ERASMUS'S NOSE

ALEXANDER MARR

Desiderius Erasmus waited until he was fifty to have his portrait painted. Thereafter, images of the "prince of scholars" came thick and fast, including Hans Holbein the Younger's oil portraits of 1523 and the celebrated engraving by Albrecht Dürer of 1526.[1] The first, though, was the diptych portrait of Erasmus and Antwerp's city clerk, Pieter Gillis, commissioned from Quinten Matsys in 1517 and sent to their mutual friend Thomas More that year (figs. 1 and 2). This much-discussed picture depicts the scholars in a *studiolo* stacked with books by ancient and modern authors, among them works by Lucian and Erasmus's own *Praise of Folly*. Erasmus is portrayed writing his *Paraphrase of St Paul's Epistle to*

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Figure 1. Quinten Matsys, *Desiderius Erasmus*, 1517. Oil on oak panel. 50.5 × 45.2 cm. London, Royal Collection, Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023.

the Romans (1517), while Gillis pushes a closed book toward the spectator, perhaps a copy of More's *Utopia* (1516), which he had helped see through the press.[2] Hanging from a shelf behind Erasmus is a pair of scissors, which historians have long puzzled over. In his account of the portrait, Peter van der Coelen observed that the purpose of this implement

Figure 2. Quinten Matsys, *Pieter Gillis*, 1517. Oil on oak panel, 76.6 × 52.2 cm. Longford Castle, Collection of the Earl of Radnor. Reproduced by permission of the Earl of Radnor.

is “not immediately obvious,” speculating that it might have been used to “sharpen reed pens, Erasmus’s favourite writing implement.”[3] While scissors are dangerously ill-suited to this job, for which a single-bladed knife was preferred, they could conceivably have been used to cut a reed to its desired length. More plausible is Larry Silver’s suggestion that they refer to Erasmus’s editing of texts: scissors often accompany depictions of Saint Jerome, whose letters and New Testament Erasmus had recently edited. Indeed, a book labeled “HIERONVMVS” on its fore edge sits directly behind Erasmus while the picture in general is informed by the iconography of the saint as developed by the workshop of Jan van Eyck and others.[4]

Contemporaneous portraits of scholars and men of business commonly feature scissors among their accoutrements, for example Jan Gossaert’s *Portrait of a Merchant (possibly Jan Snoeck)* (ca. 1530; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). Matsys’s own *Tax Collectors* (ca. 1525–30; Lichtenstein Collection, Valduz) includes a partially opened pair hanging from a shelf behind the protagonists.[5] It has not hitherto been mentioned, however, that the scissors in Matsys’s portrait of Erasmus visually echo the scholar’s famously pointy nose nor that both are angled down toward the sheet of paper on which he writes. Indeed, if one were to draw straight lines through the sharp end of the scissors, the tip of Erasmus’s nose, and the nib of his pen, all would converge roughly on the page where he has momentarily paused his writing. Erasmus was self-conscious about his large and distinctive nose. He even caricatured its size himself, in a grimacing self-portrait doodled in the margins of his working papers from around this time (fig. 3).[6]

Why, though, the apparent connection made in the painting between nose, pen, and scissors? There are few, if any, precedents for the combination of these objects in such a concerted way, but a consideration of the formal and conceptual analogies between them suggests an innovative conceit befitting the portrait’s subject. All three are notably (one might even say, pointedly) sharp, a topic that preoccupied Erasmus in his writings. Humanists often used the nose as a metaphor for acumen

Figure 3. Desiderius Erasmus, *Self-Portrait Caricature*, from *Scholia in epistulas Hieronymi*, 1514–16. Pen and ink on paper. Basel Universitätsbibliothek, Erasmuslade, MS A IX 56, fol. 226r. Reproduced by permission of the Basel Universitätsbibliothek.

or insight, a "sharp nose" meaning a "keen wit." Erasmus's collection of proverbs, the *Adages*, confirm this sense, for instance in "Scenting out, and sundry metaphors of this kind" (*Odorari, et similes aliquot metaphorae*). By way of example, Erasmus offers: "To scent out, for instance, in the sense of to discover, and to establish some fact by intelligent detective work. . . . Hence too people are said to have a 'keen nose' and to be 'keen scented,' with its converse 'thick in the head.'"[7] Another adage shows that a "nose well wiped" means something similar: "With nose well wiped. Thick in the head [*Emunctae naris. Muccosis naribus*]. With nose well wiped is a phrase for keen and exquisite judgment, as though the nose were cleared, with all mucus wiped away. . . . A blunt nose, on the other hand, conveys a degree of stupidity."[8] In the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus deployed this analogy to suggest that only discerning readers would appreciate his jeu d'esprit: "Jokes can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment [*non omnino naris obesae*—literally, those who are not entirely fat nosed] can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people we know."[9] With this in mind, we might contrast Erasmus's acute nose in Matsys's portrait with the stubby ones of fools and imbeciles, including, for example, the snub-nosed jester drawn by Holbein in the margins of the schoolmaster Osvaldus Myconius's *Praise of Folly* or the grotesque appendage of Matsys's own so-called *Ugly Duchess* (ca. 1513–17; National Gallery, London).[10]

