift in his hand, and the third king, who is being handed his gift by a page – follows a traditional Netherlandish scheme.¹³ The scene of the encounter in the background is such an accumulation of tiny figures and horses that it is very tricky to read. The placement of the three horses' heads facing in towards one another is reminiscent of Adriaen van Wesel's *Meeting of the Magi* of around 1475, but then again this sort of grouping is part of the pictorial tradition (fig. 8).

The upper half of the bead shows the Nativity according to the vision of St Birgitta of Sweden (fig. 9). The Virgin kneels in worship before her child, who lies on the ground in a halo

Fig. 7
The Adoration of the Magi. Detail of the prayer nut in fig. 3 (lower segment).





Fig. 8
ADRIAEN VAN
WESEL, *The Meeting
of the Magi*, Utrecht,
c. 1477.
Oak, h. 76.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
purchased with
the support of
the Stichting tot
Bevordering van
de Belangen van
het Rijksmuseum,
BK-1977-134.



Fig. 9
The Nativity.
Detail of the
prayer nut in fig. 3
(upper segment).

of light. Opposite her kneels Joseph, holding a candle which he shields from the wind. Behind them are the ox and ass. To the left and right we see shepherds – looking over a wall, dancing in the field, and sitting on a rock playing the bagpipes. This last motif may have been derived from fourteenth-century French ivory carving, where it frequently occurs. Two angels hover on the left and right. The scenes in the background are harder to interpret. According to the eighteenth-century note, it is ‘the Saviour going through the Land, preaching and performing miracles’, but that is decidedly vague and the scenes do not appear to relate to any events in Jesus’s public ministry or to his miracles. The images seem in part to be typological prefigurations of Mary’s virginity – in the way they are arranged around the Nativity they are reminiscent of the structure of the *Biblia pauperum* or Paupers’ Bible. In these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century illustrated Bibles, the main New Testament scenes are likewise flanked by two typologically related scenes from the Old Testament.¹⁴ In the background of the prayer nut we can

see Moses, removing his sandals during the apparition of the Angel of God in a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-5). This image appears to have been inspired by the left-hand side of a *Biblia pauperum* woodcut by Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen and Lucas van Leyden which has a Nativity in the centre (fig. 10). The burning bush is regarded as a prefiguration of Jesus’s virgin birth.¹⁵ The same *Biblia pauperum* also presents a possible source of inspiration for the scene on the far right of the bead, where an angel appears to a kneeling man in armour.¹⁶ It is Gideon receiving a sign from the angel that there is dew on the fleece that lies on the ground in front of him (Judges 6:36-40); this, since Bernard of Clairvaux, has likewise been a generally adopted prefiguration of the Annunciation to Mary and her virginity.¹⁷ In the *Biblia pauperum* the Gideon image is consequently also linked with the Annunciation (fig. 11).

The scene with the man and woman in the centre background can be identified as the vision of Caesar Augustus and the Tiburtine Sybil.

The clairvoyant Sybil of Tibur, whom Augustus consulted on the day

Fig. 10
JACOB CORNELISZ
VAN OOSTSANEN and
LUCAS VAN LEYDEN,
*Moses and the
Burning Bush* (left),
woodcut from a
Biblia pauperum,
Holland, c. 1520-30.
180 x 236 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-P-OB-12.453.





Fig. 11

JACOB CORNELISZ
VAN OOSTSANEN and
LUCAS VAN LEYDEN,
Gideon and the Angel,
woodcut from a
Biblia pauperum,
Holland, c. 1520-30.
152 x 89 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-P-BI-6244.

of Christ's birth, takes the old emperor by the hand and points upwards. Above them Mary and the infant Jesus on a sickle moon appear in a vision, whereupon the Sybil predicts that this child will be a greater ruler than Augustus himself. Admittedly the apparition of Mary and Christ is now missing from the scene, but it was there originally: minuscule remnants of the attachments of this group can still be seen on the upper edge of the bead. The man behind the emperor is a servant carrying the imperial crown. This apocryphal tale was often depicted together with the Nativity in the Middle Ages, for example in the Bladelin altar by Rogier van der Weyden (Staatliche Museum, Berlin) and in the great Mary altar that

Adriaen van Wesel made for the Confraternity of Our Lady (Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe Broederschap) in Den Bosch.¹⁸ The Vision of Augustus occurs together with the scenes of Moses and Gideon in two miniatures in a Ghent or Bruges book of hours of around 1510-20, this time in combination with an Annunciation rather than a Nativity.¹⁹ In sum, all these individual scenes can be described as epiphanies, apparitions or manifestations of God. This is true in the case of the Magi ('Epiphany') below, and in the upper register of the vision of St Birgitta, the vision of the Emperor Augustus and the appearance of angels to Moses, Gideon and the shepherds at the stable.

The ingenious grouping of the numerous tiny figures and the use of several *repoussoirs*, such as the walls, gives the scenes a remarkable effect of depth – something that would have been even more striking when the Virgin and Child still hovered above Augustus and the Sybil. When the light falls from the right angle, there are even real shadows. This suggestion of depth is reinforced in the Adoration scene by a foreshortened cross-beam linking the front wall of the stable with the back, with an almost perspectival effect.

Seemingly undaunted by the minute scale, the carver let himself go in all sorts of millimetric details, like the spur on the boot of the kneeling king, the gossamer fine lances carried by the foot-soldiers and pages, the tiny sheep scratching behind its ears with one back hoof, and the rosary hanging on a peg in the little wall above the kneeling king (fig. 7). This, of course, is a self-referential motif, referring directly as it does to the use of the prayer nut as part of a rosary or paternoster.

The designs were meticulously carved in boxwood, a dense, heavy, compact type of wood that since the Middle Ages has often been called by the rather misleading term 'palm

wood'. The wood does not come from a palm tree, but the name suggests that it originates in the Holy Land. According to medieval sources, moreover, Christ's cross was made of palm wood.²⁰ The same material was used in the same style and by the same makers for miniature altars, tabernacles and pendants, and the Rijksmuseum has several examples of these too (fig. 12).²¹ What these objects have in common, aside from the delicacy of the carving, is an uninhibited love of detail, an amazing effect of depth and a marked *horror vacui*.

Silver

It is remarkable that the eighteenth-century note makes no mention of the silver housing of the bead. Evidently this was not regarded as an important part of the object at that time – yet it is the silver that adds considerable value to the prayer nut today, since there are very few other examples in such costly packaging.²² This value is compounded by the great rarity of non-ecclesiastical,

late medieval silver from the Netherlands, particularly of such high quality and sophisticated decoration.

