

Portrait of Sixteenth-Century Disability? Quentin Matsys's *A Grotesque Old Woman*  
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**Abstract:** Scholars rarely examine art works from a disability studies perspective; their analyses often misinterpret those works, reinforcing contemporary assumptions about disability and its past representations. Accordingly, this paper examines a portrait by sixteenth-century Antwerp artist Quentin Matsys (1466-1529) from a historically situated disability studies perspective. *A Grotesque Old Woman* (c.1513) has been understood in terms of abnormality. Existing scholarship has suggested that she represents physical, gender, and sexual deviance in the spirit of Erasmian allegories, or an individual with Paget's disease. Although these interpretations may inform contemporary scholarship, they shed little light on sixteenth-century disability and its artistic representations. This paper demonstrates how the portrait reflects a cultural transition from an earlier collective, religious model of disability to a more "municipal" one which considers disability vis-à-vis individuals engaged in daily commercial or personal activities. This analysis provides insight into how disability was understood in Matsys's time, contributes to our understanding of the Dutch allegorical and portraiture traditions, and demonstrates what a historically situated disability model offers future research on artistic representations of disability.

**Key Words:** art history, Netherlandish portraiture; the grotesque

"I've always been intrigued by this painting. It's fascinating because it is so meticulously and lovingly painted. You think, why would someone go to so much trouble in order to paint such a grotesque image? I always suspected there was something more to it than just a study in grotesquery" (Brown, 2008).

Although scholars of disability studies and art history often examine art works and artists, they do so primarily from their separate disciplinary vantage points. Some disability scholars have developed theories about aesthetics or considered the works of artists with disabilities, or works that take disability themes (Garland-Thomson 1996; Siebers 2010); some art historians have applied visual or medical theories of the body to disability-themed art or to the work of disabled artists (see opening quotation).<sup>1</sup> This scholarship addresses calls to extend the influence of disability perspectives into other disciplinary realms (Garland-Thomson, 2013; Linker, 2013, pp. 503, 524). Yet, these efforts share no inclusive perspective and, as such, often misinterpret art works within their historical contexts and/or reinforce contemporary assumptions about disability and its past representations.

At present, the term "disability" is a contested but useful placeholder with which to characterize how groups and individuals have perceived and valued human physical attributes throughout recorded history (Garland-Thomson, 2013; Linker, 2013). As this history reveals, most Western societies have marginalized people with physical attributes which differ significantly from prevalent cultural standards. By revealing these values, disability scholars have opened the door to alternatives and exposed the predominant twentieth-century Western medical model of disability.<sup>2</sup> Because this model considers the body in terms which strictly

oppose normality and abnormality, it calls on doctors to treat or cure abnormalities (Linker, 2013, pp. 518-519).

To counter this stilted perspective, scholars have offered the social model of disability; its versions acknowledge the limitless variations the human body manifests and recognize them as differences to accommodate rather than deficits to cure (Garland-Thomson, 2013, p. 916; Shakespeare, 2006, p. 197). From this perspective, a physical impairment becomes a disability only when it limits individuals within the built social environment; a mobility issue is only a disability in places without ramps (Siebers, 2008, p. 27). Although these new perspectives help to bridge the gap between disability studies and other fields, art history, as indicated, has not yet benefited systematically from this interdisciplinary work, and thus its scholarship typically does not historicize its interpretations.

For example, medieval artist Opicinus de Canistri's illuminated manuscripts have been characterized as the work of a disabled, crazy mind, specifically in Freudian terms (Salomon 1953). Because this perspective names the artist as abnormal, it follows the medical model. Yet, a twelfth-century artist could hardly have manifested twentieth-century concepts such as neurosis and the Oedipus complex. In addition to offering anachronisms, the argument neglects information about how the body and mind were understood and represented at the time, along with evidence which compares Opicinus's work with contemporaneous, presumably normal artists. Lacking that material, the analysis suggests that disability is a unified concept and one which has always been based on twentieth-century norms. Such efforts do not locate the content or form of the works in their appropriate context within the history of disability.

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Accordingly, this paper offers a situated art historical and disability studies approach, and tests it through its application to a portrait by sixteenth-century Netherlandish artist Quentin Matsys (1466-1529). As its current name and the opening quotation indicate, *A Grottesque Old Woman* (c.1513; National Gallery, London, oil on wood, 64 x 45.5 cm) is now understood in terms of abnormality, an understanding based on and reifying the twentieth-century medical model of disability. In addition to uncovering this assumption, my alternative analysis responds to the opening question by attempting to capture why the portrait was painted and how it was perceived in its own day. I suggest that the painting was not understood as a portrait of disability, that is, of physical limitation. Instead, and in the spirit of then popular Erasmian satires, the portrait focuses on the sitter's human nature. She is no more or less a fool than any other individual and thus symbolizes all humanity rather than one deviant person. In this, the portrait reveals shifting cultural values about the human body in a setting transitioning from an earlier religious model of disability to a more municipal one; this model frames the concept of disability within the context of cities and towns, socio-economic units with centralized governments rather than the feudal, Church-centered world of the religious model it was replacing. By combining art history and disability studies, this paper offers a more inclusive, historically based discussion of the painting, addresses broader questions about analyzing past representations of physical difference in context, and sheds some light on how disability was (or was not) represented in the early sixteenth century.

