In the Mirror of van Eyck:  
Johan Huizinga's Autumn of  
the Middle Ages  

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Johan Huizinga's Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen (The Waning of the Middle Ages, or in the more accurate new translation, The Autumn of the Middle Ages) has long been recognized as a classic of modern historical writing. It was first published in Holland in 1919 in a carefully designed and rather expensive edition of 1,600 copies. Although it was generally well received, it did not cause an immediate breakthrough in its own field. Some medievalists of the stricter school frowned upon its highly colorful style. From the beginning it drew as much attention from literary circles as among professional historians. In 1920, it was honored with one of the very few literary awards existing at the time in the Netherlands. It soon found favor with the public, and was out of print within two years. Before World War II, four new Dutch editions appeared, each time with substantial revisions. Translations into German, English, and French followed in 1922, 1924, and 1932 respectively. These often-reprinted editions confirmed its status as an original and innovative piece of historical research. Instead of being an isolated case, halfway between literature and scholarship, the book proved to have affinities with various progressive trends in historiography, from the German Kulturgeschichte to the French histoire des mentalités. By the late twentieth century, Huizinga's masterwork has become available in almost all European languages, most recently in Russian and Lithuanian, and in Japanese.

Until recently the English-speaking world could only gain access to Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen through the heavily abridged translation made in 1924 by Frits Hopman in collaboration with the author. The new rendering by Rodney Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch is therefore greatly to be welcomed. The Autumn of the Middle Ages has the great advantage of being much more complete than the earlier English edition, and it includes Huizinga's footnotes and references. The translation, however, is somewhat

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on the cautious side. There is a high-strung, sometimes even a slightly hysterical note in Huizinga's prose that is not always rendered very well. The omission of the subtitle ("A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries") is indefensible. Various German words used in references to Dutch titles indicate that the translators have sometimes leaned too much on the German edition. And what is most important: by using the second Dutch edition of 1921, and not Huizinga's final revision, the translators have missed their chance of offering a truly complete, definitive English version. Several interesting later additions and changes of mind are now left out. Nonetheless, this new edition offers an attractive opportunity to reconsider the origins and scope of Huizinga's best-known work.⁴

*The Autumn of the Middle Ages* has often been praised for the visionary quality of its writing. Huizinga's descriptions of life in the later Middle Ages, especially in the first chapters, are highly suggestive in giving the "feel" of the age. The reader is drawn near at hand, as if things are happening before his or her eyes, and at the same time this special historical epoch is revealed in all its bewildering strangeness. Yet Huizinga was not merely offering a collection of historical impressions. The insistence in the secondary literature on his talents of visual evocation has tended to obscure the fact that *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* was written in an attempt to answer a specific set of historical questions, most of which were being asked as far back as the first decade of the twentieth century. Obviously many of these questions are obsolete by now. To grasp the full extent of Huizinga's achievement, however, they deserve closer attention. Only in this way can some of the apparent paradoxes in Huizinga's approach be understood.

In spite of its continuing popularity, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* is a deeply puzzling book. It never explains precisely what its subject is. It is certainly not a history of the rise and fall of the House of Burgundy. Huizinga expected the reader to possess a working knowledge of the political history of the age.⁵ Instead, he turned to what he called "the forms of life, thought, and art." But if he wanted to include both France and the Netherlands in his cultural survey, why did he concentrate almost entirely on sources in the French language? The book pays scant attention to the extensive literature that was written at the time in Dutch.⁶ If only for that reason, it is not an inclusive cultural history of the Burgundian lands. Huizinga's scope was both narrower and wider: while he excluded Dutch-speaking civilization, he considered northern France and the Burgundian dukedom as part of the same cultural area. Within this area, his point of view was

dominated by the culture of the court and the nobility and all those who depended upon them. The towns and their long struggle for legal and economic autonomy played a minor role in his story. Even so, did this justify his almost exclusive portrayal of the era in terms of decay and decline? A chapter on the melancholy story of Joan of Arc would certainly support his interpretation. But this is surprisingly absent. And if the visual arts were indeed the starting-point of the book, as he states in his introduction, why did he avoid any more detailed discussion of them?

Most of Huizinga's choices can be explained by the context in which the book originated. It may turn out, however, that many of the weaknesses of The Autumn of the Middle Ages are the faults of its qualities: a more balanced approach would, perhaps, have diminished the fascination it has held now for several generations. The book has become a classic mainly because it offers a strongly one-sided, but therefore eminently debatable, vision of a period in history which until then had lacked a recognizable identity. Under the influence of Jacob Burckhardt and others, Italian culture in the fifteenth century was, at the time Huizinga was writing, usually seen as the beginning of the modern age. Its progressive characteristics, realism and individualism, set it off sharply from earlier medieval culture. The fifteenth century in France and the Netherlands did not seem to possess such clearly marked traits. On the one hand, it was evident that the countries north of the Alps underwent many similar historical developments as the Italian city-states. There were strong commercial ties between the Italian and Flemish towns, and the structure of their economic life was not much different. On the other hand, the political and intellectual elite in France and the Burgundian lands remained attached to ideas and forms of expression from an older tradition. In contrast to the hedonistic classicism and philosophical paganism of most of Italian art and literature, French and Netherlandish culture of the fifteenth century was still overwhelmingly idealistic in its attitudes. For this reason, historians generally thought of the period as one of transition, halfway between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Following Jacob Burckhardt's selective treatment of the Italian Renaissance, Huizinga described fifteenth-century culture north of the Alps as thoroughly medieval. He took the rise and fall of the Burgundian state as the central historical event of the age. For slightly less than a century, the Burgundian court was the wealthiest and most powerful court in this part of Europe. Its style determined the manners and thought of the whole era. While its wealth may have been based on an early capitalist economy, the
way the Burgundian state conceived of itself and its aims was certainly not modern. The Burgundian dukes understood their task completely in terms of chivalric heroism and adventure, sanctioned by religious vows and outbursts of asceticism. What could have been the beginning of a modern state formation was in the end undone by the same ideology of feudal honor that had brought it into being. The culture of Burgundy was the final, fully developed phase of the medieval way of looking at the world. The art and literature it produced showed the same characteristics as its political attitudes. Even when the Burgundian artists used realistic forms of expression, it was misleading to see these as the coming of a Renaissance; their striking achievements in the depiction of the natural world were always subservient to transcendental ideals.

Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was a major influence on Huizinga, both as a model of cultural history and as a counterpart to his own interpretation. Huizinga tried, just like Burckhardt had done, to arrange the various aspects of social and intellectual life and of the arts in a given epoch under a small number of headings.\(^{10}\) Whereas Burckhardt saw affirmation and acceptance of the world as the key to Italian culture of the fifteenth century, Huizinga took as the dominant tendency of the Burgundian age the desire to escape from the harshness of reality. In line with Burckhardt, Huizinga believed that Western culture did not progress smoothly and evenly. On the contrary, European history showed a succession of cycles: every peak was followed by an inevitable low. Medieval culture reached its apogee in the Gothic art and the scholastic philosophy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thereafter, a long period of growing rigidity set in. Instead of developing new and original forms of culture, the creative energy of the age was spent on filling in more and more details of the existing framework. Greater cultural complexity not only meant a loss of drive and renewal, but also a getting out of touch with the basic philosophical questions of human existence. For this reason, these later periods appeared to be less rational and less balanced than the earlier ones.