In Matsys's diptych portrait, we are surely intended to equate Erasmus's prominent nose not only with his prodigious intelligence but also specifically with the mental agility required to edit (indicated by the scissors) and write (indicated by the reed pen). This connection prompts further analogies. For instance, where we can recognize Erasmus from his bodily features, the clever reader should be able to sniff out his character from his writings, to tell the mind of the man from his work.[11] One of Erasmus's mottoes, used in Matsys's portrait medal of the humanist (1519), conveys this idea: "Portrait stamped to create a living likeness / The writings will show the better one."[12] This notion that character

may be discerned in charac*ters*—the style of written letters—was one of the diptych portrait's key conceits, and we may note the connection between writing implement (*stilus*), pointy nose, and the sharp delineation of individual manner. Moreover, the painting should be interpreted in the context of epistolary exchange, which could bring absent friends vividly before the mind's eye. As Erasmus wrote, "One can find no more pleasant or familiar kind of intercourse, among those who are separated, than an exchange of letters in which the correspondents draw a picture of themselves for each other, while each of them places at least his mind and feelings, if not his physical presence, at the other's disposal."[13]

Upon receiving the painting, More wrote enthusiastically to Gillis in its praise, sending him a pair of Latin verses in which first the picture (ventriloquized) and then More himself speak of the work's merits. By bringing the sitters so vividly to life, he explains, Matsys has proven himself greater even than Apelles.[14] In the accompanying letter, he rhapsodized over the artist's mimetic skill:

> My dear Pieter, marvellously as our Quentin has represented everything, what a wonderful forger above all else it looks as though he might have been! He has imitated the address on my letter to you so well that I do not believe I could repeat it myself. And so, unless he wants it for some purpose of his own, or you are keeping it for your own ends, do please let me have the letter back: it will double the effect if it is kept handy alongside the picture. If it has been lost, or you have a use for it, I will see whether I in my turn can imitate the man who imitates my hand so well.[15]

We do not know how nor precisely where More displayed the Matsys diptych with the original letter (or, in what would have been an even more elaborate joke, his *own* imitation of the original as forged by Matsys). Presumably it went to his house in Chelsea (built ca. 1520), where Holbein's portraits of More and his family would later hang, perhaps displayed in his private study. We should remember that the diptych was probably originally hinged, openable like an enormous book (another

conceit, given its content) and thus intended to be set up on a table or other piece of furniture rather than hung on a wall. If displayed in this way, the fiction of presence would be complete: Erasmus, Gillis, and More seated together at a shared desk, the painting's illusionistic background of shelves and books mirrored in the real space of More's *studiolo*.

More's response to the picture demonstrates that humanists were starting to develop a sharp nose for the deceits of art: a nascent kind of connoisseurship. Yet the visual discernment with which he spotted Matsys's fakery was grounded in epistolary culture. Humanists set great store by the authenticity of a document written in the author's own hand. Indeed, Erasmus's correspondence is replete with references to the value of his own handwriting as a sign of trustworthiness; sometimes, he signed himself "Erasmus, in his own hand."[16] Toward the end of his life, Erasmus concluded a letter to the legal scholar Franciscus Rupilius with a typical witticism on this theme: "If *autography* pleases you, do not be offended by *cacography*. That is the way I am. But your *macrography* will never offend me."[17] The letter will delight the recipient because Erasmus took the trouble to write it out himself (*autography*), yet if its contents are bad (*cacography*), he begs forgiveness; in any case, Rupilius's lengthy writing (*macrography*) will never offend. Coining the term *cacography*, a pun on the Greek *kakos* (bad) and the Dutch/German *kak-/kack-* (shitty), Erasmus effectively says that bad writing stinks. This helps make sense of one of Erasmus's scatological anecdotes—likely of his own invention—about a detested adversary, Edward Lee, who had attacked him ferociously in *Annotationes* (1520). A copy of Lee's polemic, he claimed, had been deposited in the Franciscans' library in Louvain, where it was "thoroughly smeared inside and out with human excrement. Readers entering the library wanted to know what the stink was, but despite a search into every nook and cranny nothing was found. Finally, someone with a better nose followed the direction of the smell and discovered its source."[18] Put simply, a keen nose was synonymous with expert criticism, with the discernment of the good from the bad. Thus, when Erasmus's first *Paraphrase*—the work

he is shown composing in the diptych—was well received, he described those who liked it as having a "good nose."[19]