## Current Perspectives on Quentin Matsys's Portrait

*A Grotesque Old Woman* is perhaps Matsys's best-known work. The sitter is an aging woman, who appears from the waist up in an undefined space. No ornaments, furniture or architectural features are present, only the woman against a green background. Given this simplicity, the woman's costume, including the rosebud she holds, draws the viewer's attention. She wears a low-cut black dress, gathered across the torso. The neckline reveals her aging facial and neck skin, as well as her large breasts. The crowning piece, her hat, combines a horn-shaped headpiece with shoulder-length lace. Thus far, contemporary descriptions and analyses assume that it is a painting about disability—a painting about a woman who is physically abnormal. Specifically, they interpret the image from the perspective of the contemporary medical model without considering the historical circumstances surrounding its creation. As one art historical description puts it, the canvas:

“Shows a grotesque old woman with wrinkled skin and withered breasts (partially revealed by her low-cut dress). She wears the aristocratic horned headdress of her youth, out of fashion by the time of the painting, and holds in her right hand a red flower, then a symbol of engagement, indicating that she is trying to attract a suitor. However, it has been described as a bud that will ‘likely never blossom’” (Cumming, 2008).

Although stated as if objective, the description portrays her looks and character subjectively based on contemporary stereotypes about the body and gender. The description assumes that the audience perceived the sitter as a grotesque, embarrassing woman who could not accept the aging process, a circumstance symbolized by her abnormal, disabled body.

Others scholars apply the medical model to different, more specific purposes. Some connect the sitter with Countess Margaret of Tyrol. Her deformed maultasch, or literally “satchel mouth” symbolically called attention to her reputedly loose behaviors, they note, rendered her foolish in the spirit of Erasmus's satiric allegories and, thereby, deviant (Silver, 1984, p. 100). True, she is likely an Erasmian fool, as I discuss below, but the argument lacks any evidence demonstrating that the sitter was considered deviant. In drawing this link, moreover, the analysis follows from a reference, somewhat suspect, by Margaret's enemies to her ugliness (Silver, 1984, p. 101). No extant evidence confirms this characterization of Margaret or her connection with this painting. Because Margaret died some 150 years before this painting was made, because of the costume she wears, and because posthumous depiction was not characteristic of sixteenth-century portraits, the sitter could hardly be Margaret (Davis, 1968, p. 92). By imposing the medical model on the painting, the analysis perpetuates the notion that disability is ahistorical and always manifested in certain physical characteristics.

Some scholars focus on the sitter's physical features, pointing out that Matsys has depicted a woman with Paget's disease, which causes bone malformation (opening quotation; Dequeker, 1989). The diagnosis openly applies the contemporary medical model. It might be correct, but it might not (Sharma, 1990). Regardless, Paget's disease was not named until the later nineteenth century, and so sixteenth-century viewers would not have associated this condition with the painting.

These interpretations may inform contemporary concerns in the separate disciplines of art, disability, or medicine. But their insights apply present anachronistic thinking to a past work without acknowledging the assumptions which support these reappropriations. Such analyses shed little light on sixteenth-century disability and its artistic representations in their historical contexts. In contrast, my situated art historical/disability studies approach attempts to reconstruct how the portrait was received in its time. That reconstruction is based on considering the painting's form and content in light of available historical evidence. Although the *Old Woman's* representation follows the conventions of the municipal model, Matsys's rendering of them suggests that his aim was not to portray a disabled individual. From a sixteenth-century perspective, then, this is not a painting about disability.

### Disability Studies and Sixteenth-Century Flanders

The term "disability," of course, is an English word which does not appear in written texts until the nineteenth century (Newman 2012, p. 9). The concept, however, has existed since at least recorded human history began. Any understanding of disability when Matsys was active must turn to the sixteenth-century Northern European culture as it transitioned between the High Middle Ages and agrarian, feudal ecclesiastical ideologies to those of the Early Modern period, which were more municipal and commercial.<sup>3</sup>

Sixteenth-century Northern perceptions of the body and disability were deeply rooted in the prevailing state of medical knowledge. Before certain scientific interventions were available, especially antibiotics and public sanitation, human populations were confronted daily with and/or sustained many more birth defects, rashes, fevers, infections, and other conditions than a contemporary Western individual.<sup>4</sup> Given this everyday presence, a physical difference alone did not constitute a disability (Korhonen, 2014, pp. 30, 46). That concept of disability, associated with failure to meet cultural expectations, depended on other socioeconomic factors.