Yet Huizinga's work was also a reaction to the debate in the early 1900s occasioned by Burckhardt's work. Many of the opinions brought forward at the time were not present in Burckhardt's writings themselves. The idea of the Renaissance as a turning point in European civilization had developed during the fin de siècle into a fashionable theme as actively studied as it was bewilderingly complex.\(^{11}\) Huizinga's views on what he was to call "the autumn of the Middle Ages" began with a moment of inspiration that allowed him to approach the whole of an intricate argument from a single perspective.
Visions and revisions

In a well-known passage in his autobiography, written in 1943, Huizinga recounted how, when he was a young professor at the University of Groningen, the central idea of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* presented itself:

The moment of its conception from the very beginning has remained distinctly in my memory, though not in the form of a detailed image. Strangely enough, I cannot remember the exact date when the thought came to my mind; it can perhaps best be described as the sudden lighting of a spark. It must have been between 1906 and 1909, probably 1907. In the afternoon, when the care of the children occupied my wife’s time, I often took a walk in the countryside, in those wide-open, straight-lined spaces still closely surrounding the town. On such a walk, on a Sunday, if I am right, somewhere alongside the canal to Appingedam, I was struck with the idea that the later Middle Ages were not the inception of a new era, but the dying away of things that had outlasted themselves.¹²

The fragment offers a charming vignette of the life of a provincial Dutch professor at the beginning of the twentieth century, who apparently has little to do in the afternoon, and therefore likes to go out on a walk, taking it for granted that his wife is busy with the children. But these are secondary matters. There is something mysterious about the event Huizinga describes. The metaphor he uses, the “lighting of a spark,” indicates a sudden galvanizing, a setting into motion, or even a setting fire to something that had been quietly at rest; but it also contains an allusion to the vocabulary of late medieval mysticism. One is tempted to think of the “Funklein” of Meister Eckhardt. As Huizinga concluded his autobiography, “I had, to use the words of the ancient Windesheim Brethren, received but a spark, that every now and then started glowing brightly.”¹³

It is evident that Huizinga remembered the occasion as something out of the ordinary—an overwhelming experience, almost a moment of grace. But the way he formulated his insight near the end of his life downplayed the importance of his discovery. If we identify the later Middle Ages with fifteenth-century Burgundy, the conception of a “dying away” would be completely conventional around 1907. Burckhardt himself had made a sharp distinction between the modern culture of the Italian city-states and the traditional ways of life north of the Alps.¹⁴ Most historians reserved the
word *Renaissance* in the Netherlands for the moment when the Gothic style was replaced by an Italianate classicism. It was much more adventurous and innovative to claim that the paintings of van Eyck and van der Weyden were as progressive as the works of their Italian contemporaries. Huizinga was aware of this.

In those years, in the wake of Courajod, and following Fierens-Gevaert and Karl Voll, it was becoming a habit to see early Netherlandish art as the coming of a northern Renaissance. My thoughts were radically opposed to this.¹⁵

Did he mean to say that he chose, in the manner of a confirmed conservative, a safe and approved opinion to confront the innovators? The conclusion that Burckhardt was right after all can hardly have struck him as a revelation. Two things are obvious: Huizinga had initially put much faith himself in the attempt to widen the use of the term *Renaissance*. His insight, therefore, was not a return to Burckhardt, but an even more drastic reconsideration of the concept. The image of a “dying away of things that had outlasted themselves” did not refer primarily to Burgundian civilization, but to the Italian Renaissance. Moreover, he found the idea helpful in clarifying certain problems that had not occurred to Burckhardt at all.

The fact that Huizinga connected the name of Karl Voll with the first outlines of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* indicates that he had a much more complicated question in mind. Karl Voll’s *Altniederländische Malerei* of 1906 represented early Netherlandish painting completely according to tradition as a variety of the late Gothic style. Nowhere did Voll mention the idea of a northern Renaissance. But he considered the art of the van Eycks and their followers as the expression of a special Germanic stylistic intuition. This consisted in an aptitude to find meaningful expression in forms that would be thought far too close to reality, even ugly or grotesque, according to the idealizing, classicist standards prevailing in the Latin countries.¹⁶ Instead of attempting a rapprochement between the arts of Italy and Burgundy, Voll tried to explain the differences by national characteristics. In the debate on the Renaissance, matters of national identity and national character had come more and more to the foreground. Huizinga sought to find an answer to these questions as well.

In 1907 it was not at all clear to Huizinga what kind of book he was going to write. He was strongly interested in three extensive fields of inquiry: the Italian Renaissance, the art and civilization of the Burgundian lands, and
Dutch civilization of the seventeenth century. He did not see these themes as separate areas of study but looked for mutual connections. A change in interpretation in one field inevitably held consequences for the others. His point of departure was in each case his love of the visual arts. During his honeymoon trip around Easter 1902 he had visited Florence for a second time. Like so many others, he had in the summer of 1902 been fascinated by the large exhibition of “Flemish Primitives” in Bruges (figure 1). Already during his first stay in Florence in 1899 he had been struck by the contrast between the mood evoked by Italian painting and the medieval appearance of the palaces. He had “never forgotten the impression,” he wrote a few years later.
of the first glimpse of the Florentine palazzi, the houses of the
great. One thinks of grace and elegance, of light and colorful \textit{joie de vivre}, of happy splendor. And there you see them: grey, rigid,
massive, deathly they seem at first; Pitti like a silent threat, Strozzi
like a rock.\textsuperscript{18}

The exhibition in Bruges drew renewed attention to the much-
debated problem of the relation between the Italian Renaissance and con-
temporaneous cultural developments in the Netherlands. Moreover, the
exhibition showed an unmistakable nationalistic tendency.\textsuperscript{19} The organizing
committee had meant it as a demonstration of the originality and the Euro-
pean importance of Belgian culture. The discovery of oil painting, made on
Belgian soil, and its immediate use in an astonishing pictorial realism had
changed the course of European art. One of the major ingredients of the
European tradition was therefore of Belgian origin. In French nationalist cir-
cles this was immediately received as a provocation. An exhibition of
"French Primitives" in Paris in 1904 tried to prove that the greatness of early
Netherlandish art depended on French influences, and that some of the so-
called Flemish Primitives had actually been French painters.

In Holland the fame of the brothers van Eyck and their followers
was readily granted to Belgium. Many authors accepted the idea as proven
fact that the fifteenth century had known a separate and independent Dutch
style. In the works of the Haarlem school, in which Dirck Bouts usually was
included alongside Albert Ouwate and Geertgen tot Sint Jans, they discov-
ered traits that had more in common with the flowering of Dutch art in the
seventeenth, than with Flemish art of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{20} In this way the
characteristics of later Dutch art were projected back upon an earlier age.
Others tried to explain the specific qualities of Dutch seventeenth-century
art by the lasting influence of late medieval artistic conceptions. This idea
was repeatedly brought forward at the tercentenary of Rembrandt's birth,
which was celebrated in Holland in 1906 as a national holiday.\textsuperscript{21}

Hui\-zinga followed these discussions with close attention. During his
first years as a professor at Groningen, he promised various contributions to
books and journals on the Italian Renaissance, van Eyck, Rembrandt, and
Dutch civilization in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{22} But he never came to write
them. His opinions were constantly shifting, and he clearly found it hard to
make a choice among the conflicting interpretations. It took some time before
he could distance himself from Burckhardt's definition of the Renaissance in
terms of realism, individualism, worldliness, and practical sense. At first he went
along with the tendency among historians to read these traits further and further back into the Middle Ages. Henry Thode and Paul Sabatier, for instance, had shifted the origins of the Renaissance in Italy to the early thirteenth century with the spirituality of Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan movement. In their view, Francis’s lyrical praise of creation already answered Burckhardt’s description of the modern, postmedieval attitude. Huizinga felt strongly attracted to this line of thought, if only for religious reasons. In the 1890s he had for some time hoped to find spiritual guidelines in Buddhism. In Francis of Assisi he discovered a figure whose biography showed many similarities with that of the Buddha, but whose asceticism did not entail a complete rejection of the world. A closer study of medieval culture, however, convinced him that the conception of a “Franciscan” Renaissance was untenable. The similarity between Francis and the Buddha that had first aroused his interest, in the end pointed precisely in the other direction. The Buddha could, after all, hardly be thought of as a modern person. But then neither could Francis of Assisi.

