4. Sacred Spectacles?

Eyeglasses, Iconography and the Holy Body

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In c. 1352, Tommaso da Modena produced a fresco for the chapter house of the Dominican monastery of San Nicoló in Treviso, Italy. In this image, da Modena depicted forty renowned scholars, ecclesiastics, philosophers, and theologians of the Dominican order, including individuals such as Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. One of these men is the French cardinal Hugh de Saint-Cher (1200–1263) who is shown sitting at his desk writing, while surrounded by books (see figure 1). He is dressed in cardinal's robes and is wearing a pair of rivet spectacles on his nose.[1] Initially, it does not seem unusual that Tommaso da Modena has depicted Hugh de Saint-Cher using spectacles. As a respected biblical commentator, Hugh would have spent long hours reading, writing, and studying theology and, particularly in his later years, may very well have benefitted from the use of spectacles. However, Hugh de Saint-Cher died approximately twenty years before the invention of rivet spectacles. He would never have worn eyeglasses in his lifetime.[2] This raises an interesting question—if we can assume that Tommaso da Modena was interested in depictions of these figures as they were in life, why did he anachronistically represent Hugh de Saint-Cher as requiring spectacles?

[1] Unlike the spectacles that we wear today, medieval rivet spectacles did not have 'arms' to go over the ears. Instead, they consisted of two framed lenses held together by a rivet. To use this kind of spectacles, the wearer had to either pinch them onto their nose or hold them up to their eyes by hand.

[2] There are numerous examples of glass, water, and crystal being used as magnifying lenses prior to the medieval period—both within and beyond Europe. For example, as early as 65 CE, Seneca wrote that 'every object much exceeds its natural size when seen through water. Letters, however small and dim, are comparatively large and distinct when seen through a glass globe filled with water'—a theory that was built upon by Islamic scholars, such as Hasan ibn al-Haytham in the eleventh century. Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, 1.6.5; see Ibn al-Haytham, *Optics*. However, it was not until the 1280s that 'spectacles', as we might recognize them today—that is, two framed lenses designed to rest on the nose—appear in the historical record.

For medieval image makers, spectacles provided an opportunity to make an individual's actions or character traits 'readable' upon their boy. As David Hillman and Ulrika Maude explain, 'the body is notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition'.[3] This corporeal resistance to definition presented a challenge to medieval image makers who were asked to represent elements of an individual's character, status, or life experiences through portraiture alone. To help viewers 'read' the bodies of the people depicted in their images, medieval artists relied on a network of visual 'signs' including objects, hairstyles, types of clothing, and certain colours to demonstrate the attributes of a particular individual. This concept of a visual 'sign' was coined by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) who suggested that a sign (defined as anything that communicates a meaning to the interpreter of the sign) is made up of two components: the signifier and the signified. The signifier consists of a sound, image, or word; whereas the signified is the concept associated with that sound, image, or word.[4] These two understandings come together to create a sign whose meaning is commonly understood within a particular time, place, and culture. Today, we engage with signs throughout the day without recognising that we are doing so. We may, for example, encounter an image of skull and crossbones on a bottle of bleach (a signifier). Within popular consciousness, this image carries the meaning of 'danger to humans' (the signified). The signifier and signified then come together to create a sign, which indicates the contents of the bleach bottle may present a danger to people. St. Hugh's spectacles operate in much the same way.[5] It does not matter that Hugh could not have worn spectacles in his day-to-day life. Instead, they are included as a visual

[3] Hillman and Maude, 'Introduction', p. 1.
[4] De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 68.
[5] For a more expansive discussion of medieval iconography, see the essays in Liepe, ed., *The Locus of Meaning*.

signifier that the monks who viewed the fresco would have been able to interpret and use to impose a stable interpretation onto Hugh's otherwise mutable body. This chapter investigates why spectacles were used as visual signifiers in images of saints and holy figures, the meanings they carried as visual signs, and how they may have been 'read' by contemporary lay and monastic communities, with emphasis on images of the Four Evangelists. I argue that spectacles could visually signify both holiness and immorality in the iconography of late medieval Christianity, but the combination of spectacles with other signifiers, including scholarly activity and advanced age, assured viewers of instances in which they signified sanctity.