The silver sphere has gold rosettes at the top and bottom, and a twisted gold cable border around the middle. The prayer nut can be closed with a silver locking pin on a fine chain. An as yet unidentified maker's mark or city assay mark has been stamped in two places into the rim of one of the two halves (fig. 13). It may be the head of an animal or a serrated leaf, and it is absolutely typical of the sort of silver marks that were in use in the Netherlands from the fifteenth century onwards. Comparable marks are found on the copper plate with the names and marks of members of the St Eligius Guild of Ghent between 1454 and 1481.²³ There are also similarities to the Den Bosch assay mark and to some early maker's marks from the town, but for the moment they do not provide sufficient grounds for seeking the origin of the prayer nut there.²⁴

Fig. 12
Miniature Altar with
the Virgin and Child,
and Sts Barbara
and Catherine,
Christopher and
George, Northern
Netherlands,
c. 1500-25. Boxwood,
h. 18.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
on loan from
the Museum
Catharijneconvent,
BK-BR-946-h.





Fig. 13
Unknown maker's
mark or assay mark
stamped into the rim
on the outside of the
prayer nut in fig. 3.

The two hemispheres are decorated with extraordinarily fine Gothic engraving. On one side there are six creatures amidst foliage and flowers – a dog, a monkey wearing a collar, a heron-like bird, an owl, a small bird with outstretched wings and a calling bird (figs. 14-17). The other register is populated by five people – a nude woman ringed by four men engaged in different occupations: a man thrusting a spade into the earth, a man tending the fire, a fisherman standing in the water and a falconer. They are all surrounded by serpentine banderoles with texts in Gothic minuscule (figs. 18-22).²⁵

This amazingly intricate chasing has much to do with the rise of engraving, a new medium in the art of the late Middle Ages. It is generally assumed that the art of printing began in goldsmiths' workshops in the first half of the fifteenth century, probably in the region of the Upper Rhine, and rapidly spread northwards along the Rhine. The work of the Master of the Gardens of Love, around 1440, is regarded as the earliest attempt at engraving in the Netherlands; he was swiftly followed by artists like the Master of the Berlin Passion, Master W with the Key, Master FVB, the Master of Balaam, the Master of the

Amsterdam Cabinet and Israhel van Meckenem.²⁶ Motifs on the silver prayer nut are found in the repertoires of these pioneers of engraving and other fifteenth-century draughtsmen and miniaturists. A man with a spade as the personification of the element of earth and a falconer for the element of air occur, for instance, in two drawings – representing Saturn and Jupiter respectively – in the *Housebook* by the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet. The little dog appears to have come running straight from another drawing in the *Housebook* depicting the constellation of Luna (representing the element of water).²⁷ The birds and the way they are incorporated in the serpentine flower and foliage motifs are reminiscent of prints by the Master of the Berlin Passion,²⁸ but they can be linked in particular to a unique and almost programmatic engraving by the Master of Balaam in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 23). It shows St Eligius, the patron saint of goldsmiths, in his workshop with three assistants. He works at an anvil, his helpers draw wire and work metal. The engraving implicitly establishes the link between the goldsmith's art and the art of engraving practised by the maker of this print.²⁹ Remarkably, there are all sorts of animals in the workshop, none of which has any logical connection to Eligius and his work. A monkey sits in the open window, leering at a bird in a cage, a cat lurks under the saint's chair, two dogs play at his feet, and there are two birds mating and a mouse in the foreground. The animals probably have to be interpreted as samples of the engraver's ornamental repertoire, because similar creatures also populate miniatures and prints by other artists of the period. This repertoire of beasts is also found on engraved works in precious metals. We find, for instance, a little owl sitting on a silver chalice from the Lower Rhine (Kempen, c. 1460-75) and monkeys on an enamelled Flemish goblet of the same period.³⁰



Fig. 14
Monkey. Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.



Fig. 15
Dog. Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.

Fig. 16
Owl. Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.



Fig. 17
Birds. Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.





Fig. 18
Nude Woman.
Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.



Fig. 19
Falconer (Air).
Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.



Fig. 20
Man with Spade (Earth). Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.

Fig. 21
Fisherman (Water).
Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.



Fig. 22
Man with Tongs by a Fire (Fire).
Detail of the engraved exterior of the prayer nut in fig. 3.





In part these creatures stem from the tradition of marginalia, the border decorations in illuminated manuscripts, where they frame the sacred prayers and religious images as secular, often scabrous and obscene commentaries.³¹ This, in a sense, is what the animals on the prayer nut do too, but at the same time, in conjunction with the design on the other half of the piece, they seem to present a compact image of the world.

With the monkey and the owl as symbols of lust and sin, the animals may symbolize savage, sensual and untamed nature.³² The four men on the other half of the little sphere – the man with the spade, the man tending the fire, the fisherman and the falconer – stand for the four Aristotelian elements: earth, fire, water and air. Each of them is engaged in taming, shaping or using nature. The woman gestures towards her genitals and breasts, and can be regarded as the unchaste and vain human counterpart of the monkey, who sits directly

opposite her.³³ Until well into the eighteenth century, the appearance of a woman and a monkey side by side remained an accepted combination in scenes of reprehensible, shameless, lewd and immoral behaviour.³⁴ An alternative interpretation of the animals as symbols of the Five Senses can be ruled out, since there is one animal too many. In that case, moreover, one would expect banderoles with explanatory texts, as in the case of the Four Elements.³⁵

Epiphanies

On banderoles around the figures, in small Gothic script, we find the following text: SOKET * VAER */GHI * VILT * HIER * VINDET/* IN * D ARDE/* IN * VUER*/ * IN * VATER/INDEN * LUCHT/ (seek where ye will, ye find it here, in the earth, in fire, in water, in the air), a confirmation of the identification of the figures with the four elements.³⁶ It is at the same time an expansion on the biblical aphorism 'Seek and ye shall find', which occurs

Fig. 23
THE MASTER
OF BALAAM,
St Eligius in
his Workshop,
Germany, c. 1450.
Engraving,
115 x 185 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-P-08-963.

