All that glitters is not gold: The depiction of gold-brocaded velvets in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Netherlandish paintings

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Preface
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In 2007 prof. Jeroen Stumpel (University of Utrecht, UU) and prof. Jan Piet Fileldt Kok (University of Amsterdam, UvA) were granted funding by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for a project called *The Impact of Oil: a history of oil painting in the Low Countries and its consequences for the visual arts, 1350-1550*. Their co-applicants were: prof. Arie Wallert (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam/ UvA) and dr. Ann-Sophie Lehmann (UU). The aim of the project, as described in the research proposal, is as follows:

‘The aim of the project is to write an integrated history of the introduction, dissemination and development of the use of oil media in panel painting from 1350 to 1550. Even though the importance of the introduction of oil for the art of painting can hardly be overrated, such a history has never been the subject of a monograph. Even though oil was used in various ways well before 1350, it is clear that entirely novel avenues were opened up from then on, and in particular with the Van Eycks around 1400. The art of Van Eyck and his colleagues in the Low Countries became widely famed in fifteenth-century Europe, and the general picture seems to be that in the wake of this prestige particular pictorial motifs and painting techniques migrated to various regions in Europe. Oil had become the most important medium by the beginning of the sixteenth century, and was to remain so until the end of the nineteenth century.’

Within the project, there was room for one full-time Ph.D. candidate at the UU and at the UvA. The latter soon became two part-time positions, with the generous financial support of the Institute for Culture and History (ICH), one of the research institutes of the UvA. I applied to and was granted one of these part-time functions. As a trained paintings conservator with an Art History degree, I was particularly interested in the type of technical research proposed within the project. Soon after the inception of the project, while I was still considering different subjects, Arie Wallert came up with the idea of looking into the painting technique of luxury textiles such as gold brocades. This immediately stuck a chord with me, especially since, as a conservation student, I had done – and thoroughly enjoyed – a literature study on the use of late-medieval decoration techniques on Northern-European panels. Initially the subject had a rather large scope, comprising not only the painting technique of gold-brocaded textiles, but of gold and golden objects in general. It soon became more focussed on the painting techniques of gold-brocaded velvets. This subject turned out to be a rewarding area of study, increasing our knowledge on different artists and their workshop practices.

The exhibition *Vroege Hollanders, Schilder kunst van de late Middeleeuwen (Dutch Primitives, Paintings from the late Middle Ages)* held at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam in the spring of 2008, provided an excellent opportunity to test some of the possibilities of the research subject. After the exhibition and the subsequent kick-off meeting, it was decided to start the Ph.D. research with the early-sixteenth century Leiden painter Cornelis Engebrechtsz (c. 1462-1527), followed by his Amsterdam contemporary Jacob Cornelisz (c. 1472-before 1533). There were several practical reasons to start at the end of the proposed time period of 1350 to 1550. First a relative large number of paintings by both artists are available in Dutch Museums, most of them containing an abundance of luxury textiles. Additionally, several early Netherlandish paintings were treated shortly before the Rotterdam exhibition, providing a wealth of technical information. The *Lamentation* triptych by Engebrechtsz even travelled back to the conservator afterwards, allowing for the opportunity to study it under the best of circumstances in a well-equipped conservation studio.

In this period I learned that paintings conservator Jessica Roeders, while working on an Engebrechtsz panel at the Rijksmuseum during her internship in 2007/2008, had already done some research on gold-brocaded textiles in paintings by Engebrechtsz in order to reconstruct a small part of it on the panel that she treated. From our common interest and enthusiasm for the subject came the idea to write an article on the painting techniques of the gold-brocaded velvets in paintings by Engebrechtsz together. This was published in the 2012 winter issue of the online *Journal for Historians of Netherlandish Art*. Although the study of gold-brocaded velvets in paintings by Engebrechtsz and Jacob Cornelisz was part of my pilot study, conducted in the first year of my research, so far only the part about Engebrechtsz has been published. The publication on Jacob Cornelisz has had to wait, because I would like it to coincide with the planned exhibition in 2014. Unfortunately that means it will not be part of this dissertation, apart from appendix 2.4 with an overview of the brocade patterns that the artist used.