One of Erasmus's choice phrases for the literary gifts he bestowed on his friends was "a nosegay," plucked from "the muses' garden" or the "flower-garden of the Scriptures."[20] In the diptych, a gift to one of his closest companions, Erasmus offered up a visual equivalent that presents not only those sweet-smelling books he and More loved so much but also the physiognomic sign of their mutual wit. Sitting at home and gazing intently at the painting, More came nose to nose with his absent friend. Perhaps he held up a light to its surface to inspect the refined brushwork of its meticulous detail, musing on another apt adage of Erasmus: "It smells of the lamp [*Olet lucernam*] . . . of something that has been the object of thought and much work gone into the polishing of it."[21]

NOTES

1. See Peter van der Coelen, ed., *Images of Erasmus* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 2008), with citations for earlier literature.
2. See Larry Silver, *The Paintings of Quentin Massys* (London: Phaidon, 1984), cat. no. 58; Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus: Man of Letters; The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), chap. 1.
3. Van der Coelen, *Images of Erasmus*, 59.
4. Silver, *Paintings of Quentin Massys*, 236; Jardine, *Erasmus*, 36–37.
5. For the Gossaert painting, see John Oliver Hand and Martha Wolff, *Early Netherlandish Painting: The Collection of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103–5. For the *Tax Collectors*, see Larry Silver, "Massys and Money: The Tax Collectors Rediscovered," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 7, no. 2 (2015), https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2015.7.2.2.
6. See Jessica Stevenson-Stewart, "Towards a Hermeneutics of Doodling in the Era of *Folly*," *Word & Image* 29, no. 4 (2013): 409–27.
7. Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 32, *Adages I vi 1 to I x 100*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), no. I vi 81.
8. Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 34, *Adages II vii 1 to III iii 100*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), no. II viii 59.

9. Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 29, *Literary and Educational Writings, vols. 5–6* (*Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 84.
10. See Erika Michael, *The Drawings by Hans Holbein the Younger for Erasmus's "Praise of Folly"* (New York: Garland, 1986); Emma Capron, ed., *The Ugly Duchess: Beauty and Satire in the Renaissance* (London: National Gallery, 2023).
11. See Harry H. Vredeveld, "'Lend a Voice': The Humanistic Portrait Epigraph in the Age of Erasmus and Dürer," *Renaissance Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2013): 509–67.
12. "IMAGO AD VIVA[M] EFFIGI[EM] EXPRESSA / ΤΗΝ ΚΡΕΙΤΤΩ ΤΑ ΣΥΓΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΑ ΔΕΙΞΕΙ." See Vredeveld, "'Lend a Voice,'" 521–26.
13. Desiderius Erasmus to Cornelius Gerard, Steyn, June 1489(?); Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 1, *Letters 1–141*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors, D. F. S. Thomson, and Wallace K. Ferguson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), letter 23.
14. "Quentin, who giv'st new art for old, / Than great Apelles even greater, / With mingled colours manifold / Lending dead shapes the life of nature." Thomas More to Pieter Gillis, Calais, October 6–7, 1517; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 5, *Letters 594–841*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), letter 684.
15. Ibid.
16. See, e.g., Desiderius Erasmus to Johannes Thurso, Louvain, April 20, 1519; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 6, *Letters 842–992*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors, D. F. S. Thomson, and P. G. Bietenholz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), letter 943.
17. Desiderius Erasmus to Franciscus Rupilius, Freiburg, September 8, 1533; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 20, *Letters 2803–2939*, trans. Clarence H. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), letter 2867; see 150n5 for an explanation of the Greek terms.
18. Desiderius Erasmus to Alfonso de Valdés, Basel, March 21, 1529; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 15, *Letters 2082–2203*, trans. Alexander Dalzell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), letter 2126.
19. Desiderius Erasmus to Richard Sampson, Louvain, March 1518; Erasmus, *Correspondence*, 5: letter 806.
20. See, e.g., Desiderius Erasmus to William Warham, London, June 1514; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 2, *Letters 142–297*,

trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), letter 293; Desiderius Erasmus to Beatus Rhenanus, Saint-Omer, April 13, 1515; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 3, *Letters 298–445*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), letter 327.

21. Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 32: no. I vii 71.