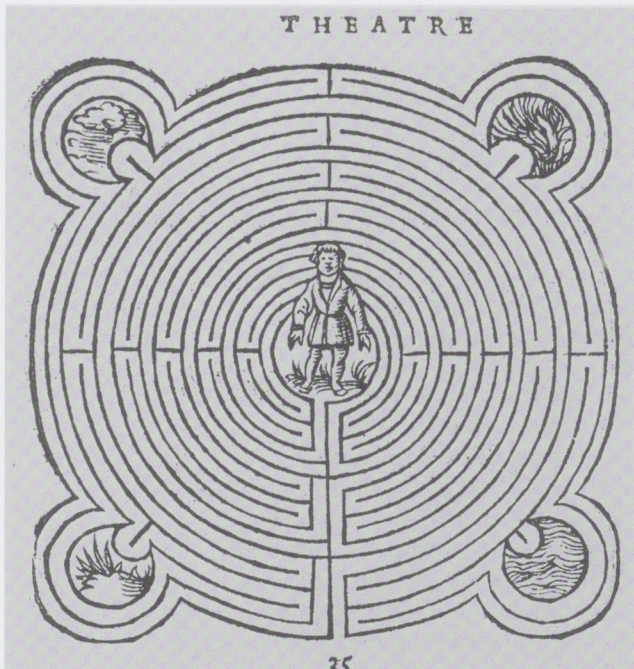
in several variants in the Old and New Testaments.³⁷ Whereas in the Bible this text always relates to God and faith, a connection is made here with untamed nature and the elements.³⁸

The parallel with the *Volupté* emblem in Guillaume de La Perrière's *Le theatre des bon engins* (Paris, 1539) is interesting in this connection (fig. 24).³⁹ It shows a little man in the middle of a circular maze, surrounded by the four elements: it is a symbolic image of man at the centre of the world, controlled by lust (*volupté*). The accompanying text asserts that it is easier for mankind to yield to lust and sensual pleasure than to struggle out of it, just as it is easier to get into a maze than to get out of it again. Aside from the presence of the four elements in both cases, which mark out the prayer nut and the maze as an image of the world, we also find the common themes of searching and lust. The negative connotations of the world as a labyrinth of lust and sin has been given a positive direction by the link with the religious scenes inside, which with their micro scale and

profusion of details can be perceived as a labyrinth for the eye. The goal of the quest here is not the sin and lust that the world offers mankind everywhere, but finding God through prayer and meditation.

The two scenes inside the prayer nut serve the faithful as tools; they are, as we saw, extraordinary divine manifestations or epiphanies: the Adoration of the Magi,⁴⁰ the Nativity according to the vision of St Birgitta and the vision of the Emperor Augustus, also two forms of epiphanic revelation, and the angels appearing to Moses and Gideon. The user of the prayer nut, who is commanded on the outside to seek God everywhere, (but to guard against the lust and impurity of nature and his own fleshly desires), is witness on the inside to a number of specific revelations of Christ. He or she could identify with the three kings who were witnesses to the first appearance of God's son on earth, imagine himself or herself an alter Birgitta with her vision of Jesus's birth or empathize with Moses, Gideon or Caesar Augustus. Such themes offered a channel to meditation and prayer and could lead to one's own 'epiphanic experience' of 'enlightenment'.

Fig. 24
Volupté (Lust),
emblem from
Guillaume
de La Perrière's
*Le theatre des bon
engins*, Paris 1539.



Kunstkammer Art

The presence of the personifications of the four elements, the literal opposition of nature and culture, and the spherical shape mark this prayer nut out as a microcosm, an elemental imagining of the world in pocket size.⁴¹ A few decades later this combination was to become the core of the *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*.⁴² In the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, small objects became a special category in art collections. Prayer nuts and other micro-carvings were included among the *mirabilia* – wonders – made by human hands and incorporated into the cabinets of art and curiosities of the European royalty and aristocracy. The virtuoso miniature object had

become fashionable, notwithstanding its often religious connotations, perhaps inspired by Pliny's descriptions of the extremely small carved ivory animals of Antiquity.⁴³ It also projected a symbolic power, a measure of control over nature that held a particular appeal for the great of the earth.⁴⁴

We come across micro valuables in one of the oldest and best documented art collections of the Middle Ages, that of Jean, Duc de Berry (1340-1416) – famous for his Book of Hours, another example of miniature art. The duke's collection was painstakingly inventoried in 1414 by his *intendant*, Robinet des Estampes. Among the *curiosa* – used here in the original, positive sense of the word – listed in this inventory are a version of St John's Gospel written in its entirety on a piece of vellum the size of a silver coin, and two tiny turned ivory balls in which could be seen a crucifix and a courtly couple playing chess.⁴⁵ A century later the minute had already achieved a place of its own in the collection of Margaret of Austria in Mechelen. Her *petit cabinet* was not just literally a small room, but also the place where precious trinkets were kept – costly, exotic and artistically valuable little objects like painted miniatures, ivory boxes, medals, timepieces, gems and corals, pieces in gold and silver and miniature sculptures.⁴⁶ The presentation of items from the natural world – *naturalia* – exotica and curiosities alongside one another makes Margaret's *petit cabinet* an immediate forerunner of the *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*.⁴⁷ Two generations later her example was followed in Munich: in 1565 Duke Albrecht v (1550-1579) of Bavaria took a group of seventeen (and later twenty-seven) small valuables – *erb und haus kleinodern* – from his art cabinet – *Kunst-kammer* – and put them in a separate *Schatzturm*, or treasure tower. They included a prayer nut of Netherlandish manufacture.⁴⁸ In the light of

these developments at the dawn of early modern collecting, it is reasonable to ask whether the production of prayer nuts and similar micro-sculptures from around 1500 onwards was a deliberate response to this growing and spreading market of collectors. In other words, was their use for private devotions really the only reason for making these miraculously small objects, or was their value as collectors' items also a significant factor? One strong indication that prayer nuts and similar micro-carvings do indeed represent an early moment in the history of Western collecting, a transition from luxury devotional item to collectible object *per se*, is the fact that the surviving prayer nuts are virtually all in perfect condition and show few if any signs of wear – something that one would expect to see had they been subjected to regular use. Clearly they were cherished and admired primarily as tiny works of art.

An even more important indication, however, lies in the very nature of the prayer nuts. The microscopic scale of the carving would not really seem to support a serious religious function. In their virtuosity, the prayer nuts overshoot their goal because they are essentially unusable without a magnifying glass or strong spectacles. The intricacy of the carving and the *horror vacui* obstruct their legibility and hence frustrate any practical use during meditation. They are, on the other hand, ideally suited to consumption as a work of art that can be examined and admired in peace and quiet with a loupe or a lens.⁴⁹

A prayer nut in a private collection contains an astounding detail: an infinitesimal ring on the wall of the stable in which Christ has been born has been carved such that it is actually free-hanging and can even be moved up and down (fig. 25).⁵⁰ This ring measures roughly one and a half millimetres in diameter! For what other reason than to impress his



Fig. 25
Prayer Nut with
the Nativity and the
Adoration of the
Magi. Detail with a
movable ring on the
wall in the centre of
the lower register,
Northern Nether-
lands, c. 1500-25.
Boxwood,
diam. 4.7 cm.
Private collection,
Netherlands.