Scriptoria, Sight-loss, and Signs

In the years following the invention of spectacles in the 1280s, the main beneficiaries of this new technology were scholars and ecclesiastics whose professions required them to spend long hours bent over desks, reading and writing in dimly lit environments. The difficulty of this process is evidenced by scribes who complained about the long and uncomfortable nature of their work. For example, in a ninth-century copy of the Codex Theodosianus, one cleric included the following colophon:

> Oh, what weighty writing! It bends the back, makes the eyes foggy, and it breaks the stomach and ribs. And you Brother, who are reading this book, pray for Radulfo the cleric, God's servant, who wrote in the atrium of St Aignan.[6]

[6] 'O quam grave pondus scriptura! Dorsum incurvat, oculos caliginem facit, ventrem et costas frangit. Et tu frater, qui legis istum librum, ora pro Radulfo clerico, famulo Dei, qui hoc scripsit in atrio Sancti Aniani'. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 4415, fol. 111^{v}. All

This short statement offers an insight into the pain and impairment experienced by the individuals who produced the texts that historians so heavily rely upon to access the Middle Ages.[7] Radulfo draws attention to the link between his work as a cleric and the physical suffering that the work causes him. He explains how writing for extended periods affected both his body and eyes, causing him such significant joint pain and eye strain that he requests all who read his work to pray for him specifically. If Radulfo only undertook this kind of work occasionally, his injuries would have been uncomfortable but brief. Having adequate time to rest between periods of writing would likely have helped to alleviate his symptoms. However, as a cleric, Radulfo was probably engaged in manuscript production on a regular basis—as Julia Barrow suggests, literacy was one of the defining features of the clergy.[8] By frequently putting his body under this kind of strain, Radulfo's acute impairments could have become chronic in nature.

The development of early-onset vision impairments can also be caused by straining one's eyes in low light. Poor lighting conditions were a common problem in scriptoria—

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manuscript translations and transcriptions, with scribal abbreviations silently expanded, are my own unless otherwise stated.

[7] Such colophons and annotations are interesting examples of marginalized individuals speaking, quite literally, from the margins. The scribes and clerics who complained about their work-related pains and impairments at the edges of manuscripts both mirror and challenge the notion of disabled individuals operating on the edge of society. On the one hand, the voices of physically impaired individuals appearing 'on the edge' of a master text reflects their own marginal position within the dominant social structure. However, as Elaine Treharne expresses in relation to a colophon in the Lindisfarne Gospels, these scribal additions demonstrate a 'daring act that reflects the degree of ownership' that scribes and clerics felt over their work; Treharne, *Perceptions*, p. 92. The very fact that these scribes feel authorized to complain about their poor working conditions and subsequent pains, provides a space for otherwise silent voices to be heard. In this sense, these colophons and annotations allow marginal figures to move into the more dominant discourse.

[8] Barrow, *Clergy*, p. 170.

especially in the winter when the hours of natural light were limited. In 1939, Florence Edler De Roover suggested, 'Ordinarily, work by artificial light was not permitted [within a scriptorium] because of the greater possibility for errors or poor writing and the dangers of casualties to the costly books from grease and fire', and that subsequently scribes were only permitted to work during daylight hours.[9] That said, the number of scribal manuscript annotations that complain about writing at night or by low lamp-light suggests that this rule was rarely followed. For example, in a ninth-century commentary on Cassiodorus's Psalms, a scribe included a marginal annotation in vernacular Irish, complaining that 'the light of the candle is not bright'.[10] Focusing on small, detailed work, for extended periods of time, in low or flickering lighting would likely have led to eyestrain, blurred vision, and ultimately hyperopia.[11] As Joy Hawkins suggests, 'the constant labour and poor light had a detrimental impact, and, as a result, many scribes would have suffered from poor sight'.[12] Based on the damaging effect of reading and writing in low light for extended periods of time, it makes sense that 'most of the accounts we have of [spectacle] use relate to churchmen and friars', as these would have been some of the most likely groups of people to develop hyperopia and to have subsequently purchased and used spectacles.[13] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that many of the earliest visual representations of spectacles were commissioned and/or produced by the same group of people who initially benefitted from the technology. It was the Abbot who could approve the production of

[9] De Roover, 'Scriptorium', p. 605. One need only look to the Cotton Library Fire of 1731 or the Tre Kronor Palace Fire of 1697 to see the devastating impact of fire on medieval manuscripts.

[10] 'Nisorche suilse indítharni'. Laon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 26, fol. 6^{v}.

[11] The development of long-sightedness as a result of detailed work in dim environments is still a problem today. In 2010, the American Optometric Association listed occupations that include 'near vision demands' as a common risk factor for hyperopia (long-sightedness). See American Optometric Association, *Optometric Clinical Practice Guideline*, p. 6.

[12] Hawkins, 'The Blind in Later Medieval England', p. 116.