Huizinga’s teaching closely reflected the course of his deliberations. During his first year as a professor he lectured on European history in the fourteenth century. The following year, in 1906–7, he continued with the Middle Ages in Italy, under the heading “The Origins of the Renaissance.” At that time he still thought of a very early origin of the Renaissance, and he paid considerable attention to the Franciscan movement. In a letter of 11 December 1906, he told the historian H. T. Colenbrander:

> A lecture course that I had first meant as an introduction to the Renaissance has turned into a study of the origins of modern civilization in the Middle Ages. I’m still stuck in the twelfth century. … Later, I hope to make a book out of this.

But the more he concentrated on the Middle Ages, the more his conception of “modern culture” was transformed. In his final lecture for this course, he came to the conclusion that the Italian Renaissance had been nothing but “a short triumph of excessive individualism.”

In February 1908, Huizinga gave a talk on the Italian Renaissance to students of the Delft Polytechnic, who planned a historical pageant on the subject of “Lorenzo de’ Medici.” He explicitly expressed his admiration for Jacob Burckhardt. Yet he asserted:

> Research has not come to a standstill after Burckhardt. With all his genius, Burckhardt himself has not escaped the error of pushing his leading ideas too far. On the one hand, he has ignored how
the Renaissance grew out of the Middle Ages themselves, and on the other hand he has exaggerated the modern character of the Renaissance.²⁹

By that time, Huizinga’s own view of the Renaissance was dominated by the idea of continuity. He offered three arguments. In the first place, it was not before the Quattrocento that the visual arts reached the same degree of “expression of life” that Dante had mastered more than a century before. The much-praised sense of reality of the Renaissance was the result of a slow development. Secondly, the Renaissance remained limited to the aesthetic sphere. It was, no less than the chivalric culture of the Middle Ages, the result of a “craving for a more beautiful life.” It did not bring a totally different conception of life that could be of value to those outside the small circle of the social elite. This did not come with the Renaissance, but with the Reformation. And therefore, in the third place, the civilization of the Italian Renaissance should not be seen as the coming of a new era, but as a final stage, a form of decadence, a fin de siècle.

“We can consider every historical period,” he said, “as a beginning and as an ending. We can look in it for the seeds of new things that have later come to fruition. This is how we usually regard the Renaissance. But with the arguments I just outlined to you, I have tried to make you see it as an ending: it had the greatness of despair, it was a course into the abyss. As a concluding chapter I would presently like to consider the Renaissance in Florence, and then it becomes surrounded with a golden glow: ‘le grand siècle à son déclin, Quand le soleil couchant, si beau, dorait la vie.’”³⁰

In this talk of 1908, Huizinga introduced some of the main topics he would take up in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*: the relationship between word and image that was to occupy him in the last chapters; the relationship between aesthetic refinement, the “craving for a more beautiful life,” and religious experience; and the representation of the fifteenth century as an era of decline. The image of the setting sun, here quoted from a poem in Paul Verlaine’s *Sagesse*,³¹ returned in much darker colors in the introduction to *The Autumn*, where it was used as a central metaphor underlying the whole work: “In writing this text, my eye was trained on the depth of the evening sky, a sky steeped in blood red, desolate with threatening leaden clouds, full of the false glow of copper.”³² Just like his earlier lectures
on the origins of the Renaissance, Huizinga thought of elaborating his talk into an article. Once again he did not carry out his intentions. "You must think the worst of me, with all my unkept promises," he wrote to Colenbrander, "I mean concerning my lectures on the Florentine Renaissance. As I said at the time, if they satisfy me, I will attempt to turn them into an article. But after all I think they are based far too little on primary sources."  

This last remark was certainly true. Huizinga was still trying to keep abreast of the latest debates on the subject in Germany. In 1903, Carl Neumann had attempted in a controversial article to replace Burckhardt's modern interpretation of the Renaissance with a conception of Byzantine decadence. Ernst Troeltsch represented the Reformation in 1906 as a revival of the medieval yearning for transcendental salvation, which reduced the Renaissance to a short-lived intermezzo, instead of a definitive historical turn. And in 1907 Walter Goetz summarized the historical discussion up to that point with the conclusion that the intensive study of the Renaissance of the last decades had primarily resulted in a better understanding of the Middle Ages. All three publications made a deep impression on Huizinga. They made an essential contribution to the change of opinion he experienced in the course of 1907.

Was it possible to apply these ideas to the cultural history of the Netherlands? Huizinga's reflections still depended strongly on his contact with the visual arts. In September 1907 he visited the exhibition on the "Golden Fleece" in Bruges. The high point of this exhibition was the triptych with the Annunciation, the so-called Mérode-Altar, by the Master of Flémalle, now for the first time on show in public. Much more strongly than the works of the brothers van Eyck, this painting seemed to look forward in style to the Dutch realism of the seventeenth century. The following year Huizinga made up his mind to write a cultural history of the Netherlands along these lines. To the publisher J. M. Meulenhoff, who had planned a new series of works on Dutch history, he promised a volume on the development of Dutch culture from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. The book was to be a counterpart to the older but still popular Het Land van Rembrandt (1884) by Conrad Busken Huet that covered more or less the same period in history. But Busken Huet had limited himself to the territory of present-day Holland, and he had measured the cultural production of the earlier centuries by the achievements of the so-called Golden Age. Huizinga planned to work the other way around, by showing how a distinct Dutch civilization had gradually developed out of the whole of the Burgundian Netherlands.
Against the nationalist perspective

This was the reason why Huizinga opened his lecture course of 1909, announced as “Cultural History of the Burgundian-Netherlandish State,” with a discussion of the seventeenth century. But soon the age of Burgundy came to occupy all of his attention. The volume for the publisher Meulenhoff was never written. Its place was taken, ten years later and with a different publisher, by *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. That Huizinga could not help revising his project again obviously had to do with the extent and the unexpected richness of the fifteenth-century sources. However, the search for continuity between the Burgundian era and Dutch seventeenth-century civilization also raised a fundamental problem. If, as he had come to see it, the Italian Renaissance could best be considered as a concluding stage of medieval culture, then there could be no doubt that the culture of the Burgundian Netherlands belonged entirely to the Middle Ages. To this point of view the visual arts posed a formidable stumbling block. It was common practice to describe early Netherlandish painting as “realistic.” This realism was usually taken as a progressive element that pointed forward to the art of the seventeenth century. The Mérode-Altar had made this connection all the more evident. But if the art of seventeenth-century Holland was directly derived from the realism of early Netherlandish art, and if this was the product of essentially medieval thought and attitudes, a case could be made for seeing seventeenth-century Dutch art as mainly backward-looking. The exceptional character of Dutch painting in the courtly art of the European Baroque then would be the result of its continuing late medieval traditions. It seems that Huizinga was indeed aiming at this conclusion.