overindulged public would the maker of the bead have added this visual joke? We find the same playful demonstration of virtuosity in two miniature altars and there was probably something of the kind in the Rijksmuseum bead too.⁵¹ A minuscule hole in the wall of the stable in the vision of Birgitta appears to be the remnant of just such a ring. Likewise as an expression of his pride in the virtuosity of his carving, the maker of a prayer nut in Copenhagen carved his signature in Latin on the outside of the tiny sphere: *Adam Theodrici me fecit*.⁵²

If prayer nuts like these were no longer being made solely as devotional objects and were also intended for a market of pampered art lovers and collectors, they balance on the cusp of two traditions: religious and spiritual perception making way for the consumption of art. The inward-looking nature of late medieval private devotions, in which a religious image was internalized so that it could reappear before the mind's eye, became outward observation and enjoyment.⁵³ It was the contemplation

of the connoisseur, the art lover, armed with a lens. At the beginning of the sixteenth century he was still a rare creature in Northern Europe, but a century later he was even putting in an appearance in paintings. We see here a number of connoisseurs examining a collection of objects on a table (fig. 26). On the right lies a magnifying glass, the attribute of their elitist pastime.

Adam Dirckz?

In his publication of the prayer nuts in Amsterdam, Copenhagen and elsewhere as works by the unknown artist Adam Theodrici – which he rendered in its Dutch version, 'Adam Dirckz' – Leeuwenberg clearly formulated the question of the provenance, manufacture and dating of these micro-carvings for the first time. Although he came to the conclusion that this 'Dirckz' was personally responsible for a whole group of prayer nuts and allied devotional objects, there has since been a shift to the view that the micro-carvings are not necessarily the work of a single artist, but may well have been made in one or even several studios in the Low Countries.⁵⁴ At first sight, it may seem that Leeuwenberg's attribution to 'Adam Dirckz' might have been over-influenced by the art history of his day, which focused more on individual artists and less on identifying studios and other workshops, nevertheless it merits reconsideration. Close study indicates that the great majority of the prayer nuts, tiny tabernacles and miniature altars form one stylistically and technically homogeneous group.⁵⁵ Admittedly some scenes are worked out in much greater detail than others, with more complex compositions and more figures, but that suggests a different level of finish and magnificence rather than different makers. A number of characters and motifs were shrewdly and effectively varied within this stylistically coherent group.



Fig. 26
*Cognoscenti in a
 Room Hung with
 Pictures* (detail),
 Antwerp, c. 1620.
 Oil on panel.
 London, National
 Gallery, N 1287.

In addition to the similarities that Leeuwenberg had already established, we can identify countless other common motifs, such as the shape and finish of the outside of the prayer nuts, the faces and clothes of the figures, the stratified rock formations, the little brick walls, the loose rings on the wall, the stippled backgrounds, the typical openwork horse blankets, the delicately branched trees, the vaulting, the freely carved and twisted 'masonry' branches at the top of the altars and the standard lettering in either a Gothic *textura* or a minuscule.

Compositions of Christ's Nativity and Passion that were general at the time are, it is true, the most common, but they are seldom repeated exactly. Furthermore, we find them alongside or in combination with far less customary scenes and saints. This suggests that in many cases these must have been special commissions with a

'made to measure' iconography and text, which could if desired be embellished with family coats of arms, the name of the patron or even tiny figures of donors.⁵⁶ Compositions and ornamentation in Late Gothic style predominate, but Renaissance motifs are introduced at an early stage, as in a tabernacle dated 1511.⁵⁷ Such a flexible, efficient manner of working in a modern, homogeneous style points to a small specialist workshop headed by a single artist who set the style – 'Adam Dirckz'? – working on commission for an exclusive clientele.⁵⁸ His studio must have been active for the best part of the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

Attempts to locate this workshop have not yet produced a satisfactory and convincing solution. The lack of any traces in the archives – not surprising if we are dealing with a small specialist business – is in part to

blame. This means that the question as to the origin of the micro-carving can only be answered with the aid of circumstantial evidence, for instance stylistic and compositional similarities to documented works of art or the origins of the people who commissioned the works and the earliest owners. On the basis of general compositional resemblances to altarpieces from the Southern Netherlands, Leeuwenberg took the view that 'Adam Dirckz' must have been active in that area; not without irony, he suggested that Dirckz might have worked in the city of Ghent, in homage to the Ghent art historian Jozef Duverger, for whom he wrote his article.⁵⁹ Most authors have subsequently subscribed to the idea of a Flemish provenance.⁶⁰ It would seem obvious, because the major centres in Brabant and Flanders – cities like Brussels, Antwerp, Mechelen and Ghent – were flourishing in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, and there was considerable specialization in the decorative crafts. There was also a guaranteed supply of the costly boxwood here, and the region housed an excellent market for exclusive craft work, such as micro-carving. Prompted in part by the backgrounds of the documented first owners of a small number of prayer nuts and tabernacles, however, Paul Williamson suggested that 'a small number of different workshops, probably located in various towns throughout the Netherlands and Lower Rhine, were involved in the making of the existing micro-carvings'.⁶¹

Strikingly, though, the early owners of a number of prayer nuts all came from Holland or Zeeland, as Marks demonstrated: Eewert van Bleiswick (1460-1531) of Delft, Jacques van Borsele and his wife Ursula van Foreest of Gouda, Floris van Egmond (1469-1539), the Lord of Buren and Leerdam, and a general in Charles v's army, Dismas van Berghen (?-1514),

the bastard son of Jan III de Glymes, the Lord of Bergen op Zoom and a relative of Floris van Egmond.⁶² In 1633 the Arnhem nobleman Joost van Cranevelt owned a large prayer nut with a design after Lucas van Leyden's 1519 print *The Dance of St Mary Magdalen*, which he had inherited from his ancestors.⁶³ A prayer nut tailor-made for the prior-general of the Carthusian Order, Franciscus de Puteo, may have been ordered by the Leiden-born Petrus Blommeveen or Blomevenna (prior from 1507-1536), the prior of the Carthusians in Cologne.⁶⁴ The tabernacle in the British Museum might have been made for Emperor Charles v,⁶⁵ and another paternoster for King Henry VIII of England.⁶⁶ Another owner from Holland can be added to this list: the Alkmaar burgomaster Jan Gerritsz van Egmond van de Nijenburg (?-1523), a kinsman of the Floris van Egmond referred to above and married to the Leiden-born Judith Heereman van Oegstgeest (?-1507). In his portrait by Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen he holds between his thumb and forefinger a silver-gilt ball attached by a chain to a ring on his middle finger. The shape of this trinket is virtually identical to the Rijksmuseum's silver prayer nut and the decorated sphere can therefore be identified as a prayer nut (fig. 27). Van Egmond died in 1523; the portrait probably dates from around 1518.⁶⁷