[13] Kuulalia, *Childhood Disability*, p. 261.

communal artworks in the monastery—such as Tommaso da Modena's Dominican fresco—while the monks and lay brothers were responsible for copying and illuminating manuscripts in the scriptoria, such as the Tilliot Hours and *Das Schachzabelbuch* (discussed below) in the scriptoriums. As such, these monastic image-makers played a significant role in the early development of spectacles as a visual sign.

Over the course of the Middle Ages, depictions of spectacles came to represent either of two things. On the one hand, in images of saints and respected religious figures, spectacles signified the 'venerable mark of wear of the eyes that read and reread the holy writings'.[14] On the other hand, when accompanying an image of someone exhibiting negative behaviours (such as getting drunk, gambling, or failing to pay attention in church) spectacles indicated that the wearer had spent too much time engaging in, or looking at, inappropriate things. An example of this is found in the second woodcut accompanying Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools, see figure 2).[15] In this image, a fool—indicated by his cap, decorated with bells and donkey-shaped 'ears'—sits at his desk surrounded by books. He peers into one of these books through a pair of rivet spectacles. The construction of this image is very similar to that of Hugh de Saint-Cher. Both images depict a man, surrounded by books, using spectacles to read or write at his desk. However, while we know that Hugh de Saint-Cher is engaged in 'appropriate' and pious activities, the fool is using his books to learn the Latin terms for 'inappropriate things'. In Brant's poem accompanying the woodcut, the fool says:

> Although my Latin isn't fine

[14] 'Marque vénérable de usure des yeux qui ont lu et relu les écrits saints'. Margolin, 'Des lunettes et des hommes', p. 381.

[15] Haintz-Nar-Meister, *De inutilibus libris* (Woodcut), Switzerland, c. 1498; in Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, Fool No. 1.

I know that ‘vinum’ stands for wine,

‘Gucklus’ a cuckold, ‘stultus’ fool,

And I am ‘doctor’, that’s my rule.[16]

Here, the fool admits that his knowledge of Latin is not very good. Despite that, he has prioritised learning the words for objects and activities that are connected to immoral behaviours; for example, ‘wine’ representing drunkenness, and ‘cuckold’ representing a man whose wife has been conducting an extra-marital affair. Unlike the image of Hugh de Saint-Cher, in which spectacles signify the wearer’s engagement with holy teachings, the image of the fool demonstrates an interest in immoral or undesirable activities such as drinking or sexual affairs.

Following Saussure’s definition of a sign, the spectacles in these images can be understood as the primary signifier, which, when combined with different secondary signifiers (i.e., the holy man and the fool) result in distinct interpretations. In the case of Hugh de Saint-Cher, spectacles (the primary signifier) signify reading, looking, and learning. However, as as the person represented is a respected cardinal (the secondary signifier) the spectacles come to suggest that the wearer has been engaged in desirable Christian behaviour. The overarching sign is that Hugh de Saint-Cher acquired his ocular impairment through the reading and production of holy materials. In the image of the fool, spectacles (the primary signifier) still signify reading, looking, and learning. However, the fact that the wearer of the spectacles is visually coded as a fool (the secondary signifier), the overarching sign is that the individual has acquired their ocular impairment through the pursuit of undesirable and potentially sinful activities.

[16] ‘dan ich gar wenig kan latin; [/] ich weiß, das vinum heißet win, [/] gucklus ein gouch, stultus ein dor [/] und das ich heiß domne doctor’. Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, p. 64. Translation from Brant, *Ship of Fools*, trans. by Edwin H. Zeydel, p. 63.

In both the image of Hugh de Saint-Cher and the image of Brant's Fool, spectacles are applied as a visual signifier. However, the resulting sign conveyed to the viewer is dependent on their understanding of how an individual acquired an ocular impairment. The fool's eyesight is damaged through the pursuit of inappropriate knowledge—such as learning the Latin words for 'wine', 'cuckold', and 'fool'—whereas Hugh de Saint-Cher, as the biblical commentator responsible for directing the first revision of the Vulgate Bible, damaged his eyesight through the reading and re-reading of holy texts. The fool's spectacles underscore his immorality, while Hugh's spectacles underscore his morality.

