

PRAYER NUTS SEEN THROUGH THE 'EYES OF THE HEART'

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It has long been assumed that lay piety in the late Middle Ages was a rather superficial affair, and that people's interest in religious art was determined more by their admiration for its exquisite craftsmanship, refined aesthetics, and the aura of social prestige conveyed by its possession than by an authentic personal religiosity. It is often believed that this is also true for the jewel-like objects we call 'prayer nuts', the output of which had its heyday in a period that is usually hailed as the beginning of the Renaissance (c. 1500–30), with its interest in the artistic pursuit *per se*. The astonishingly refined carving of a multitude of figures on an extraordinarily small scale in the interior of dozens of surviving prayer nuts would indeed have won the admiration and pleased the eyes of contemporary beholders as much as it does today. There are no records from the period telling us about the way prayer nuts were used, which makes it difficult to assess whether the word 'prayer' in 'prayer nuts' or 'prayer beads' has more than just a superficial meaning. The objects themselves seem to offer only paradoxical information at best. While most of them have a religious scene in both halves of their interiors, which become visible only when one opens the tiny sphere, and quite a few contain some text taken from the Bible or a hymn, it is unclear how image and text may have functioned as an aid for saying prayers.



FIG. 63



FIG. 64

A very elaborately worked prayer nut in the British Museum, for example, which is in the form of a polyptych with tiny wings, shows small bands of text surrounding the individual scenes that are taken from the Old and the New Testament [FIG. 63].¹ At least two of the texts – ‘SVS[c]EPERV[n]T AVT[em] IHESUM ET EDVXER[un]T ET BAIVLA[n]S SIBI CRUCE[m] EXIVIT’ around a scene of the Carrying of the Cross (John 19:16–17: ‘And they took Jesus, and led him away. And he bearing his cross went forth’) and ‘LEVEMUS CORDA NOSTR[a] CV[m] MANIB[u]S AD D[o]M[i]NI IN SELOS’ carved on the exterior (Lamentations 3:41: ‘Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens’) – were also chanted during Mass, and point to the use of the prayer nut in a liturgical context. Many prayer nuts, on the other hand, have a tiny ring attached to the exterior, which suggests that they were, or could be, attached to a string of beads and used in some form of personal devotion. Acting as an aid for personal prayer does not exclude a possible use in a liturgical context, however, as demonstrated by a prayer nut in the Metropolitan Museum of Art [FIG. 64]. The elaborately worked outer sphere is topped by a small ring, making a fastening to a string of prayer beads likely, but the inscriptions inside the nut cite the same hymnal phrases inscribed in the British Museum polyptych nut, which suggests a liturgical connection.² Other prayer nuts lack this kind of Eucharistic connotation, and may have been used only in the intimacy of the private sphere. These are nuts featuring a saint as their main protagonist, such as the one with scenes from the life of St Hubert,

which may have played a role in the owner's veneration for his or her patron saint [FIG. 65]. But then there are also pictorial and written records from the period indicating that people carried around prayer beads attached to their clothes as a public sign of their religiosity (and sociability) – a habit that was heavily criticized by adherents of the Reformation as hollow gestures disguising a lack of true inner religiosity.³ Actually, the microscopic scale of the religious scenes as such may have limited, or even prevented, a serious use as an aid for prayer and devotion.⁴ Some prayer nuts, moreover, contain legends that point to their users' belief in the apotropaic effect of the object – leaving the realm not only of prayer and devotion, but also of the appreciation of artistic craftsmanship and beauty altogether. Can we say anything more specific, then, about the way people may have used, viewed and cherished their prayer nuts beyond these generalizations and broad range of possibilities?

There are a few physical properties of prayer nuts that can help us explore this question. First there are the tiny dimensions of the religious scenes and their very crowded compositions – which sometimes run to dozens of figures cramped into a very small space. These characteristics necessitate viewing prayer nuts from very close range. Even then, though, beyond the first row of figures in the foreground, the shapes and features of individual bodies, faces, poses and gestures are not easily discernible, and leave more to the imagination than to what the eye can actually perceive. This offers an important clue to the possible