These dates give us a clear indication for the dating of the silver prayer nut and fit in neatly with the known dates of other micro-carvings. Romanelli dated micro-carving as a genre to a longish period of around fifty years, between 1475 and 1530. The documented pieces found so far, however, suggest a much shorter time span – the first quarter of the sixteenth century, reaching a peak of popularity between 1510 and 1525.⁶⁸ This supports the theory that all the micro-carvings were produced in one workshop,

Fig. 27
 JACOB CORNELISZ
 VAN OOSTSANEN,
*Jan Gerritsz van
 Egmond van de
 Nijenburg* (?-1523),
 Amsterdam, c. 1518.
 Oil on panel,
 42.4 x 32.8 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 SK-A-3838.



headed by one artist, perhaps the elusive 'Adam Dircksz'. It seems more likely that we should be looking for his studio in one of the cities of the Northern Netherlands rather than in Flanders or Brabant. It was active for around a single generation and responsible in this period for a steady stream of dozens of prayer nuts and other miniature carvings for the elite of the Netherlands and a number

of foreign clients. With its unique silver mount, the Rijksmuseum prayer nut demonstrates just how greatly the devotional micro-carving from this workshop was valued at the time of its creation as virtuoso art in its own right.

NOTES

- * This article is based in part on the address *Handzaam verzamelen* given by the author on his acceptance of the post of professor in the Rijksmuseum Chair of the Theory and History of Collection Creation, funded by the Rijksmuseum Fonds at the Faculty of Arts at the Free University Amsterdam on 10 February 2011. My thanks to Katrina Dyballa, Merel Groentjes, Bieke van der Mark, Ingmar Reesing, Matthias Ubl and Guido de Werd for their help in the writing of this article.
- 1 Jaap Leeuwenberg, 'De gebedsnoot van Eewert Jansz van Bleiswick en andere werken van Adam Dircksz', *Miscellanea Jozef Duverger II*, Ghent 1968, pp. 614-24.
 - 2 For prayer nuts see also Richard Marks, 'Two early 16th century boxwood carvings associated with the Glymes Family of Bergen op Zoom', *Oud Holland* 91 (1977), pp. 131-42; Charmian A. Mesenzeva, 'Spätgotische Miniaturschnitzereien in der Ermitage in Leningrad', *Pantheon* 36 (1978), pp. 31-35; W.D. Wixom, 'A Brabantine boxwood triptych', *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 61 (1983), pp. 38-45; Susan Jean Romanelli, *South Netherlandish Boxwood Devotional Sculpture, 1475-1530*, Ann Arbor 1992 (PhD Columbia University) 1992, typescript published by UMI); Frits Scholten and Reindert Falkenburg, *A Sense of Heaven, 16th Century Boxwood Carvings for Private Devotion*, Leeds (The Henry Moore Institute) 1999; cat. Nuremberg (Germanisches Nationalmuseum), *Spiegel der Seligkeit. Privates Bild und Frömmigkeit im Spätmittelalter*, Nuremberg 2000, pp. 265-306, esp. pp. 284-87; P. Williamson, *Netherlandish Sculpture 1450-1550*, London 2002, pp. 107, 140-49; S. Scholten, 'Gebedsnoten', in cat. Uden (Museum voor Religieuze Kunst), *Deftige Devotie*, Uden 2003, pp. 166-69; Frits Scholten, 'A Prayer-Nut for Franciscus de Puteo', *The Burlington Magazine* (July 2011), pp. 447-51; Frits Scholten, *Handzaam Verzamelen*, Amsterdam 2011 (self-published in association with the Rijksmuseum Fonds).
 - 3 Reindert Falkenburg, 'The scent of holiness: notes on the interpretation of botanical symbolism in paintings by Hans Memling', in H. Verougstraete et al. (eds.), *Memling Studies. Proceedings of the International Colloquium*, Bruges 10-12 November 1994, pp. 149-61; Scholten and Falkenburg 1999, op. cit. (note 2), p. 41. See also a gold miniature censor in the Schnütgen Museum, Cologne, see *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch LV* (1994), p. 396, fig. 2.
 - 4 Liselotte Hansmann and Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett und Talisman. Erscheinungsform und Geschichte*, Munich 1966, pp. 119-27. Edmund Launert, *Parfüm und Flakons, Kostbare Gefässe für erlesenen Duft, Aus der Sammlung Schwarzkopf und europäischen Museen*, Munich 1985. The legends on some prayer nuts also indicate an apotropaic effect, see Scholten 2003, op. cit. (note 2), p. 169.
 - 5 Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 74-108; Scholten 2003, op. cit. (note 2), p. 167.
 - 6 Inv. no. BK-1981-1. See Henk van Os et al., *Nederlandse kunst in het Rijksmuseum 1400-1600*, Zwolle/Amsterdam 2000, no. 32.
 - 7 Inv. no. BK-2010-16. Purchase from a Dutch private collection with the support of the Ebus Fonds, part of the Rijksmuseum Fonds. With thanks to John Schlichte Bergen for his mediation in this purchase.
 - 8 See his biography by W.N. du Rieu in the *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* 1888 (which can be consulted at www.dbnl.org); he was an active member of the *Ars Aemula Naturae* academy of art in Leiden and in close contact with the collectors Snellen van Vollenhoven and Bodel Nyenhuis.
 - 9 The Beyeren Armorial in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, was also owned by Jonkheer W.A. Beelaerts van Blokland. Like the prayer nut, it was removed from De Hemelsche Berg in a dog-cart during the evacuation of the house in 1944 and thus escaped destruction.
 - 10 See his extended biography in the *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* 1819 (which can be found at www.dbnl.org).
 - 11 Since 1818, after the death of Kneppelhout senior.
 - 12 'Dit zeer konstig silver-balletje, het welk uyt twee delen bestaat, in welk een Aller Uytmuntende teekening, uyt gesneede Houwt-werk te vinden is – en in zyn Ronte en Holligheid, niet grooter is als 1 1/2 Duijmen in zyn bewerking Vind men [Aan] – Dese schrap is 1 1/2 duym. [voorzijde] Aan de Eene zyde, de Geboorte van den Heijland, met de Wysen uyt het Oosten die haare vereeringe aanbrenghen vertoond in 17 menschen beelden 2 koeyen in de stal, 6 paarden enz. De andere Zijde Sc[hets?]t af den Saligmaker als in het land doorgaande, preedikende en Wondere doende – Door 16 menschen beelden, 1 koe, 1 Ezel 3 schaapen