Around 1902, by the time of the great exhibition of Flemish Primitives in Bruges, two conflicting interpretations of the art and culture of the Burgundian era were current. One was the image, based on Romantic historiography, of unbridled passion and violence, of “its bloody cruelty, its arrogance and its greed, its lust for revenge and its misery.” This vision was literary in origin and ultimately derived from stories in the Burgundian court chronicles. The world depicted by the painters had long been regarded as something exceptional, as an element of serenity and inwardness, totally separated from the tumultuous affairs of the time. At the end of the nineteenth century some authors began to include the visual arts within the idea of decay and decadence. The piously kneeling figures in the altarpieces, looking up at the sweet smiling face of Mary, were the same persons whose cruelty and avarice were recounted in the chronicles. In other words, the
paintings with their mystical contemplation did not belong to a different sphere of life, but showed only the reverse of the violent passions that dominated the age. Great crimes were followed by ecstatic repentance; the mood of deep devotion suggested by the paintings was only an interruption, a temporary break in the general hardness of heart. And even then all too often the aim was personal glorification. Moreover, the new style the painters introduced soon grew fixed into a repetitive manner. It was not only that the great political power and glory of the house of Burgundy finally came to nothing; even the school of painting that contributed most to this glory slowly died out and in the end succumbed to the new style that arose in Italy. In the novels and criticism of J.-K. Huysmans and his contemporaries, the culture of the Burgundian century was described, with a certain morbid relish, as obsessed by sin, mortification, and death. The silent city of Bruges, where the ghosts of the Middle Ages still seemed to walk about, was certainly the appropriate place for an exhibition of the art of this epoch.\textsuperscript{40}

On the other hand, it was a common assumption that the fifteenth-century Flemish School had made a new beginning in the history of art. From the early nineteenth century on, when the first art historical studies of early Netherlandish painting were published, every author singled out as the main characteristic of this art its extraordinary realism. The brothers van Eyck not only invented the art of oil painting, as Vasari had it, they immediately brought it to an unsurpassed perfection in the depiction of naturalistic detail. Insofar as the mastery of the imitation of nature was considered to be an intrinsic goal in the history of European art, this meant an important step forward. To a mind trained in classicism, there was also a drawback: the realism of the Flemish artists was a "naive" and unselective realism; it took things as they presented themselves to the eye and did not distinguish between beauty and ugliness. Later in the nineteenth century, when classicist art theory gradually lost its ascendancy, this uncompromising realism was often praised as the quality that linked the Flemish "Primitives" to Dutch seventeenth-century realism and beyond that to modern naturalism. Hippolyte Taine, for instance, developed the idea of a separate northern tradition, marked by an almost complete absence of idealization, that he saw running alongside classicism in all the different stylistic phases of European art.\textsuperscript{41} The art historian Louis Courajod combined this suggestion with his reading of Jacob Burckhardt in a series of very influential lectures that were posthumously published in 1901. If the art of the Burgundian countries in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was realist, so he said, and if realism was the dominant trait of the Renaissance, then it could no longer be
maintained that the Flemish School belonged to the Middle Ages. It was a Renaissance in itself; and because it was relatively free from the classicist straitjacket, it had even stronger claims to be considered as the dawn of modern culture.42

In 1905, the Belgian scholar Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert, under the impression of the exhibition in Bruges and the reaction it had aroused in France, gave a pronounced nationalist accent to Courajod's theories. In his *La Renaissance septentrionale et les premiers Maîtres des Flandres* he attempted to show, not only that the Renaissance, at least in its realist guise, had begun north of the Alps, but also that it was the result of the particular genius of the Belgian nation.43 This nation combined the best elements from the Latin and the Germanic spirits, and was therefore bound to be in the forefront of progress, then as well as now. Fierens's lyrical effusions evidently were an attempt to counter the expansionist French nationalism that had manifested itself in the Paris exhibition of 1904. His argument could hardly be considered well founded, but in the general tendency of his ideas he did not stand alone. In a more subtle fashion these ideas were shared by the historical school at the University of Ghent, of which Henri Pirenne was the undisputed leader. In his monumental *Histoire de Belgique*, Pirenne was much more careful in using the word *Renaissance*. Nevertheless, he agreed that the art of the van Eycks and their followers was an essentially modern phenomenon, part of the great renewal that bridged the different linguistic and social antagonisms of the country, Flemish and Walloon, aristocracy and bourgeoisie, laying in this way the foundation of the Belgian nation.44

Huizinga admired Pirenne as the greatest historian of the moment. In the spring of 1908 he paid him a respectful visit in Ghent, the younger scholar giving homage to his senior.45 But he rejected Pirenne's view of an age-old, unchanging Belgian national identity, and he strongly doubted his interpretation of the fifteenth century in the Netherlands as the beginning of the modern era. He took the national problem, that by now threatened to dominate every discussion of the cultural history of the Burgundian Netherlands, as his point of departure. Could one discern in the fifteenth century an awareness of belonging to a specific nationality? Had there been anything like a Burgundian national identity? Or just a provincial patriotism? Did people see themselves as Flemish or Walloon, as northern or southern Netherlands? This last question was of particular importance to the history of Netherlandish culture that Huizinga intended to write.

Herman Colenbrander, one of Huizinga's closest friends among
Dutch historians, had argued in 1905, following Pirenne, that the northern Netherlands by the fifteenth century already possessed a distinct cultural style of its own. The visual arts clearly proved it: the paintings of the Haarlem School and Dirck Bouts were, according to Colenbrander, recognizably different from the works of their Flemish contemporaries. If it therefore was true that the inhabitants of Holland and Flanders had always experienced the world in a different manner, the existence of two separate national states on the territory of the former Burgundian Netherlands, Holland and Belgium, was entirely justified.④⁶ Huizinga gradually began to doubt these nationalist conceptions. The St. John the Baptist by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, one of the high points of the Bruges exhibition in 1902, for a long time seemed to him a perfect anticipation of all the national characteristics that he thought present in Dutch art of the seventeenth century: the composition was slightly awkward, without much idea of the rules of style; it was static rather than dynamic; it remained true to nature; and at the same time it evoked a mood of melancholy contemplation.④⁷ In 1910 he tried to demonstrate in a lecture in Groningen that the paintings by Dirck Bouts unquestionably belonged to a northern Netherlandish school.④⁸ But was it necessary to ascribe these qualities to a hereditary and unchanging Dutch national character? Could they not better be explained by the distance that had always existed between the northern Netherlands and the main centers of art, especially the ducal court? And was the absence of a directly influential court culture not also the reason why Dutch art until the 1670s showed so much affinity with earlier traditions?

Huizinga was certainly a man of strong patriotic sentiments. Ideas about national character and a deep respect for the achievements of his country can be found everywhere in his writings.④⁹ He always remained convinced that the Dutch had a special gift for painting.⑤⁰ And when he called the Renaissance a triumph of the Romance spirit, this implied an entirely conventional division into different European culture-groups: precisely because it was a thoroughly Latin phenomenon, the Renaissance could have little hold on the Germanic peoples.⑤¹ But Huizinga’s national feelings were rooted in pride and satisfaction, not in political ambition or a need for a national legitimation. If the history of the Dutch nation was admirable in hindsight, this did not mean that it had been predestined to be that way. At every point, things could have taken a different turn. The more he began to be skeptical of historical determinism, the more he became critical of all attempts to justify present-day political ideals by reference to the past.