FIG. 65



FIG. 66

function of the prayer nut as a devotional aid, especially if one takes into account that it would often have been attached to the end of a string of prayer beads. Such a string is commonly identified with a rosary and is thus associated with the habit of addressing the Virgin Mary with an 'Ave Maria' prayer ('Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus'). Each bead stands for one Hail Mary, whereas larger beads, which were often inserted after each series of ten 'Ave' beads, marks the Our Father prayer [FIG. 66]. This form of devotion, which emerged in the twelfth century, became extremely popular in the late Middle Ages, resulting among other things in the foundation of a Brotherhood of the Rosary in Cologne in 1475, which found many adherents among lay people in the Netherlands.⁵ This prayer cult also gave rise to the legend that once, when a monk recited the Hail Mary, his prayers were transformed into roses with which the Virgin Mary wove a wreath that she then placed on her head – a gesture reminiscent of the habit of accepting a wreath of flowers from a loving friend that was practiced in courtly circles of the day.⁶ The legend helped cement the association of the string of prayer beads (the rosary as physical object) with a *rosarium*, a rose garden, and with the flower imagery of gardens described in the Song of Songs, which was widely understood as a symbolic prefiguration of the virtues of the Virgin and her compassion with her son in the sense of sharing in his Passion. This imagery was developed further at the end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth

centuries in devotional treatises that offered the reader an aid for a meditation on the life and Passion and compassion of Christ and the Virgin by way of a detailed description of a love garden full of flowers, fruit and trees that symbolically referred to the Virgin and her son and their salutary deeds for mankind. The texts exhorted readers to lay out a similar garden in their own souls, to cultivate flowers of virtuousness and fruits of compassion in their own hearts, and to mobilize all their inner senses in meditating on how Christ carried the Cross, and how his mother suffered with her son, and so on. Underlying this meditative imagery was a form of saying the rosary that emerged in the early fourteenth century but only became truly popular in the second half of the fifteenth century, which was to combine the recitation of Hail Mary prayers with meditation on the life and Passion of Christ.⁷ Saying this rosary with the help of a string of beads thus became a rather complex sensorial affair that comprised a tactile element – keeping track of the number of Hail Marys by touching each individual bead in turn in combination with the utterance (inwardly or out loud) of the words of the prayer, but also an imaginative and mnemonic one by meditating on Christ's life and Passion, and even an inner and outer sensation of smell and taste. The meditation on episodes of Christ's life, and the Virgin's compassionate symbiosis with her son, could evoke passages full of multi-sensorial metaphors in devotional manuals, such as the phrases 'O loving soul, see the pure rose bedewed with the color of my blood. Ave Maria. Suck the sweet honey from there. Ave.

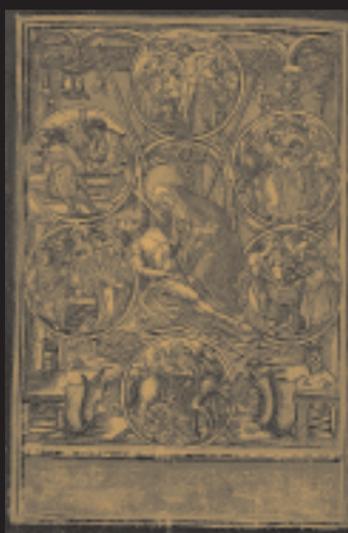


FIG. 67

And make of it a lasting memory to commemorate His goodness for evermore', or 'Loving soul, pluck the flowers of His drops of blood and scatter them over the bed of your thoughts. Ave. And pluck the rose of His sweet wounds and decorate the chamber of your heart [with this rose]. Ave Maria'.⁸ The experience of inwardly 'smelling' and 'tasting' such words could actually have been accompanied by real fragrant sensations if the rosary beads were made of sweet-smelling materials – rose essences, amber, cinnamon, sandalwood, Arabic gum etc. – as was a widespread custom.⁹