- & 3 vliegende engeltjes enz. NB Dit blaadye is de groote van het turks-leeren koffertje, daar konst en vergroot glas in beslote is.' [keerzijde]
- 13 It is, for instance, akin to a Utrecht statue group dating from around 1470, see M. van Vlierden, *Hout- en steensculptuur van Museum het Catharijneconvent, ca. 1200-1600*, Zwolle/Utrecht 2004, pp. 199-201.
- 14 J.P. Filedt Kok, 'Een biblia pauperum met houtsneden van Jacob Cornelisz. en Lucas van Leyden gereconstrueerd', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 36 (1988), pp. 83-116, esp. pp. 83-85.
- 15 Filedt Kok, op. cit. (note 14), fig. 1a (Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-OB-12.453). The publication date of this *Biblia pauperum* is uncertain, but Filedt Kok places it around 1530. In a number of cases, however, the illustrations used in it are considerably older. Similar images and combinations can already be found in the earliest Dutch *Biblia pauperum* (first half of the 15th century), see H.T. Musper, *Die Urausgaben der holländischen Apokalypse und Biblia pauperum*, Munich 1961 (Plates 11). With thanks to Bieke van der Mark.
- 16 Filedt Kok, op. cit. (note 14), fig. 17, and Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-BI-6244.
- 17 See Louis Goosen, *Van Abraham tot Zacharia. Thema's uit het Oude Testament in religie, beeldende kunst, literatuur, muziek en theater*, Nijmegen 1990, p. 94.
- 18 My thanks to Merel Groentjes (Emory University, Atlanta) for this identification. For Van Wesel's altar see W. Halsema, G. Lemmens and G. de Werd, *Adriaen van Wesel (ca. 1417 - ca. 1490), een Utrechtse beeldhouwer uit de late middeleeuwen*, The Hague 1980, pp. 94-95.
- 19 The J. Paul Getty Museum. MS Ludwig IX 18, fols. 92verso, 93recto. With thanks to Merel Groentjes for this information.
- 20 Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe*, Munich 1994, p. 50 (referring to Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea (The Golden Legend)* and Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*).
- 21 E.g. Wixom 1983, op. cit. (note 2), and Scholten and Falkenburg 1999, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 13, 22.
- 22 Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2) mentions three examples with contemporary settings: cat. nos. 27 (Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet, inv. no. D166a), 33 (Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, inv. no. 1878.134), 37 (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 17.190.328); also a half bead mounted as a miniature altar in a late 16th- or 17th-century silver setting, see Williamson 2002 (note 2), no. 48 (Victoria & Albert Museum). None of these prayer nuts has intricate engraving on the silver exterior like the example in the Rijksmuseum.
- 23 For this plate in the Bijloke Museum in Ghent see Ursula Weekes, *Early Engravers and their Public. The Master of the Berlin Passion and Manuscripts from Convents in the Rhine-Maas Region, ca. 1450-1500*, Turnhout 2004, p. 29, fig. 14.
- 24 My thanks to Dirk Jan Biemond for this observation. The little mark on the prayer nut could be part of the 'bosboom' (forest tree), the Den Bosch assay mark, but there are also similarities to the seven-pointed star and the trefoil flower marks. See cat. Den Bosch (Noordbrabants Museum), *Zilver uit 's-Hertogenbosch van bourgondisch tot biedermeier* (ed. A.M. Koldewey), Den Bosch 1985, pp. 30-33.
- 25 For related banderoles see cat. Den Bosch, op. cit. (note 24), p. 156 (no. 5, a small silver goblet from Den Bosch), and exh. cat. Zwolle (Provinciaal Overijssels Museum), *Thuis in de late middeleeuwen. Het Nederlands burgerinterieur 1400-1535*, Zwolle 1980, no. 316 (a silver dagger handle from Cleves/Nijmegen, late 15th/early 16th century).
- 26 Weekes, op. cit. (note 23), p. 25.
- 27 J.P. Filedt Kok (ed.), *Livelier than Life: The Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet or the Housebook Master, c. 1470-1500*, Amsterdam/Maarssen 1985, p. 222, figs. 117 (Hausbuch, fol. 11a, 12a), 225, pl. 1b (Hausbuch, fol. 17a).
- 28 Weekes, op. cit. (note 23), figs. 8, 33, 34, 59.
- 29 J.M. Fritz, *Gestochene Bilder, Gravierungen auf deutschen Goldschmiedearbeiten der Spätgotik*, Köln/Graz 1966. David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print 1470-1550*, New Haven/London 1994, pp. 1, 2.
- 30 Weekes, op. cit. (note 23), fig. 9; J.L. Schrader, *A Medieval Bestiary. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Summer 1986), New York.
- 31 Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art*, London 1995.
- 32 For the monkey and owl as sinful animals see among others E. Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 1, Rome/Freiburg/Basel/Vienna 1968, cols. 76-79 (headword 'Affe'); O. Schmitt et al., *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, Munich 1973, vol. 6, esp. cols. 306-09 (under the headword 'Eule'); H.W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, London 1952, pp. 123 (monkey in savage nature),