Bespectacled Saints

The visual tradition of depicting learned religious figures wearing spectacles developed quite quickly over the course of the fourteenth century, resulting in a wide range of saints being retrospectively depicted wearing spectacles, including St Peter, St Jerome, and St Ambrosius, to name but a few.[17] Unfortunately, there is neither the time nor space to discuss each individual or instance of spectacle use here. Instead, this chapter will consider the inclusion of spectacles in fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century representations of the Four Evangelists: Ss Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As the men responsible for writing the Gospels included in the New Testament of the Bible, the representation of spectacles in images of the Evangelists

[17] A clear example of St Peter wearing spectacles can be found at the bottom centre-left of the 'Twelve Apostles Altar' (produced 1466) at the church of Saint James, in Rothenberg. Similarly, an image of Saint Ambrosius wearing spectacles is currently held by the Belvedere Museum (Vienna, Belvedere, 4859), produced by the Master of Grossgmain, c. 1498. Images of Saint Jerome, on the other hand, are a little different. Although Jerome is very frequently shown with spectacles laid out on his desk—as depicted in Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco painted for the Church of Ognissanti, Florence in 1480 or in the 1456 *Vie et miracles de Notre Dame* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 9198, fol. 2^{r})—he is less frequently depicted as actively using his glasses.

demonstrates their prioritization of religious duties and scholarship over the needs of their physical bodies. Leaving aside Saint John for the moment, let us consider how St Matthew, St Mark, and St Luke are regularly represented wearing spectacles.

There are several privately commissioned religious manuscripts which contain one or more images of the Evangelists wearing spectacles. Eltjo Buringh defines these texts as 'books for personal devotion such as Book of Hours and prayer books' and explains how, despite beginning as a commodity exclusive to royal households, manuscripts 'eventually became virtually books for "everyone". That is, for everyone who was well off in the Middle Ages'.[18] A particularly good example of this kind of book is the Tilliot Hours, a French Book of Hours, illustrated by Jean Poyer, c. 1500.[19] This manuscript was produced after the advent of the printing press and consequently represents what Janet Backhouse refers to as one of the 'last decadent manifestations of a dying art'; it would have been an especially decadent commission given the availability of cheaper, printed alternatives.[20] Drawing on a sample of manuscripts housed in the Louvre, Carla Bozzolo and Ezio Ornato argue that the value of French manuscripts fell significantly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries on account of the financial difficulties posed by the Hundred Years War.[21] But that does not mean that manuscripts were 'cheap'. By the fifteenth century, an 'average' manuscript may cost around £2 5s (which would have the equivalent buying power of approximately $2319 U.S. dollars as of May 2024).[22] Although the exact owner of the Tilliot Hours remains unknown, a manuscript such as this would have been commissioned by someone with access to significant personal

[18] Buringh, *Medieval Manuscript Production*, p. 128.
[19] For an overview of the contents and image program of Books of Hours, see the essay by Escobedo in the present volume, pp. XX—XX.
[20] Backhouse, 'Tilliot Hours', p. 211.
[21] Bozzolo and Ornato, *Pour une histoire du livre manuscrit au Moyen Âge*, p. 25.
[22] Buringh, *Medieval Manuscript Production*, p. 429.

wealth. The manuscript's calendar was also written for someone interested in the Franciscans and their feast days, which shows that the owner had some interest in or knowledge of the religious orders. Moreover, the primary language of the text is Latin, suggesting that the reader/s would have had familiarity with the language.

In the Tilliot Hours, the Four Evangelists are depicted with their distinctive saintly attributes as they work on their gospels.[23] The images of the Evangelists are quite simple, showing only the saint, their gospel, and a single piece of scholarly apparatus. In the case of Matthew and Luke this scholarly equipment takes the form of a quill and in the case of Mark it is a pair of spectacles. While Matthew and Luke are presented as writing their gospels, neither are looking directly at their manuscripts. Instead, Matthew is cutting a quill and Luke is dipping his quill in an inkwell while looking up as though in thought. Mark is the only Evangelist actively involved in reading his gospel and is subsequently the only Evangelist depicted with spectacles. For this reason, the image of Mark could have been very easily 'read' within the broader context of medieval visual iconography. He wears spectacles to draw attention to his act of reading; his attribute identifies him as St Mark the Evangelist, allowing viewers to infer that