After Engebrechtsz and Jacob Cornelisz, I went back in time so to say, to continue my study on gold-brocaded velvets with the painting techniques ap-
plied by Geertgen tot Sint Jans (1455/1465-1485/1495). Focussing on the Northern Netherlands seemed a logical choice since this was largely unexplored territory in which there was much information to gain. Much more had already been written about Southern-Netherlandish painters from the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century, including on the subject of gold-brocaded textiles. Additionally, many more paintings by Southern-Netherlandish masters have survived than those by painters from the North, although the surviving paintings still are only a small fraction of the works that must have been produced in that period, making it much harder to focus. However, during our excursions to various European museums, I tried to examine as many Southern-Netherlandish paintings as possible within the given time, to serve as a reference. Two exhibitions were especially helpful in this regard: The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden in Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, and Rogier van der Weyden: The Master of Passions in Leuven.10 When the Impact of Oil team got the invitation to visit Jan and Hubert van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece and Jan van Eyck’s Madonna and Child with Canon van der Paele, this really was a dream come true.11 By then it was clear that the techniques used by Jan van Eyck (c. 1390-1441) to imitate gold-brocaded velvets, were distinctly different from previous methods to depict such textiles, all of which involved the use of gold leaf. I decided to include a separate article on the painting technique of Jan van Eyck’s gold-brocaded velvets, because he can be seen as the forefather of all painted gold-brocaded velvets in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

Notes
1 For the complete research proposal and additional information, see: www.impactofoil.org or contact one of the members.
2 The positions were specifically meant for conservators and it was hoped that, by making the positions part-time, the candidate would still have time for practical conservation work.
3 The full-time position at the UU was filled by Marjolijn Bol, who successfully defended her dissertation Oil and the Translucent. Varnishing and glazing in practice, recipes and historiography, 1100-1600 in January 2012. The second part-time position was entered by Abbie Vandivere, paintings conservator, who will defend her dissertation From the Ground Up. Surface and sub-surface effects in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Netherlandish paintings on 19 June 2013.
4 A research post-doc position was filled by dr. Mark Clark. The article was called: ‘Schoonheid in Goud. Laat middeleeuwse decoratietechnieken op panelen in Noord Europa’ and became a chapter in an instructional reader for the SRAL (Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg) on the painting techniques of panel painting in Northern Europe from 1200 to 1400.
5 The exhibition Vroege Hollanders ran from 16 February to 25 May 2008.
6 The triptych, owned by Museum de Lakenhal in Leiden, was treated by Menno Dooijes, a private conservator from Makkum. For object information on the triptych, see chapter 3, p. 78 (note 22) and appendix 1.
7 Cornelis Engebrechtsz, Christ taking leave of his mother, c. 1515-1520, panel, 54.7 x 44 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-1719.
8 See: http://www.jhna.org/index.php/past-issues/volume-4-issue-1. Although our individual contributions to this article are difficult to separate, for the purpose of this dissertation, I did all research on the paintings myself, even if it sometimes overlapped with work that Jessica had already done. I wrote a pilot study on gold-brocaded velvets in the paintings by Engebrechtsz and Jacob Cornelisz in January 2009 myself. Our joint article was written only after the approval of my pilot study.
9 The exhibition Van Oostsanen (1470-1533): De ware Jacob is scheduled to run from 15 March to 29 June 2014 in the Stedelijk Museum in Alkmaar, the Sint-Laurenskerk in Alkmaar and the Amsterdam Museum in Amsterdam.
10 The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden was held in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main between 21 November 2008 and 1 March 2009, followed by the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin between 20 March and 21 June 2009. The exhibition Rogier van der Weyden: The Master of Passions ran in M-Museum in Leuven from 20 September to 6 December 2009.
11 For object information on these paintings, see chapter 1, p. 33 (notes 2 and 3) and appendix 1.