- 169, 181-86 (monkey and owl) and 261-68 (monkey as a symbol of sexual desire).
- 33 In a panel by Memlinc, a nude woman in a landscape with a mirror in her hand symbolizes Vanitas, see Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 6, (*Hans Memlinc and Gerard David*), part 1, Leiden/Brussels 1971, pl. 63 (no. 21). In combination with the terrestrial globe she stands for Frau Welt, the personification of what is bad and evil in mankind. If the prayer nut can be viewed as a miniature globe, an association of the nude woman with Frau Welt cannot be ruled out. See also Wolfgang Stämmeler, *Frau Welt. Eine mittelalterliche Allegorie*, Freiburg in der Schweiz 1959.
- 34 Cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum), *Tot lering en vermaak. Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 1976, pp. 176-79, 215-17.
- 35 Four of the six animals on the prayer nut can be linked to one of the senses according to the pictorial tradition of the 16th century: the monkey (taste), the owl (sight), the dog (smell) and a pecking bird (touch). The other one, a calling bird, could represent hearing, although as far as we know this combination does not occur in the pictorial tradition. Hearing is usually associated with a deer or a boar. The sixth creature, a biting, heron-like bird, is left over. For this symbolism see among others Carl Nordenfalk, 'The five senses in Flemish art before 1600', in Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Netherlandish Mannerism. Papers Given at a Symposium in Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, September 21-22, 1984*, Stockholm 1985, pp. 135-54; Lubomir Konecny, 'I Cinque Sensi da Aristotele a Constantin Brancusi', in Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (ed.), *Immagini del sentire. I cinque sensi nell'arte*, Cremona 1996, pp. 23-48, esp. pp. 27-33; Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (ed.), *Immagini del sentire. I cinque sensi nell'arte*, Cremona 1996, pp. 106-19; Katrin Dyballa, 'Die fünf Sinne (um 1544) von Georg Pencz', in Karl Möseneder (ed.), *Zwischen Dürer und Raffael – Graphikserien Nürnberger Kleinmeister*, Petersberg 2010, pp. 161-178. With thanks to Katrin Dyballa, Berlin.
- 36 With thanks to Guido de Werd and Gerard Lemmens, Nijmegen, for their help with the transcription.
- 37 Proverbs 8:17, Jeremiah 29:13, Matthew 7:7, Matthew 21:22, Mark 11:24, Luke 11:9
- 38 The Four Elements also repeatedly occur in *Tafel van den kersten ghelove*, an early 15th-century text, chapter VIII (*Vanden vier elementen aerde, water, lucht, vuer*), see Dirc van Delf, *Tafel van den kersten ghelove*. Vol. 2: *Winterstuc* (ed. L.M.F. Daniels). Antwerp/Nijmegen/Utrecht 1937, p. 33.
- 39 Guillaume de La Perrière's *Le theatre des bon engins*, Paris, 1539, no. 35.
- 40 According to Christian doctrine, three moments in the life of Christ are identified as epiphanyes: the adoration of the magi, the baptism in the River Jordan and the wedding at Cana. But the ecclesiastical Feast of the Epiphany is chiefly associated with the three wise men. We know of three other prayer nuts with the theme of the adoration of the magi, see Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), nos. 40, 57, 58, but none in combination with the Nativity.
- 41 For the microcosm and the four elements in medieval cosmology, particularly in Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and in Thomas of Chantimpré's *De natura rerum* (1295) see Hartmut Böhme, 'Die hermetische Ikonologie der vier Elemente', in cat. *Mediale Hamburg*, Hamburg 1993, pp. 84-97; also *ibid.*, 'Antropologie der Vier Elemente', in cat. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik, *Wasser*, Cologne 2000, pp. 17-38, and *id.*, *Feuer Wasser Erde Luft. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Elemente*, Munich 1996.
- 42 For the four elements as a structuring principle of the *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* see among others Alfred Walz, 'Weltenharmonie-Die Kunstkammer und die Ordnung des Wissens', in exh. cat. Braunschweig (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum), *Weltenharmonie. Die Kunstkammer und die Ordnung des Wissens*, Braunschweig 2000, pp. 9-21.
- 43 On collecting such *mirabilia* see among others Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750*, New York 1998, pp. 68-108, esp. pp. 91-92; Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens*, Braunschweig 1978, pp. 28-45, esp. pp. 38-40. Pliny, *Natural History* (translated from the Dutch translation by Joost van Gelder, Mark Nieuwenhuis and Ton Peters), Amsterdam 2004, p. 158 (book VII, 85): '...Callicrates carved out of ivory ants and other tiny creatures so small that no one but he could distinguish the parts of their bodies. A certain Myrmecides was famous for the same sort of work; he made a four-horse chariot of the same material that could be covered by the wings of a fly and a minute boat that a small bee could conceal under its wings.'
- 44 It is striking that in the 19th century these trinkets were appreciated chiefly by a small group of fabulously rich and powerful collectors, among them Baron Ferdinand

- Rothschild (Waddesdon Bequest, British Museum, London), Baron Adolphe de Rothschild (Louvre, Paris) and J. Pierpont Morgan (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). See C.H. Read, *The Waddesdon Bequest. Catalogue of the Works of Art bequeathed to the British Museum by Baron Ferdinand Rothschild*, 1898, London 1902, figs. XLIV, XLV, XLVI, XLVII, XLVIII, XLIX; Émile Molinier, *Donation de M. le Baron Adolphe de Rothschild. Catalogue*, Paris 1902, nos. 59-62 and figs. XXVIII, XXIX and XXXIV; Christian Theuerkauff, 'Baroque ivories from the collection of Anselm Salomon von Rothschild in Vienna', *Apollo*, February 2003, pp. 15-25; D. Thornton, 'From Waddesdon to the British Museum: Baron Ferdinand Rothschild and his cabinet collection', *Journal of the History of Collections* 2001, no. 2, pp. 191-213; Pauline Prevost-Marcilhacy, *Les Rothschild, bâtisseurs et mécènes*, Paris 1995.
- 45 Jules Guiffrey, *Inventaires de Jean duc de Berry (1401-1416) publiés et annotés par Jules Guiffrey*, 2 vols., Paris 1894-1896, I, pp. 74, 75, 152, 153 (no. 208: *Item, l'euangile saint Jehan, escripte de menue letter, en parchemin, de la grandeur d'un blanc*, no. 548: *Item, deux petites pièces, du gros d'une noix [sic], de mine* and no. 564: *Item, deux pommes de voirre, en l'une desquelles a auedens un crucifix, et en l'autre un home et une femme jouans aux eschaz*).
- 46 She owned among other things a miniature letter M, carved in boxwood and decorated with scenes from the life and suffering of St Margaret, described in her inventory of 1524 as 'Une belle M de bois, bien taille a une petite chayne de bois, pendant au lettres du nom de Jhesus', see Marks 1977, op. cit. (note 2), p. 140 and Dagmar Eichberger (ed.), *Dames met Klasse. Margareta van York, Margareta van Oostenrijk*, Louvain 2005, no. 55 (Ecouen, Musée de la Renaissance, inv. no. cl. 21327).
- 47 Dagmar Eichberger, *Leben mit Kunst, Wirken durch Kunst. Sammelwesen und Hofkunst unter Margarete von Österreich, Regentin der Niederlande*, Turnhout 2002, pp. 110-11, 372-88. An example of Dutch miniature carving in which virtuosity and the transformation of nature coincide is a boxwood statuette of St George (c. 1520; Victoria & Albert Museum, London), see Malcolm Baker, 'Limewood, chiromancy and narratives of making. Writing about the materials and processes of sculpture', *Art History* 21 (December 1998), no. 4, pp. 498-530.
- 48 Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens*, Braunschweig 1978, pp. 143-44 and fig. 96. For other micro-carvings with a provenance in royal art cabinets or treasure houses see Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), cat. nos. 2 (Munich, since 1598), 27 (Copenhagen, since 1690), 31 (Dresden, since 1640), 41 (Munich, since 1846), 57 (Munich, since 1814).
- 49 This consumption of marvellously made things is captured in a passage in the travel journal Albrecht Dürer kept during his visit to the Low Countries in 1521. He wrote of a number of objects that had arrived in Brussels from recently-conquered Mexico and been presented to Charles V, '...and all sorts of things for different kinds of use, which is much nicer to see than objects of mere wonder. These things were all precious, for one valued them around one hundred thousand florins. And I have not seen anything in my whole life which pleased my heart as much. Because I saw in them wonderful artificial things ('wunderlich künstlich ding') and have been amazed by the subtle ingenuity of the people in foreign lands.' It is likely that these exotica included miniature carvings, which found their way from Mexico to Europe in the course of the sixteenth century. See Hans Rupprich (ed.), *Albrecht Dürer. Schriftlicher Nachlass*, 3 vols., Berlin 1956-70, vol. 1, pp. 164-65.
- 50 Former collection of J.P. Six, now in the possession of a descendant in the Netherlands. See also Leeuwenberg, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 614-24, p. 614, note 2.
- 51 Mesenzeva 1978, op. cit. (note 2), fig. 2 (Hermitage, St Petersburg); Sotheby's London, 7 December 2010 (*Old Master Sculpture & Works of Art*), no. 32.
- 52 Leeuwenberg, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 614-624; Harald Olsen, *Aeldre Udenlansk Skulptur, Statens Museum for Kunst*, Copenhagen 1980, I, pp. 37, 38 and II, no. 138. This bead comes from the royal Danish *Kunstskammer*.
- 53 M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Rhetoric, Meditation and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, Cambridge 1998; Reindert Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir: Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1988, pp. 37-41; Reindert Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion. Mysticism and the Imagery of Love in Flemish Paintings of the Virgin and Child 1450-1550*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1994, pp. 50-53, 78-82, 94-95 and Scholten and Falkenburg 1999, op. cit. (note 2).
- 54 Marks 1977, op. cit. (note 2), p. 142; Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 58-73, esp. pp. 68-73; Williamson 2002, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 140-41.