In 1911 Huizinga read a paper titled “On the Origins of Our

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National Consciousness" at a conference in the presence of Henri Pirenne. When he published a much-expanded version of the article the following year, he dedicated it to Pirenne. By honoring his senior in this way, he sought to avoid any suggestion of personal antagonism. For the essay was, in fact, even if he did not say so explicitly, a long critique of the tendency among historians (including Pirenne) to construct separate national identities for Holland and Belgium in the fifteenth century. What had been interpreted as modern national feelings actually proved to be loyalties of an entirely different and much more archaic kind: the ties to the local community, the bond between lord and servant, the magical veneration of the royal blood, the mutual interdependence created by gift-giving, oaths and promises, and above all, the sentiment of belonging to a certain "house," that is, to one of the parties in the great conflicts that divided the times. These should not be confused with modern political parties. They had no clear economic or political aims, and they did not support programs, but persons. What held the Burgundian lands together was not a sense of national identity, but the very primitive feeling of being bound to the ducal house in its war of revenge against the house of Armagnac. Only after the death of Charles the Bold in 1477, did an idea of common political interests against the new rulers occasionally arise.

Instead of looking for those aspects that seemed to point forward to later developments, Huizinga turned around and stressed the origins of fifteenth-century political behavior in much older, often apparently irrational systems of belief. Huizinga had never forgotten his training as an orientalist and his reading in what is now known as "Victorian anthropology" —the linguistic and mythographic studies of, among others, E Max Müller, Andrew Lang, and E. B. Tylor. 53 The essay of 1912 was his first attempt to apply ethnological concepts to European history. At that time, this was an entirely new approach. It had the advantage of presenting a way out from the deadlock of the nationalist debate: if it could be shown that political divisions in the fifteenth century did not run along territorial but along dynastic lines, it no longer made sense to credit the achievements of the Burgundian age either to a Belgian, French, or Dutch national spirit. But this approach stimulated Huizinga to stress the elements in Burgundian culture that originated in, and often were a revival of, very ancient and more or less "primitive" ways of thinking. Given his inclination to medievalize the Italian Renaissance, he necessarily had to see the age of Burgundy as the last and complete summing up of everything that could be considered truly medieval: feudalism, chivalry, scholasticism, and mysticism.
If the Burgundian territories had possessed any sense of political coherence, it did not result from a growing national consciousness, as Pirenne had assumed, but from the relationship of different social groups with the ducal court. This conclusion was of great consequence to Huizinga's projected study of the cultural history of the Netherlands. He now revised his plans once more and concentrated exclusively on the fifteenth century. He also abandoned his initial orientation toward the northern Netherlands. The culture of the Burgundian age was dominated by the court; it was the example of the court that set the standard for the towns and communities. Although the court constantly employed many persons who were born in the Dutch-speaking areas, its official language was French, and the manners of the Burgundian aristocracy were derived from French courtly traditions. The cultural context of early Netherlandish painting was not Belgian or Dutch, let alone "Germanic," but a French-speaking culture that included most of the Netherlands as well as part of France. The dukes of Burgundy were, after all, a branch of the French royal house. At the height of their power their influence reached deep into France, and after their downfall many of their servants shifted their allegiance back to France. This is why Huizinga felt entitled to treat the Netherlands and northern France as one cultural entity. He did not want to suggest that Jan van Eyck, for instance, was actually French. Rather he refused to see him as French, Belgian, or Dutch, since these categories made no sense at the time.

The contemporary cultural crisis

This was the basic presupposition of The Autumn of the Middle Ages. After many interruptions the book was finally completed in 1919. Huizinga proceeded slowly and cautiously. It took much time before he saw a way to draw all the different strands of his thought together. After 1912, he was first occupied with various other publications, among them a history of Groningen University for its tercentenary in 1914. In the disastrous summer of that year, his wife died of cancer, leaving him a widower with five young children. At the same moment, his political expectations were shattered by the outbreak of World War I. Even though Holland remained neutral, he was convinced that the era of international law and peaceful diplomacy had passed away forever. He watched the hostilities and the accompanying flood of propaganda with growing anxiety. Early in 1915 he left Groningen to occupy the chair of general history at the University of Leiden. The next year he published a long article on art and literature at the time of the van Eycks,
which he subsequently reworked into chapters 12 and 13 of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages.*

The United States' entry into the war in 1917 induced Huizinga to give a lecture course on American history. He laid aside his manuscript again to expand his American notes into a small book. America, at that time, of course meant to him everything new and unprecedented. In America a new type of culture was developing that in the long run presumably would replace the older European tradition. In this respect Huizinga followed a line of thought that had originated with Tocqueville. And just like Tocqueville, he was strongly apprehensive of the future. Every major change entailed important losses. This had been the case when several centuries earlier medieval culture had made way for the Renaissance, and so it would be in his own age. When he returned to his work on the fifteenth century, he found that he was no longer satisfied with the long digression on method that he had wanted to give as an introduction. Only after he had incorporated most of this material into the text itself, necessitating a new arrangement of chapters, he finally decided to send it to his publisher.

He still had no title. For a long time, almost until the book went to the press, he hesitated between *In den Spiegel van Jan van Eyck* (*In the Mirror of Jan van Eyck*) and *De Eeuw van Bourgondië* (*The Age of Burgundy*). The first suggested art history, the second a political history of the Burgundian dukes. At the last moment he chose *The Autumn of the Middle Ages,* but he soon came to regret it. It overaccentuated the image of decline that ran through the book. In the end he would have preferred a nonmetaphorical designation.

During the course of his writing, the comparison with his own times was never far from his mind. He deliberately decided to see the culture of the Burgundian age as a culture that was approaching its end. He knew that he was ignoring everything that could be interpreted as pointing to a future renewal. Since every historical epoch could be regarded as an end and as a beginning, one could not avoid being one-sided. Therefore he offered a vision of fifteenth-century culture as an epoch of decadence, showing it, as he announced in his preface, "in the light of a setting sun." His decision evidently depended very much on his actual experiences. What he saw before him in thinking of the fifteenth century was a culture locked up in all kinds of mental constraints it fruitlessly tried to break out of. Was this not also the case with present-day Europe, that spilled its life and energy in a war that no longer made sense to anybody? His worries about the European catastrophe, even from a distance, as well as his feelings of grief over the death of his wife,
gave the book a different flavor than it otherwise would have had. It became a book of remembrance. He dedicated it to the memory of his wife, and while he wrote it, his thoughts constantly went back to the time when he first knew her. His use of highly colored descriptions not only echoes the style of the fifteenth-century chronicles themselves, it also contains many reflections of the “decadent” literature of the fin de siècle.60 Attraction and repulsion alternate. Often his elaborate examples are written with evident excitement. But there are also many moments when he regards his subject with a sudden hatred. A final judgment is never reached.

In more fortunate circumstances he would perhaps have strived for a more evenhanded treatment. As he says in his new introduction:

Looking back at what I have written, the question arises whether, if my eye had dwelt still longer on the evening sky, the turbid colours may yet have dissolved into utter clarity. It also seems quite possible that the image, now that I have given it contours and colours, may yet have become more gloomy and less serene than I had perceived it when I started my labors.61

After the war he felt these scruples even more strongly.