Prayer nuts, which were attached to such rosaries, must therefore be imagined as forming the culmination of a complex synesthetic devotional experience, in which all the senses (inner and outer) were involved. Pomanders – metal balls containing sweet-smelling materials – are another class of object people attached to rosaries, not only because their fragrance was believed to protect their owners against illnesses and evil forces, but also because pomanders enhanced the sensate experience of saying the rosary [FIG. 67]. But whereas pomanders added to the aromatic aspects of this experience, prayer nuts intensified its visual and imaginary dimensions. Indeed, some of the formal characteristics of the prayer nut can be understood as emerging directly from the floral imagery illustrating the 'chaplets' of prayers in contemporary rosary manuals and other devotional texts. The *Vnser lieben frauen Psalter* (1483), which is one of the first rosary manuals propagating the combination of the Hail Mary with meditations on the life of Christ,

illustrates five episodes from his childhood, five from the Passion, and five from his life after the Resurrection, as small narrative scenes set in roundels that are framed by floral wreaths [FIG. 68].¹⁰ This kind of a visually epigrammatic rendering of serial meditative content became very popular in the first decades of the sixteenth century and can also be found in panel paintings of the period, for example in depictions of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin, which were also part of meditative sequences of rosary prayers [FIG. 69].¹¹ These images gave the devotees visual support for their meditation similar to the way beads offered the meditator a tactile mainstay for their prayers. Images such as these functioned as anchors for a meditative process that was supposed to contain much more imagined detail than the epigrammatic representations themselves would be able to show. Visually concise as they were, or perhaps precisely because they contained only very little narrative substance, these images could fire the imagination of believers so as to have them unfold the individual episodes of the suffering Christ and the compassion of his mother in all their detail before their inner eye, as if they were happening in the here and now.¹² This element of unfolding is more explicitly addressed visually in other illustrations accompanying meditative rosary texts such as a *Virgin of the Rosary* woodcut of 1485 [FIG. 70].¹³ Here, the roundels containing small vignettes with the 'mysteries' of Christ's childhood and his Passion are framed in petals, and together they form a garland of floral 'visuals' around the central image of the Virgin and Child, who are



FIGS. 68, 69



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FIG. 70

receiving similar garlands from a variety of devotees. The idea expressed in this woodcut is that the rosary is a form of meditation that aims to imaginatively portray, or rather unfold, the episodes of Christ's life before one's inner eye, just like a rose opens its petals and releases a scent from its heart, which then rises to heaven. Each rose, in other words, is intended as a flower that can grow in the garden (the *rosarium*) of the soul. It represents the center, the heart, of the inner self, which opens itself to a meditative identification with the suffering Christ. A similar idea is conveyed in a contemporary colored drawing made by an anonymous Benedictine nun in Eichstätt [FIG. 71].¹⁴ A rose bush and a large blooming rose growing in the garden of the soul dominate the drawing. The flower has opened its petals and offers the viewer in its interior a glance into a miniature image of another garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ is shown conforming to the will of God, and accepting the Passion.

The kind of perception to which these images appeal can be described as 'seeing with the eyes of the heart'.¹⁵ 'To fill one's heart with devout meditations' and 'to put the image of Christ before one's eyes, as if he were bodily present' are formulations found, among others, in writings of the *Devotio Moderna*, a spiritual movement that was widespread in the Netherlands at the time when and in the same region where prayer nuts were made. These words indicate the heart as the center of a person's spiritual being, i.e. the soul, the seat, so to speak, of one's inner senses. So the organs with which the devotee was

believed to engage in the meditative exercises with the help of rosaries and prayer nuts were the 'eyes of the heart'. Those organs, however, as the writings of the *Devotio Moderna* explained, were not an immediately accessible faculty of the soul but were regarded as the soul's potential to regain its original capacity, lost since the Fall, to 'see' the divine in an unmediated way, that is to say to turn one's eye away from the material world around us to the realm of our inner spiritual selves. 'Seeing with the eyes of the heart', therefore, was considered to be a transformative process from outer to inner vision – or rather, as an ongoing elliptical process from outer to inner, and then back to an outer vision that was now more illuminated.¹⁶

How would all this have affected the viewer of a prayer nut? What can we say about the way prayer nuts may have been viewed by their owners, if we assume that their primary context must have been the rosary devotion, and their attachment to a string of rosary beads? Perhaps the most fundamental point to make here is that in all likelihood viewing the prayer nut would have been part of, or even the culmination of, a viewing *process* that was supported by a material object with qualities that stimulated several senses. Before reaching and opening the prayer nut, the viewer would have gone through a meditative prayer process that would have involved all his or her inner and outer senses. Viewing the prayer nut, therefore, would be very different from the immediacy and accessibility of its interior scenes that the display of a prayer nut in a museum setting