[23] London, British Library, Yates Thompson 5. For St Luke, see fol. 10; for St John, see fol. 9; for St Matthew, see fol. 11; for St Mark, see fol. 12. Throughout the Middle Ages (and still to this day) saints were commonly depicted with a defining 'attribute' so that individual saints could be quickly and easily recognized within visual material; much like spectacles, this attribute was a signifier that signposted the identity of a particular saint. Often, these attributes invoked elements of the saint's martyrdom, miracles, or broader hagiography. However, the devices which represent the Four Evangelists differ from these formats and instead represent the four-faced creatures from Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision. In this vision, Ezekiel describes witnessing four heavenly creatures residing in a flaming storm cloud. Each of these creatures had four faces: 'And as for the likeness of their faces: there was the face of a man, and the face of a lion on the right side of all the four: and the face of an ox, on the left side of all the four: and the face of an eagle over all the four.' (Ezekiel 1:10; Douay-Rheims Bible). Later, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, St Jerome attributes each of these 'faces' to the four gospels, suggesting that the face of a human man represented the Gospel of Matthew, that the lion represented the Gospel of Mark, that the ox (or calf) represented the Gospel of Luke, and the eagle represented the Gospel of John. See St Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, p. 55.

his reading is an example of desirable Christian behaviour; and the two together allow the viewer/s to conclude that his visual impairment was acquired through moral means.

Some scholars have argued that, due to the magnifying function of spectacles, image-makers chose to include these devices in depictions of religious figures as a reference to the hymn known as the Magnificat, in which the opening line states, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord'.[24] Stephen Hanley, for example, suggests that 'the tradition of depicting an apostle using spectacles to "magnify" text was a reference to the Virgin's supreme act of magnification as expressed in her canticle of joy'.[25] While a connection between spectacles and the Magnificat is possible, Hanley's interpretation presupposes a more thorough knowledge of liturgical hymns than some members of the laity might have had. For an individual to 'read' this visual metaphor they would need a very strong knowledge of both the scripture and canticles as well as a working knowledge of Latin. While it is likely that someone with a religious background and education in Latin would have been able to make this connection (such as the owner of the Tilliot Hours), Hanley's suggestion does not account for the use of spectacles as a sign in images with a much broader lay audience.

One such image, for example, is the depiction of St Matthew on a fifteenth-century rood screen in St Agnes's Church, Cawston, England.[26] In this image, a balding and bearded St Matthew is depicted as reading from an open Bible in his hand, while holding a pair of rivet spectacles up to his face. St Matthew is part of a line-up of twenty influential saints depicted across the rood screen, facing into the nave, making him visible to members of the laity

[24] 'Magnificat anima mea Dominum'. Luke 1:46–55 (Vulgate Bible; translation from the Douay-Rheims Bible).

[25] Hanley, 'Optical Symbolism', p. 8.

[26] A 360° tour of St Agnes Church, which includes the painted rood screen, is available in Diocese of Norfolk, 'St Agnes, Cawston'.

throughout church services. While it could be that the inclusion of spectacles in this image was intended to represent the Magnificat, it seems more likely that, given its location and audience, the portrait sought to demonstrate that St Matthew was so devout that he had damaged his vision through the noble pursuit of reading and writing of holy scripture, rather than through engagement in immoral or un-Christian activities. By rendering St Matthew's impairment legible through the inclusion of spectacles in the image, the portrait may have provided reassurance to individuals who were concerned about developing ocular impairments of their own.

The cause for this concern likely stemmed from contemporary understandings of ocular theory and the way in which this theory connected to religious practice and physical health. Throughout the Middle Ages it was accepted that the eyes emitted a substance known as 'visual spirit' that absorbed information about the objects it fell upon and returned this information back through the lens of the eye, to the brain. This theory built upon earlier Greek optics and was known as ocular 'emission' or 'extramission'.[27] As this visual spirit could carry external elements into the body and brain, any image seen could disturb the body's humoral equilibrium, for better or worse. Correspondingly, looking at beautiful or holy sights could have the opposite effect. By viewing religious imagery, a person could stimulate and strengthen both their physical body and their immortal soul.

Perhaps the most effective way to receive spiritual and physical healing through the act of looking was to witness the elevation of the Host during Mass.[28] As Edward Wheatley explains, 'the synodal statutes of Paris of 1205–8 mandated that the *elevatio* take place only after the bread

[27] For a more thorough overview of extramission theory and medieval optics, see Lindberg and Tachau, 'Science of Light and Color'.