Contents and criticism

In the first chapter of The Autumn of the Middle Ages, Huizinga depicts life in the later Middle Ages as nearly unbearable in its incessant violence and its helplessness against misfortune. To come to terms with this insecurity, every aspect of life was strictly and systematically ritualized. These rituals could either take the form of a denial of the value of earthly goods, of a constant reminder of the transitoriness of life, or they could try to create the illusion of unchanging youth, valor, beauty, and happiness. The belief in progress, in the capacity for improvement of the world itself, was still extremely rare. Apart from asceticism or aestheticism, there was little choice. In these circumstances, Huizinga believed, culture would take the form of a constant flight from reality.

Huizinga devoted the largest part of his work to a detailed description of the two escape routes that offered themselves. The sheer mass of examples he assembled—he himself spoke of “a mosaic,” “a picture-book”62—made the book seem haphazardly organized. Yet it does proceed according to a certain associative logic: How did individuals in the later Middle
Ages, or those who had the time to think about it, find meaning in their lives? From the cruelty, greed, and bitterness of daily existence, Huizinga first turned to the attempt at beautifying life in the cult of chivalry, the dream of heroic deeds and its amorous counterpart in the pastoral idyll. Inevitably, these will eventually be recognized as illusions, if only because of the permanent presence of death. The thought of death leads, in turn, to the attempt at transcending life through religion, mysticism, and philosophical contemplation. Later medieval philosophy brings up the problem of realism and nominalism, closely connected to the problem of representation in art and literature. The book concludes with a discussion of realism in the art and literature of the age: in the medieval sense, that is, as a representation of universal truths, and in a modern sense, as a depiction of the immediately perceptible world.

Over the years, several fundamental objections have been raised against Huizinga's approach. The first problem is the geographical and social demarcation of his subject. Huizinga considered the Burgundian lands and northern France as one continuous cultural area, but inside this area he focused exclusively on the French-speaking elite connected with the court. In what way was the cultural life of the towns related to the court? Had an autonomous bourgeois culture come into being by this time? To this objection, Huizinga would answer that if one is to give an outline of a whole cultural epoch, one has to concentrate on the most typical and influential phenomena, and not on anything secondary or derivative. But the point remains that he never offered any proof that cultural life among the middle classes and among those who by their language stood apart from the dominant elite was actually derivative. In trying to avoid the standard discussion of class or nationality, he sometimes kept too close to the aristocratic ideal of a general standard of civilization, handed down from top to bottom.

Directly related is a second objection—his neglect of the economic factor. Huizinga considered the portrayal of the emotional and spiritual life of the age, with its revival of ancient traditions, its fantasies, illusions, and self-delusions, as his most original contribution to historiography. His lack of interest in the economic or legal history of the period was the result of a deliberate choice. His lecture notes show that he was very well aware of the contemporary debates on the rise of commercial capitalism. Seen in the context of its time, the most surprising, even shocking aspect of The Autumn of the Middle Ages was not the idea of a general decline, but the consistent attention paid to the irrational. Positivist historiography had for a long time been looking for the political and economic "reality" behind the often naive
and bizarre tales of the Burgundian chroniclers. Huizinga tried to demonstrate that the apparently uncontrolled behavior and unbalanced emotions of the protagonists formed part of a cultural system that was itself a historical reality. Conceptions of honor, rank, and status, fear of death and decay, ideals of purity, and visions of an afterlife are just as important in shaping the course of history as the principle of well-considered self-interest. Ultimately, he thought, it was the mental outlook of an age that determined the structure of the economy, and not the other way around. Earlier on, Huizinga had put some faith in Marxism, mainly as an instrument of peace through the international labor movement. The complete submission of the socialist parties to the politics of their national governments at the outbreak of the war in 1914 had deeply disappointed him. His book still bore the traces of this disappointment.

A study of Burgundian civilization that was to base itself on the towns instead of the court would perhaps offer a different image. As a consequence of his decision, Huizinga tended to broaden the distance to the culture of the Italian city-states. This is a third important objection. Though he had come to the conclusion that the Italian Renaissance was no more than a variant of later medieval culture, he still considered Burgundian culture to be entirely different from its Italian counterpart. In this respect he never freed himself from the influence of Jacob Burckhardt. Obviously he was well acquainted with the intensive exchange, both in commerce and in the arts, that had existed between Italy and the Burgundian lands. But the stubborn way in which he held to his conjecture that van Eyck’s Arnolfini Marriage did not depict any Italians at all indicates that he saw any assimilation of Italy and Burgundy as encroaching on his interpretation. The question remains: Did he not represent medieval culture as far too closed, consistent, and self-sufficient? Burckhardt had described the Renaissance as a sharp break with the preceding Middle Ages. Huizinga rejected this idea. Nonetheless he kept looking for a clear dividing line between the medieval and the modern world.

His compelling image of a culture in decline depends on the traditional cyclical metaphors: spring, summer, autumn; growth, flowering, fruition, and decay. Was the trope of an all-pervading decadence not primarily the projection of late-nineteenth-century conceptions of culture onto the age of Burgundy? The Autumn of the Middle Ages plays a complicated mirror game with the reader. Huizinga rarely referred directly to the fears that during the war years remained uppermost in his mind: that modern culture in its immense complexity had overreached itself, in the same way that medieval
culture four hundred years earlier had lost its capacity for spontaneous renewal. In his essays on America he extensively discussed the possibility of a present decline. In *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* he offered instead a parallel, nearly an allegory, in which the modern age appears dimly in the background, like the figure of the painter in the mirror of Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Marriage*. Images from the fifteenth century had been used in this way before. The incessant ringing of the bells in Huizinga’s first chapter inevitably calls to mind Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). Many of the same themes had been taken up again in the novels of J.-K. Huysmans, especially in *Là-Bas* (1891): the bloodthirstiness of the masses, the frequent oscillation between cruel greed and tearful piety, the general mood of inescapable oppression.

Huizinga saw a direct connection between the rise of modern mass politics and aggressive nationalism. In the propaganda of the war years the passions of the crowd had been stirred up to almost medieval peaks of hysteria. But he was careful not to draw too close a correspondence between present-day politics and the fifteenth century. This is certainly one of the reasons why he left Joan of Arc out of his story. Later he tried to make up for this omission in a long review of Bernard Shaw’s play *Saint Joan* (1924). In his conclusion he commented upon his earlier attitude. “It has been charged to me as an error,” he wrote.

But it was a considered, deliberate omission. I knew that Joan of Arc would have torn the book I visualized in my mind completely out of balance. What kept me from introducing her in it was a sense of harmony— that and a vast and reverent humility.\textsuperscript{64}

The persons and circumstances in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* figured as examples, as instances of broader and more general tendencies. Joan of Arc could not be taken as an example of anything else; she drew all attention immediately to herself. Huizinga, though not a Roman Catholic, accepted the idea of holiness in her case as completely appropriate. The story of her life was such a unique phenomenon that it transcended her own age. For the historian, this was not entirely without danger. In France her name was used as a symbol by almost every variety of nationalist movement, as Huizinga knew very well. To discuss the history of Joan of Arc at the time of the war would have drawn him into precisely the kind of political argument that he tried so hard to avoid.