FIG. 71



FIG. 72

offers the modern viewer. The historical viewer would have been in a heightened state of anticipation, when he or she would have reached the moment of opening the prayer nut – the *moment suprême* of an entire meditative process. The act of opening the nut, therefore, like the opening of an altarpiece,¹⁷ must have come with a sense of revelation – even for the viewer who would have gone through the process many times. The opened prayer nut, then, with its three-dimensional roundels showing a multitude of tiny figures must have looked very similar to the roundels illustrating contemporary rosary texts, especially those that were surrounded by petals suggesting the unfolding of a rosebud. Perhaps one can even say that opening the prayer nut must have been something like plucking a flower – and completing the meditative weaving of the garland of one's prayers.

This whole process has been visualized, in a way, in the left panel of the '*Merode Altarpiece*' in The Cloisters [FIG. 72].¹⁸ The painting shows the donor and his wife in an enclosed garden that they have entered through the gate in the background. Their path leads to a domestic interior containing the figures of the Virgin and the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. The donors are kneeling in front of a short flight of steps leading to the entrance of the Annunciation chamber. The partly opened door enables the man to cast a glance into the room. This realm is conceived as a symbolic representation of the Virgin's inner *cubiculum* – her womb as much as her inner spiritual self – at the moment of the

Incarnation, which is visualized by the tiny figure of the Christ Child entering the space through a window on seven golden rays of heavenly light. Entering the sacred space of the Virgin's *cubiculum*, therefore, is the leitmotif connecting the figures in the garden with those in the central panel. The inward look of the kneeling woman, together with the string of rosary beads she has in her folded hands, reveals that for the donors this act of entering is purely a spiritual, inner affair. It indicates that prayer and meditation are the path and steps that lead to the Virgin's chamber and to a spiritual opening of their eyes to the mystery of the Incarnation. The contemporary fifteen-century setting of the entire triptych suggests that the Annunciation is to be imagined as a reenactment of the historical event in the here and now – that is to say as an exhortation to the donors (and to the viewers of the painting) to prepare the garden and the house of their own souls for Christ's 'inhabitation' through prayer and meditation, as the Virgin once did. The garden with the large rose bush up against the rear wall, as well as the domestic realm with its furniture, are Marian symbols serving the donors – and viewers of the painting – as examples for the furnishing of their own inner surroundings with flowers and objects representing the virtues of purity of heart, humility, compassion and so on. The rosebud that the male donor has plucked from the bush behind him exemplifies this act of meditative appropriation, and symbolizes the culminating point of the meditative ascent of his and his wife's rosary devotion. The position of the rosebud moreover –





FIG. 73

the man has pinned it to his hat, which he is holding close to his chest, precisely at heart height – in combination with his wide-open eyes indicate that this culminating act of meditative identification with the Virgin (*the rose par excellence*) consists of a 'seeing with the eyes of the heart'. It suggests that when the donors have progressed on the path of meditation to a heightened state of their imaginative powers they can 'see' their happy cohabitation with the Virgin right before their eyes.

There is a major difference, of course, between the visual accessibility (for the external viewer) of the object of the donors' vision in the '*Merode Altarpiece*' and the visual accessibility of the imagery in the interior of a prayer nut. While the figures of the Virgin and the angel and the entire composition of the altarpiece are presented to the viewer with remarkable clarity and lucidity, the religious protagonists of prayer nuts can often only be discerned with difficulty, after a painstaking scrutiny of what appears at first sight to be a rather cluttered scene. This is especially the case in prayer nuts with depictions of the Crucifixion, one of the most frequently carved scenes in these objects. A prayer nut in the Metropolitan Museum exemplifies these labyrinthine compositions with their profusion of miniature figures crowded around the foot of the Cross [FIG. 73]. Its interior shows a jumble of bystanders – Roman soldiers on horseback and other witnesses of the Crucifixion, such as the Virgin and her retinue – occupying the entire foreground, and almost obscuring the figures of the crucified men behind them. Their position in the background,