[28] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 91, 101.

was consecrated, so that the viewers would be looking not at bread but at the actual body of Christ'.[29] As the Host was believed to be the actual body of Christ, those who looked upon it would receive a form of humoral and spiritual cleansing and would have been protected by its blessing for the rest of the day. The benefits bestowed on those people who could witness the elevation of the Host were so important that several measures were implemented to make this possible. Some of these measures were legitimized by the Church; for instance, just before the event took place, a mass bell was rung to tell worshippers that they should look up from their prayers to see the moment of consecration. Similarly, it was not unusual for small holes called 'elevation squints' to be drilled into a church's rood screen at the height of a kneeling parishioner. These 'squints' allowed members of the congregation to look through the rood screen, bear witness to the elevation, and receive any associated physical or spiritual healing.[30]

Although the rood screen at the Church of St. Agnes does not contain squints, it is of a low height, which allowed members of the laity to see over it while they were sitting or standing in the nave, but not when they were kneeling. As parishioners would have been encouraged to kneel for the Elevation, they would only have been able to see the Host when the priest lifted it above his head and over the sightline imposed by the rood screen. Throughout the rest of the rite, kneeling parishioners would have found themselves face-to-face with the portraits of the saints depicted across the rood screen, including St Matthew wearing spectacles. The location of these portraits and their 'interactivity' in response to the physical movements associated with liturgical rites, would have provided viewers with an additional opportunity for spiritual reflection. The image of St Matthew wearing spectacles would have reminded members of the laity that visual

[29] Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, p. 15.

[30] These elevation squints, also known as hagioscopes, still survive in many churches across Europe. For a more detailed discussion of hagioscopes, see Kemp, 'Out Past the Eye Mark'.

disabilities need not be a barrier to faith at the very moment they were likely to have felt most concerned about this. Although sight loss or sight deterioration might prevent an individual from fully experiencing the elevation of the Host, these images demonstrated that, provided one's sight was weakened through their engagement in appropriate and pious activities, 'declining vision did not preclude them from having inner sight'.[31]

Another similarly reassuring image of an Evangelist depicted with spectacles is Maarten van Heemskerck's 'Saint Luke painting the Virgin and Child'. Completed in 1532, this image shows St Luke painting the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus as, according to Christian tradition, Luke was believed to be the first painter of holy icons.[32] St Luke sits upon a carved block displaying his winged-ox attribute and wears a pair of rivet spectacles upon his nose. As stated in a note in the bottom left of the painting, Heemskerck produced this image for the Haarlem Painters' Guild Chapel in Saint Bravo, Haarlem, Netherlands, where it is referenced in the Guild's archives as 'an altarpiece by Heemskerck'.[33] This is supported by the way in which Heemskerck has painted the image as though seen from a low viewpoint, suggesting that the image was hung above natural eye level over an altar.[34] Due to its location in the Guild's chantry chapel, the primary audience for this image would have been members of the guild, comprising of a combination of painters, craftsmen, and members of associated trades (including paint-makers, engravers, and printers). Heemskerck's decision to paint St Luke with spectacles references the idea that Luke had developed long-sightedness because of extensive close work in the form of icon painting—a desirable Christian activity. This firmly positions the painting within the iconographic framework that spectacles, when worn by an individual

[31] Hawkins, 'Seeing the Light', p. 156.
[32] See Bacci, *Il Pennello dell'Evangelista*.
[33] 'Een Autaarstuk door Heemskerk'; quoted in Taverne, 'Salomon de Bray', p. 62.
[34] Images of the painting are available at Frans Hals Museum, 'Maarten van Heemskerck'.

engaged in desirable Christian behaviour, signifies an impairment that reflects morality, even holiness. As a result, this image would have been reassuring to the guild members who, as painters themselves, might also have experienced sight-loss and have needed to wear spectacles. The image reminded painters that the production of Christian iconography was a noble pursuit and would have confirmed that any work-related impairments they developed as a result would be 'read' on their body in a positive way by their direct contemporaries.

However, not all of the Evangelists were regularly depicted wearing spectacles. Although we frequently see Matthew, Mark, and Luke wearing spectacles, the same cannot be said for St John. Considering St John's reputation for having written one of the gospels, coupled with the inclusion of spectacles in images of the other three Evangelists, it initially seems odd that the signifier of spectacles would not have also been applied to him. However, St John was already emmeshed in a complex web of visual signifiers that would have conflicted with the sign produced by spectacles. St John is regularly depicted in visual source material as a youthful figure, who would not have been expected to use spectacles. As Sarah McNamer suggests, St John 'is always depicted without a beard; moreover, the artists call attention to his hair, portraying him with curly locks, often long and blond. These physical features have been interpreted in the scholarship as signs of John's youthfulness'.[35] The fact that St John is so frequently depicted with long curly hair, rosy cheeks, and without a beard, suggests that, in these images, he was not yet at the age of maturity, let alone of acquired long-sightedness.[36]

[35] McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, p. 143.