The 1996 American translation of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* reveals the extent of Huizinga’s use of original sources. To some readers it
may have come as a surprise how little Huizinga refers to contemporary historical literature. But his image of later medieval culture obviously was not only based on the Burgundian court chronicles or on the visions of nineteenth-century novelists. One of the contemporary works he studied closely, but did not mention in his notes, was Heinrich von Eicken's Geschichte und System der mittelalterliche Weltanschauung. This largely forgotten, yet at the time highly influential, book stimulated him to see later medieval thought as running down into ever more rigid and complex patterns. It also shows once more how close Huizinga was to the concerns of certain literary authors. Von Eicken depicts medieval political and religious thought as a self-contained world-system, based on the opposition between religious asceticism and the worldly power of the church. In the later Middle Ages all the problems raised by these contradictory tendencies had been resolved in a complex and detailed system, allowing for no escape except by destroying it altogether. Although Huizinga thought the book was “based too much on just one opposition,” his vision of the final stages of medieval culture certainly was indebted to it. Interestingly, at the same moment when Huizinga finished his Autumn of the Middle Ages, Thomas Mann was inspired by his reading of von Eicken to continue his work on The Magic Mountain. In the rather improbable character of Naphtha, who is both Catholic and Marxist, Mann drew the same implicit comparison between late medieval and late modern thinking that Huizinga had suggested.

Apart from major objections to the argument of The Autumn of the Middle Ages, various minor points can be mentioned about its dated quality. There is the highly expressive style: metaphors such as “the gull’s flight of the eyebrows” try too hard to approach a literary Art Nouveau. Huizinga’s opinions on religious matters are not entirely free from vestiges of his Protestant upbringing. The use of secular melodies in religious music, for instance, was not a lack of respect and therefore a sign of decline, as Huizinga thought, but rather a sign of vitality. Although he spoke openly, according to some contemporaries far too openly, on the role of love and sexuality in culture, according to modern standards he may be considered prudish. Not one of the risqué stories he copied in his notes during his reading of the chronicles found its way into the published version of The Autumn of the Middle Ages. And finally, his ideas on art remained almost completely determined by his early enthusiasm for the symbolist theories of the fin de siècle. He rejected as symptoms of decadence the very things that were most important to the imagination of the fifteenth century, such as the colorful and emotional depiction of religious truths.
In the last chapters of his book, Huizinga came to the conclusion that the pictorial realism of the van Eycks and their followers was not a sign of progress, but a consequence of the same late medieval attitudes. This was an important step in the debate on early Netherlandish painting. Nevertheless, his definition opened up a new problem that he could not solve himself. If late medieval religious art visualizes a theological program, and aims at giving immediate presence to all holy things, how can it be realist at all? Huizinga demonstrated at length how religious thinking at the time applied itself to an ever more detailed symbolic interpretation of the world. Almost everything became symbol and allegory. Even the most insignificant objects could contain an allusion to the history of human salvation. It was inevitable, he thought, that this way of thinking would be reflected in painting.

Huizinga sensed that early Netherlandish painting contained hidden meanings, no longer obvious to the modern viewer. At first, he described the mousetraps that St. Joseph is making on the Mérode-triptych as a comic element, closely related to the homely aspects of later genre-painting. But in 1935 he added a footnote, in which he pointed to the symbolic meaning of the mousetrap as being connected with the representation of Christ as bait for the devil. This idea was developed ten years later in a famous essay by Meyer Schapiro. Research into this sort of symbolic content, however, required putting oneself in the same place as the late medieval theologians, whose intellectual activities he had repeatedly denounced as childish and inconsequential. What Huizinga admired most in the paintings was not the immediate representation of theological ideas and concepts, the angels, the madonnas, the saints, or the majestic figure of God the Father as shown in van Eyck's Adoration of the Lamb. In these images he recognized the same desire for worldly splendor that had characterized the epoch in other respects. He reproached the painters for having been worldly when they had attempted to be deeply religious, and he felt a deep emotion where they depicted the seemingly unimportant matters of everyday life. Small still-life paintings like the water kettle at the background of the Annunciation in the Adoration of the Lamb, or the representation of the interior of the room in the Arnolfini Marriage moved him most. He did not read such objects as specific symbols, as the expression of particular philosophic or religious ideas, but as glimpses of eternity, captured in the likeness of contingent and transient things.

As far as the visual arts are concerned, The Autumn of the Middle Ages stands on a dividing line. It closed the debate on realism in early Netherlandish art, with all the nationalist sentiments it had entailed, but it
did not yet take part in the allegorical and iconological interpretations that would intensively occupy the next generation of researchers. This may be a reason why art historians have in general taken little notice of his work. Obviously Huizinga’s demarcation between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has lost most of its persuasiveness. In various well-known reference works early Netherlandish art is, as a matter of course, described as art of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{70} The exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1994, devoted to a very “autumnal” artist like Petrus Christus, bore the subtitle “Renaissance Master of Bruges.”\textsuperscript{71} With the age of Burgundy, too, Middle Ages and Renaissance have become interchangeable terms. This is partly due to the fact that the Italian Renaissance is much further removed in time from us than it was from Huizinga, let alone from Burckhardt. For that reason it appears more often strange and exotic than modern and familiar. Moreover, there are simply too many things that do not lend themselves to this classification. The music of the early Netherlandish school, which played such an important part in the cultural life of the age but which was still almost unknown to Huizinga, shows an unbroken continuity from the early fifteenth until the later sixteenth century. It was appreciated as much in Italy as in the Low Countries. It cannot be related to any conception of decline. Nor did it die out or change markedly after the downfall of the House of Burgundy. The traditional distinction between Middle Ages and Renaissance does not apply here.\textsuperscript{72} But perhaps this is no more than the inevitable conclusion of Huizinga’s line of reasoning, which began by doubting Burckhardt’s interpretation of the Renaissance.

Notes


University of Amsterdam until his appointment as professor of history at Groningen University in 1905. In 1914 he was called to the chair of general history at Leiden University, where he taught until the university was closed by the German occupation authorities in 1942. After three months of imprisonment in a concentration camp, he was exiled to a small village near the German border. There he died in February 1945, shortly before the liberation of his country. His collected writings have been published as Verzamelde Werken, 9 vols. (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink and Zoon, 1948–53). Some other titles in English are Erasmus of Rotterdam, trans. F. Hopman (New York: Scribner, 1924); Men and Ideas, trans. James S. Holmes and Hans van Marle (New York: Meridian Books, 1959); Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century and Other Essays, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Collins, 1968); and America, trans. Herbert H. Rowen (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). Recently, Huizinga’s life and works have become the object of intensive study in the Netherlands. A selection of his correspondence has been published in J. Huizinga, Briefwisseling, ed. L. Hanssen, W. E. Krul, and A. van der Lem, 3 vols. (Utrecht: Veen, Tjeenk Willink, 1989–91). Anton van der Lem, Johan Huizinga, Leven en Werk in Beelden en Documenten (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1993) offers a general biographical introduction. More specialized essays can be found in W. E. Krul, Historicus tegen de Tijd: Opstellen over Leven en Werk van J. Huizinga (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1990); Léon Hanssen, Huizinga en de Troost van de Geschiedenis: Verbeelding en Rede (Amsterdam: Balans, 1996); and Anton van der Lem, De Eeuwighed in een Afgehaald Bed: Huizinga en de Nederlandse Beschaving (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1997). Jo Tollebeek, De Toga van Ptoom: Denken over Geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860 (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1990), elucidates Huizinga’s exceptional position in Dutch history writing.


3 The history of the translation by Frits Hopman, The Waning of the Middle Ages, is touched upon in the introduction to the new translation by Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch. In 1921, the historian Gabriel Hanotaux introduced Huizinga to the publisher, Champion, who agreed to publish a French version, provided the text was cut by one-third. Huizinga duly did this, but in the end Champion raised his demands to such an extent that the whole project came to nothing. In 1932 a much better French translation was published with a different publishing house. His troubles with the French edition, in the meantime, had convinced Huizinga that there was (with Germany as the exception) little chance of finding publishers for foreign-language editions of the complete text. This is why he consented to a drastically short-ened English version.