right up against the ceiling of the nut, places them in a semidarkness that obstructs their visibility even more. Why would the artist have opted for a depiction of the Crucifixion with such seeming disdain for the centrality of the Christ figure? One answer is that this type of complex composition is fairly typical of large sculpted Crucifixion altarpieces of the period as well [FIG. 74]. The artist, in other words, has simply followed the fashion of his day – which seems to be corroborated by the fact that other prayer nuts with the Crucifixion, while differing in the individual figures making up the crowd of bystanders, are as visually complex and abstruse in their overall composition [CF. FIG. 63]. Another obvious answer is that this complexity is an effective way of drawing the viewer's attention to the incredible craftsmanship with which the carver has treated each individual detail. Or, to address this question from the point of view of the prayer nut as devotional aid: it forces the viewer to focus successively on each individual figure and thereby to reassemble, so to speak, the entire Passion narrative in a step-by-step viewing process of some duration. The informed viewer can thus recognize, among others, Longinus (seen from behind) holding the spear in his left hand which is destined to pierce Christ's body; the gesture of his other hand, which he has raised to his eye, pointing to his recognition of Christ's human and divine identity; the figure offering a sponge with vinegar on a spear to the suffering Christ; and further to the left, the Virgin who has fainted from sorrow and compassion with her son, supported by St John and her female companions.¹⁹



FIG. 74



FIGS. 75, 76

It is evident that the sculptor wishing to fit these and other figures into the narrow space of the interior of the prayer nut had to sacrifice the one-point perspective that is characteristic of similar sculpted multi-figured ensembles in large carved altarpieces. Some figures are rendered in a foreshortening as if seen from above, such as the group with the swooning Virgin, or the soldier on horseback in the foreground to the right. Others are depicted parallel to the (imaginary) picture plane defined by the outer frame of the nut with its Latin inscription. What is quite striking is that most of the figures are only partially visible, forcing the viewer to struggle to find his or her way in the crowd. Some figures that are seen from behind or look up in the direction of the crucified men offer the viewer some guidance in this melee. The overall effect of these shifts in perspective, the jumble of figures and their spears, which are portrayed from different angles, and the relative obscurity of the main protagonists, is that the viewers have to 'descend' into the interior of the prayer nut, so to speak, in order to work themselves through the welter of bystanders from foreground to background, and then to 'climb' the imaginary mount Golgotha in the background towards Jesus hanging on the Cross. The entire composition, in other words, seems to be designed to 'trap' the eye of the devotees in the very visual complexity of the scenery,²⁰ to lead them on a visual journey of discovery and recognition of, and meditation on, figures representing different moments in the Passion story, and thus to prepare the viewer for an imaginary ascent to, and spiritual and

compassionate union with, the figure of Christ – whose diminutive size and relative obscurity enhances the power it exerts on the imagination of the devout ‘traveler’.²¹ The summit of this experience, which comes at the end of a series of rosary prayers and meditations, is thus a visual sensation of ‘seeing’ the Passion truly with the ‘eyes of the heart’. The prayer nut leads the eye of the devotee through the very transformation process from seeing with one’s physical eye to ‘seeing’ with the eye of devout imagination – a way of seeing that is richer in detail and embedded in more sensorial experiences than the prayer nut itself can express.

The content of this devotional exercise may have been different when a saint was the main subject, and thematically broader than we have explored so far, for example when the prayer nut contained tiny side-wings showing other scenes of the Passion, Christ’s childhood, or typological scenes from the Old Testament that were seen as foreshadowing his life. But regardless of the subjects that prayer nuts portrayed, their repeated use will have caused them to become real ‘treasure houses’, ‘strongboxes’, of memories of the imagined presence of the religious protagonist in the mind of the meditating devotee.²² That is to say, that outsiders, including the modern viewer, will never come close to anything like this highly personal experience, or ‘see’ the treasures hidden in these strongboxes the way their owners did. We can say a few more words, however, about their use if we accept this notion of the prayer nut as a ‘treasure chest’ of devotional memories. Perhaps