- 55 For a prayer nut of a clearly different style in the shape of a skull which, in view of the arms of the first owner – Joachim I, Margrave of Brandenburg – was probably made in Germany not the Netherlands, see John Lowden and John Cherry, *Medieval Ivories and Works of Art. The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario*, Toronto 2008, no. 48.
- 56 Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), nos. 7, 14, 25, 15, 55 (arms), 4, 12, 20, 54 (empty escutcheons, nos. 34, 35, 54, 55 (donors), no. 25 (donor's name); Scholten 2011, op. cit. (note 2) (donor with name);
- 57 Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), nos. 4 (tabernacle, British Museum), 6 (altar, Detroit Art Institute) 22 (prayer nut, Abegg-Stiftung with a design after a print by Lucas van Leyden) and Sotheby's London, 7 December 2010 (*Old Master Sculpture & Works of Art*), no. 32.
- 58 Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 69-70, for arguments in favour of a small specialist workshop.
- 59 Leeuwenberg, op. cit. (note 1), p. 622.
- 60 Destrée in 1930 and Jansen in 1964 suggested Ghent-Bruges and Mechelen respectively (see Leeuwenberg, op. cit. (note 1), p. 622); Marks 1977, op. cit. (note 2), p. 141 (Antwerp, Brussels or Mechelen as the most likely candidates), Scholten and Falkenburg 1999, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 21-23 (Antwerp), Scholten 2003, op. cit. (note 2), p. 169 (Southern Netherlands).
- 61 Williamson 2002, op. cit. (note 2), p. 141.
- 62 Marks 1977, op. cit. (note 2) and Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), nos. 14, 34, 55.
- 63 Perhaps the prayer nut in the Abegg Stiftung in Riggisberg (Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), no. 22) or a very similar example described in 1633 in an anonymous manuscript now in the collection of the KOG (Royal Antiquarian Society) (Rijksmuseum Library, KOG HS 55): *Beschrijvinge van een constigen appel, gesneden in busbomen holt ... welcke nu rustende is in handen van jonckheer Joost van Craenevelt, wonende binnen Arnhem* (1633). The print by Lucas van Leyden has been pasted into the manuscript. The author is currently preparing a transcription of this manuscript.
- 64 Scholten 2011, op. cit. (note 2).
- 65 British Museum, Waddesdon Bequest, with an accompanying *cuir bouilli* case bearing the arms of Emperor Charles V, see Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), no. 1.
- 66 Marks 1977, op. cit. (note 2) and Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), p. 252.
- 67 Online catalogue *Early Netherlandish Paintings in the Rijksmuseum – 1 – Artists Born Before 1500* (ed. J.P. Filedt Kok), SK-A-3838 (entry by Daantje Meuwissen). There the little ball is simply identified as a pomander. In this period prayer nuts, beads and pomanders hanging on paternosters are also found in other portraits from the Northern Netherlands, among them the 1518 portraits of the Leiden brewer Dirck Ottensz van Meerburch and his wife Cornelie Pietersdr by the Leiden painter Cornelis Engebrechtsz (see Marks 1977, op. cit. (note 2), note 15 and cat. Leiden (Museum de Lakenhal), *Lucas van Leyden en de Renaissance*, Leiden 2011, no. 15) and, likewise by Cornelis Engebrechtsz., a *Crucifixion* with two anonymous (Leiden?) donors who have a rosary with a silver prayer nut (or medallion?) lying on a table before them (see cat. Leiden, op. cit. (note 67), no. 10 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 88.3.88). On a *Crucifixion* triptych with unknown donors by Jan Jansz Mostaert (Haarlem), the female donor holds a blood coral rosary from which hangs what is probably a prayer nut. The side panels with the donors have been dated on good grounds to the second decade of the 16th century (Rijksmuseum, SK-A-2123). With thanks to Dr Matthias Ubl.
- 68 Romanelli 1992, op. cit. (note 2), no. 4 (the triptych in the Waddesdon Bequest, British Museum, dated 1511), no. 15 (the paternoster for Henry VIII, made between 1509 and 1526), no. 22 (the prayer nut after a print by Lucas van Leyden of 1519, Abegg Stiftung), no. 25 (the prayer nut for Eewert van Bleiswick in Amsterdam, before 1531), no. 55 (the example for Dismas van Berghen in London between 1510 and 1514); the prayer nut for Franciscus de Puteo was made between about 1517 and 1521. (Scholten 2011, op. cit. (note 2), p. 450); Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen's portrait of Jan Gerritz van Egmond with a prayer nut is dated to around 1518 and must in any event have been made before 1523, the year the sitter died. We find a similar concentration of prayer nuts in Germany: a possibly German prayer nut in the shape of a skull is dated 1515 (Lowden and Cherry, op. cit. (note 55), no. 48) and prayer nuts are found in dated German portraits of this period, for instance in Hans Brosamer's portrait of the Nuremberg tailor Hans Pirkl Junior, dated 1515, and in Martin Schaffer's portrait of Eitel Besserer zu Rohr of 1516, see exh. cat. Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum), *Dürer, Cranach, Holbein. Die Entdeckung des Menschen: das deutsche Porträt um 1500*, Vienna 2011, nos. 184, 191 (with thanks to Dr Matthias Ubl).