4 The review by Walter Simons of The Autumn of the Middle Ages, in Speculum 72 (1997): 488–91, published after this essay was completed, entirely confirms my suspicions about the translators’ dependence on the German edition.

5 From the third printing of 1928 onward, Huizinga included a chronological table of the most important political events of the age.


13 Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken*, 1:42.

14 Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* contains only a few short references to Burgundy, and all of these assume a wide cultural gap between the two parts of Europe: Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, ed. W. Goetz (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1938), 15–16, 90, 279.


22 Huizinga, *Briefwisseling*, 1:77, 94.


24 After 1902 Huizinga gradually “came to the conclusion, that the world of ancient India was too far off for me, and attracted me far less than the European Middle Ages.
in my mind dominated by Dante, Gothic art, and Saint Francis." University Library
Leiden, Huizinga Papers 81, MS "Mijn Weg tot de Historie," first version, 20. Both in
his lectures on Buddhism of 1904–5 and in his lectures on the Middle Ages of
1906–7 he often drew a comparison between St. Francis and the Buddha.

25 University Library, Leiden, Huizinga Papers 23. See also the fragments dating from

26 Huizinga, Briefwisseling, 1:81.

27 According to the summary given in Jaarboekje van de Letterenlijke Faculteitsvereniging
te Groningen, 1907–1908, 14.

28 University Library, Leiden, Huizinga Papers 105. See Delfsche Studentenalmanak voor
1909, 88; and Gedenkboek van het Delfsche Studenten Corps (Delft: J. Waltman, Jr.,
1923), 101–3.


30 Ibid., II, 17.

31 Paul Verlaine, Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes, ed. Y.-G. le Dantec (Paris: Gallimard,
1954), 153.

32 Huizinga, Autumn of the Middle Ages, xix.

33 Huizinga, Briefwisseling, 1:94.

34 Carl Neumann, "Byzantinische Kultur und Renaissancekultur," Historische Zeitschrift
91 (1903): 215–32; Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die
Entstehung der modernen Welt," Historische Zeitschrift 97 (1906): 1–66; and Walter
Huizinga, Men and Ideas, 253, 265–66, 269–70.

35 Catalogue Exposition de la Toison d'Or à Bruges (Brussels: Librairie nationale d'art et
d'histoire, 1907), no. 181. At that time, the Mérode-Alter was in a private collection
in Brussels; it is now at the Cloisters, New York. Huizinga’s reaction is in
Briefwisseling, 1:90–91.

36 His contribution was announced in Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel 75 (1908): 708.
In a letter of 6 April 1921, the publisher Meulenhoff expressed his regret that
Huizinga had not kept his promise: University Library, Leiden, Huizinga Papers 79.
For a detailed discussion of Huizinga’s original project, see now Van der Lem, Het
Eeuwige Verbeeld in een Afgehaald Bed, 74–84.

37 Conrad Busken Huet, Het Land van Rembrand, 2 vols. (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink,
1884–86). This often reprinted work was for a long time the only general intro-
duction to the history of Dutch civilization from the Middle Ages to the end of the
seventeenth century.

38 University Library, Leiden, Huizinga Papers 27.

39 Huizinga, Autumn of the Middle Ages, 294.

40 For Huizinga’s reading of J.-K. Huysmans, see Verzamelde Werken, 1:17; and Krul,
Historicus tegen de Tijd, 91–98. Bruges as a place of ultimate decadence is of course
the theme of the much-imitated novel Bruges la Mort, by Georges Rodenbach
(1892). For the ramifications of this literary motif, see Donald F. Friedman, The

1917), 1:267.

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46 Colenbrander, *De Belgische Omwenteling*, 46, 59, 63.


49 One of his main reasons for wanting to replace the work of Busken Huet was that he had not understood “our national character” (Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken*, 6:476).

50 Ibid., 4:275.

51 Ibid.; see *Men and Ideas*, 287.


54 It will be clear by now that Huizinga did not write the book in the course of one summer at the farm of his mother-in-law, as Norman E. Cantor has it in one of the funnier stories in his *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 377–78. Huizinga would have been amused with this portrayal as a diligent rustic, but it certainly pushes the pastoral idyll too far.

55 For some of his notes during the first years of the war, see van der Lem, *Johan Huizinga*, 152–54.


59 Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken* 4:450 (1921); “The author of this essay long regrets that he has laid down the image of an autumn (though never meant as more than an image) in the title of a book”; *Verzamelde Werken* 7:172 (1935); “Dr. ter Braak’s opinion that I have rejected *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* is unjustified. I have only
sometimes regretted the title." See also Huizinga, *Briefwisseling*, 1:534: "In a literary
sense I regret it very much" (to Jan Romain, 2 October 1924). His feeling of unease
about the title was primarily caused by its similarity to Oswald Spengler's *Ungang
des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*), a book that was brought to his attention
only after the publication of his own work.

60 The famous opening passage on the intensity of experience in the Middle Ages, for
instance, was almost certainly inspired by Frederic Rolfe ("Baron Corvo"), *Chronicles
of the House of Borgia* (1901): "the physically strong and intellectually simple
fifteenth, when the world . . . was five centuries younger and fresher; when color was
vivid; light, a blaze; virtue and vice, extreme; passion, primitive and ardent; life, vio-
 lent; youth, intense, supreme." Quoted in A. J. A. Symons, *The Quest for Corvo* (East
63 Huizinga, *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 312; see also Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken*,
3:446, 490–91.
64 Huizinga, *Men and Ideas*, 239.
65 Heinrich von Eicken, *Geschichte und System der mittelalterliche Weltanschaung*
(Stuttgart, 1887), repr. in 1913, 1917, and 1924. For Huizinga's use of it, see his
lecture notes in University Library, Leiden, Huizinga Papers 23. Von Eicken's work
had a comparable impact on the art historian Max Dvorák. However, in Dvorák's
*Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art*, trans. Randolph J. Klawiter (Notre Dame:
University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 197, the translator adds a note on von
Eicken, saying that he could find no information on this author.
66 Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher, 1919–1921*, ed. Peter de Mendelsohn (Frankfurt am
Main: S. Fischer, 1979), 200, 205–6, 210–14. Mann again consulted the work of
von Eicken in 1948 in preparing his story, *Die Erwählte*. See Thomas Mann, *Tage-
How obscure an author von Eicken has become is demonstrated by the fact that he is
mentioned in the index of *Tagebücher, 1919–1921* as "Friedrich Eicken," and in the
index of *Tagebücher, 1946–1948* as "Hans von Eicken."
67 Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken*, 3:93. Payton and Mammitzsch paraphrase: "the gull-
like arches of the brows"; *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 87.
68 Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken*, 3:371; Meyer Schapiro, "Muscula Diaboli: the
apparently had no knowledge of Huizinga's suggestion.
69 Huizinga, *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 312, 337.
70 See for instance James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and the
Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (New York: Abrams, 1985).
72 In several writings from the 1470s, the musical theorist Johannes Tinctoris dated the
beginning of the new music around the year 1400, with the appearance of Dunstable
and Dufay. This has caused Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1954), and many others to see the whole of the fifteenth century as a Renaissance. For a balanced recent opinion, see Reinhard Strohm, *The Rise of European Music, 1380–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); the epoch shows an independent character, and it can be seen with equal justice as a last phase of the Middle Ages or as a Renaissance.