FIG. 77



FIG. 78

it is correct to say that in this respect prayer nuts resemble other devotional jewels of the period. A golden and partly enameled triptych in Amsterdam, and pendants such as a small enameled medallion of the *imago pietatis* in New York [FIGS. 75, 76], offer perhaps the closest parallel to prayer nuts. Such objects, which could contain relics and precious stones, could serve their owners as protective amulets, but also as devotional aids.²³ The term 'pectoral' indicates the physical relationship people felt they had with these jewels, which they carried close to their *pectus*, their chest, their heart. Such a physical relationship must also have existed for owners of prayer nuts, for not only did they tie the rosary to which the prayer nut was attached as a belt around their bodies, they also maintained an ongoing physical contact with their prayer beads by attaching them to a ring around their finger [FIG. 77]. The close connection between jewel, treasure chest, prayer nut, pomander, amulet and rosary beads is beautifully illustrated in a well-known miniature in a Book of Hours made for Mary of Burgundy around 1475–80 [FIG. 78]. All these objects are gathered together in the very space where Mary is invited to imagine kneeling in front of a window, with her arms resting on a pillow, and 'seeing' the Crucifixion happening right in front of her eyes. That is to say: her devotion is imagined as surrounded by and physically 'attached to' her *devotionalia*. Historians of late medieval religion have pointed out how important the close vicinity of the holy powers and personae was to the believers of the day.²⁴ Their depiction in devotional *pretiosa* was

considered not so much to be an image in the modern sense, as an immaterial (digital or analog) representation of a holy being, also immaterial and existing in another, metaphysical world, but as an 'embodiment *in effigie*' of the *real presence* of the holy *virtus* (grace) of that being.²⁵ The belief in the real presence of Christ's body in the consecrated Host was the cornerstone of this devotional worldview, which has led some scholars to say that all devotion of the period, including the rosary, is essentially Eucharistic devotion.²⁶ Such Eucharistic associations involving connection with the real presence of Christ and other holy persons depicted in prayer nuts, must have added to the mnemonic *virtus* of the prayers and meditations 'buried' by the devotee, through frequent 'kontemplative Versenkung', in the interiors of these 'treasure boxes'.²⁷ From here it was just a small step for the treasurer of these collected devotional memories to also become the treasurer and curator of the very objects that preserved the sculpted and meditative *pretiosa* that were so dear to the owner's heart.

- 1 Thornton 2015, pp. 162–67.
- 2 Cf. Williamson 1910, no. 39, pp. 63–64 (with a full quotation of the hymn ‘Vexilla Regis’); the same inscriptions can be found on other prayer nuts depicting the Crucifixion, such as cat. nos. 14, 26–28.
- 3 Oelke 2003.
- 4 As noted in Scholten 2011a, p. 338.
- 5 Falkenburg 1999, pp. 35–36 (see also note 35, with further literature).
- 6 Winston-Allen 1997, pp. 100–03.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 15–30, with a summary of the developments that led to the transformation of the rosary from an ‘Ave Maria prayer into a Jesus prayer’ (*ibid.*, p. 27). See also Heinz 2003.
- 8 Taken from *Hier begint een suverlijck crans van dusent rosen* (Here starts a pure wreath of a thousand roses), Leiden (Jan Seversz) s.a. (early sixteenth century), The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, call no. 228 G 9; Falkenburg 1994a, pp. 46–48.
- 9 Falkenburg 1999, pp. 36–37; King 2013.
- 10 Winston-Allen 1997, pp. 32ff., and figs. 1a–c.
- 11 Husemann 2000, esp. fig. 13; Eichberger 2015.
- 12 Berns 2003; Rudy 2011, pp. 119–70.
- 13 Cf. Winston-Allen 1997, fig. 6.
- 14 Hamburger 1997, p. 136, fig. 45.
- 15 Schuppisser 1993; Hamburger 1997, pp. 92, 129.
- 16 De Baere 1985; Van Dijk 2000; Waaijman 2000; Falkenburg 2012.
- 17 Möhle 2004; Jacobs 2012, pp. 4–10; Schlie 2004.
- 18 For the following see Falkenburg 2001.
- 19 Wetter 2011, pp. 26ff. In the prayer nut in the British Museum one also finds the figures of Mary Magdalen embracing the Cross and, to the right, soldiers fighting over Christ’s garments.
- 20 Gell 2010, esp. ch. 6, ‘The Critique of the Index’, pp. 73–95; cf. Scholten 2011a, p. 337.
- 21 See Falkenburg 2007 for the function of tiny narrative scenes as guides for an imaginary journey through a pictorial world in contemporary landscape painting.
- 22 Carruthers 1990, pp. 33–35, 246.
- 23 Husemann 2000.
- 24 Hamm 2007.
- 25 Husemann 2000, p. 60.
- 26 Caspers 1992; Lentjes 2003.
- 27 Panofsky 1927, p. 264.