[36] There are many examples of St John depicted according to these youthful tropes throughout the Middle Ages, from his image in the Lindisfarne Gospels in the eighth century (London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D IV, fol. 209^{v}) to representations in late medieval Books of Hours (see, for example, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Latin 9474, fol. 16^{v}; New York City, Morgan Library and Museum, MS M.1054, fol. 13^{r}; The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 74 G 28, fol. 13^{r}).

Medieval scientists, artists, and philosophers widely debated the ways in which the human lifecycle should be divided. However, as J. A. Burrow suggests, 'the physiological theory of the four ages of man […] can claim to have provided the most powerful and the most influential of all attempts to explain scientifically the changes which human being go through in the course of their life'.[37] Allegedly, this division of the life course originated with Pythagoras, whom Diogenes Laetius claimed divided 'man's life into four quarters thus: "Twenty years a boy, twenty years a youth, twenty years a young man, twenty years an old man"'.[38] Building upon this sequence, Johannitus (whose *Isagoge* was translated into Latin at the end of the eleventh century) stated that:

> The ages are four, namely adolescence, maturity, old age, and decrepitude. Adolescence is of a hot and moist complexion, and in it the body grows and increases up to the twenty-fifth or thirtieth year. Maturity follows, which is hot and dry and preserves the body in perfection without any decrease in its powers; it ends in the thirty-fifth or fortieth year. After that follows old age, cold and dry, in which the body does indeed begin to lessen and diminish, but still without loss of power; it lasts until the fifty-fifth or sixtieth year. After that follows decrepitude, cold and moist through the gathering of the phlegmatic humour, during which a loss of power becomes evident; its years run to the end of life.[39]

[37] Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p. 12.

[38] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.1, p. 329.

[39] 'Quattuor sunt etates, scilicet adolescentia, iuventus, senectus, et senium. Adolescentia complexionis videlicet calide et humide est, in qua crescit et augetur corpus usque ad 25 vel 30 perveniens annum. Hanc iuventus sequitur que calida est et sicca, perfectum sine diminutione virium corpus conservans, que 35 vel 40 anno nitur. Hinc succedit senectus, frigida et sicca, in

This work significantly influenced later Western scholarship pertaining to the lifecycle, coupled with Avicenna's *Canon*, which was translated into Latin at the end of the twelfth century, and divided the life course into Adolescence (0–30), the 'Age of Standing Still' (30–35/40), the 'Age of Diminution' (35/40–60), and the 'Age of Decrepitude' (over 60).[40]

Following Johannitus and Avicenna, images of St John frequently depict him within the age of 'adolescence' and therefore below the age of thirty. Within Western medieval visual culture, the 'adolescent' period of life is usually marked by signifiers including blonde-coloured hairstyles and a clean-shaven face. 'Maturity' (or 'the Age of Standing Still') is marked by shorter hair and a beard. As spectacles were used as a visual signifier of a long career of pious reading and learning, St John cannot be known for both his youthfulness and the wearing of spectacles. Unlike the other Evangelists whose maturity aligns with the suggestion that they have spent many years reading or writing the holy scripture (to the point that their eyes had deteriorated), for St John the commonly understood reading of spectacles would contradict the signifier of youth.

In this way, age becomes another important visual signifier in the production of meaning. If a younger individual were to be presented with spectacles it may suggest that they had acquired their visual impairment through some means other than religious learning. This is depicted quite clearly in examples of 'fools' wearing spectacles. Although these later medieval fools—as seen in the woodcut accompanying Brant's 'First Fool' in the *Ship of Fools*—are not

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qua quidem minui et decrescere corpus incipit, tamen virtus non decit, quinquagesimo quinto anno vel sexagesimo persistens. Huic succedit senium, collectione phlegmatis humoris frigidum et humidum, in quo virtutis apparet defectus, quod suos annos vite termino metitur.' *Isagoge Joannitii ad Tegni Galieni* quoted and translated in Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p. 23.

[40] Avicenna, *Canon*, Bk. I, Fen i, Doctr. 3, Chap. 3.

necessarily young, they are certainly more youthful than Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who are regularly depicted as white-haired, bearded, and aged. Unlike the elder Evangelists, whose ocular impairments demonstrate a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of religious learning, the inclusion of spectacles in images of fools who are visually coded as being in the 'adolescent' or 'mature' stages of life—rather than old age—suggests that they acquired their impairment through inappropriate means.

Misbehaving Monks

Fools were not the only individuals for whom spectacles could be used as a visual signifier of inappropriate behaviour. Spectacles were also used in images to draw attention to religious individuals who are looking at, or participating in, things that are undesirable within the Christian worldview. In these instances, the individual's behaviour and associated ocular impairment demonstrates their distance from—rather than closeness to—God.

An example of this is depicted in a manuscript miniature located in a late fourteenth-century copy of Konrad von Ammenhausen's *Das Schachzabelbuch*.[41] This manuscript is a Middle High German verse translation of the *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilum ac popularium super ludo scacchorum* [Book of the Customs of Men and the Duties of Nobles or the Book of Chess], a morality text written by Jacobus de Cessolis (c. 1250–c. 1322).[42] It was likely produced in the scriptorium of the monastery of Stein-am-Rhein, where Konrad von Ammenhausen lived and worked across the fourteenth century.[43] In this illustration, a tonsured

[41] St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, NLR Germ. F.v. XIV.1. *Das Schachzabelbuch*.

[42] Jacobus de Cessolis was an Italian Dominican friar who adopted chess as an allegory for the city, around which he composed this morality text. See Adams, *Power Play*; Luchitskaya, 'Chess as a Metaphor'.

[43] National Library of Russia, 'Cultural Heritage of Europe'.

and bespectacled monk is depicted playing dice with another man.[44] The monk's opponent represents a lower-status or unsavoury character: his hose are falling down, he has a hole in the toe of his left boot, and he is depicted with wild red hair and a red forked beard. These signifiers are anti-Semitic in nature and were frequently used in contemporary Western imagery to represent both Judas as an individual and Jewish people more broadly.[45] Engaging in gambling would have been against the monk's religious upbringing, as 'contemporary school texts and ecclesiastical rules t[old] young clerics to stay away from dice and malicious women'.[46] There is little doubt then that, by gambling with a roguish opponent, the monk depicted in *Das Schachzabelbuch* is focusing his attentions on the wrong kind of activity. As outlined towards the beginning of this chapter, monastic scribes and illuminators were integral to the early development of spectacles as a visual signifier. In this image, we see spectacles being combined with an individual engaged in undesirable behaviour. This changes the overall 'reading' of spectacles to indicate the acquisition of an impairment through immoral means. As this manuscript is a morality text, originally written by a Dominican friar, it makes sense that the inclusion of spectacles was intended to render the monk's immorality as legible on his body—indicating that he should be applying himself to holy scripture, instead of a game of dice.

Another example of spectacles being used as a sign of immorality and bad Christian behaviour is depicted in a fourteenth-century French psalter.[47] Much like the Tilliot Hours, this manuscript would have been commissioned by a wealthy member of the laity to facilitate their private worship. In this psalter, an illuminated initial 'D' shows four

[44] St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, NLR Germ. F.v. XIV.1., fol. 104^{v}.
[45] Boyarin, *The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess*, pp. 87–88.
[46] Warnar, 'Discovery', p. 70.
[47] Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon, MS 0140, fol. 190^{r}.

tonsured monks reading from a prayer book, in front of a cloth-covered altar. Whilst the three monks at the front of the group are looking at the text before them with scowls of concentration, the bespectacled monk at the back of the group is wistfully staring over his shoulder, away from the prayer book. The spectacles in this image thus critique their wearer's inappropriate behaviour. Unlike his pious brothers, who are actively engaged in reading the holy text in front of them, the bespectacled monk's mind and eyes have wandered away from his religious responsibilities. Spectacles are used in this image to demonstrate that the monk should be applying himself to the holy text, rather than idle daydreaming. It is also possible that this image served as a warning to the lay reader whose eyes had wandered away from the central text of the manuscript to focus, instead, upon the marginal illustrations. In this case, the monk's distraction actively mirrors the potential distraction of the reader, with his spectacles acting as a caution against misplaced attention.

Conclusion

Within medieval European image-making traditions, spectacles were a complex signifier whose meaning could shift and change depending on how they were combined with other signifiers. On the one hand, they could be combined with an individual engaging in desirable Christian behaviour to indicate the acquisition of impairment through moral means; on the other hand, they could be combined with signifiers of undesirable behaviour to condemn individuals who had spent too much time reading, looking at, or engaging with the wrong kinds of people and materials. As it was impossible for medieval people to determine how an individual had acquired a visual impairment, it was unclear whether the impairment resulted from moral and desirable Christian activities or from immoral and

undesirable behaviours. Depictions of holy figures wearing spectacles helped clarify this ambiguity. These images made a more explicit connection between visual impairment and desirable Christian behaviour. By doing so, they stabilized the otherwise mutable and illegible bodies presented in medieval imagery.

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