Prior to the sixteenth century, and lingering into it, high medieval church doctrine regulated socioeconomic matters in Northern Europe (Eyler, 2010, p. 3; Metzler, 2006, p. 13). Significantly, this spiritual doctrine hinged on physical appearances. From this perspective, an individual's state of moral and mental health, the essence of that person's life, was manifested through correspondences between outer behavior and appearances, on the one hand, and internal physical and moral states, on the other. Because this spiritual doctrine opposed body and soul, and the present and hereafter, a healthy bodily appearance represented a healthy soul and a person worthy of an afterlife in Heaven. An unhealthy body and its correspondingly unhealthy soul forecast an afterlife in Hell. In this environment, every human life began with the potential for physical and moral deviance and, perhaps inevitably, manifested it. Women's bodies, moreover, were considered inherently weaker than men's, physically and mentally. This significant difference aside, every believer's life goal was salvation, and salvation required perfection of body and soul. The church was responsible for guiding believers toward that perfected state (Eyler, 2010, p. 2; Metzler, 2006, p. 16-18; Stiker, 1999, pp. 65-89; Wheatley, 2002, pp. 194 ff.).<sup>5</sup> Any earthly, physical attribute which might block an individual's way to salvation was a disability, and all humans implicitly shared this experience and the need to remediate it. For example, ascetics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Catherine of Siena (1347-1389), and Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), describe themselves as limited by their

physical deficits. In so doing, they acknowledge their struggles to overcome their sinful, earthly nature and characterize their bodily pains as disabilities obstructing the path to Heaven (Newman, 2012, pp. 45 ff.). Edward Wheatley calls this Church-based concept of disability the religious model (Wheatley, 2010, p. 210).

Images created before the sixteenth century reflected this religious model of disability. Aimed at scaring sinners, these works portray the body, and disability, in terms of collective imperfection; the sinners' unhealthy bodies bespeak their unhealthy souls. This perspective is captured in a painting of a *Mystery Play* (1460) by Jean Fouquet (1420–1481) which represents sinners clamoring around the mouth of Hell.<sup>6</sup> Hell is not only depicted as a distorted body part, the mouth from which deviant blasphemy emerges, but the individuals involved are also a correspondingly beastly collective. Their sinful bodies betray their disabled states of being.

The religious perspective retained a presence into the sixteenth century. Gradually, however, religious institutions and their collective worldview were overtaken by a municipal mindset concerned with individuals engaged in commercial or personal activities. This transition was facilitated and documented, as extant city records indicate, when the Church and city began sharing the burden of urban activities, thereby shifting their attention to occupational and bodily issues, for instance, rather than spiritual wounds (Farmer 2002; Wheatley 2002).

These municipal documents also chronicle how the printing revolution fostered secularization in sixteenth-century Northern Europe (Eisenstein, 2013.). In general, print technologies increased the availability of texts, the rate of literacy, and the dissemination of the texts and the values they espoused, all this to a more diverse readership. So too was the content of the texts more diverse. Many were published in the vernacular and addressed non-religious, moralizing subjects. The satires of Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) and Sebastian Brandt (1457–1521) especially encouraged readers to attend to their individual, present foolish lives. By drawing attention to the range of embarrassing, improper behaviors which humanity exhibits, these satires mocked the human race and called on each member to reflect on and attempt to avoid such ridiculous acts. Liberated from a singular concern with the future consequences of their collective sin, citizens could conceptualize themselves as individuals, a hallmark of early modernity (Coleman, 2002, pp. 2 ff.).<sup>7</sup>

Secular values also appeared in sixteenth-century art. In terms of this study, the shifts from religious and collective to secular and individualistic are salient with respect to portraiture. In Hugo van der Goes's (c. 1430/1440–1482) *Portinari Altarpiece* (c. 1475; Uffizi), the donors appear on separate side panels of the triptych; the husband, Tomasso Portinari, and two sons on the left and the wife, Maria di Francesco Baroncelli, and daughter on the right. Smaller in scale than all other figures in the painting praying, they kneel in front of their respective patron saints and observe the nativity happening before them in the central panel. The placement of the donors, in the painting but to the side, as well as their diminished size, emphasizes their implicit participation in that central event; they do so in the present as but earthly sinners who aspire to one day enter Heaven. In the sixteenth century, attention turns to the patrons. The donor panels are excerpted, as it were, allowing the two individuals to be portrayed as real people in simple surroundings; the space might contain architectural or decorative items.<sup>8</sup> Although the format retains the presence of the donors, the broader religious context and the third and central panel

does not appear. Represented simply as paired portraits of couples, these small, private, domestic works were hung in homes rather than public churches. In fact, the tradition of the double portrait is associated with Matsys's many renditions of such works (Soussloff, 2002, p. 117).

In addition to new formats, increasing secularization led to new kinds of patrons and workshop practices. While fifteenth-century patrons consisted primarily of the wealthy (rulers, clergy, landowners), sixteenth-century patrons included middle class citizens, many of whom wanted and could afford to purchase private, domestic art.<sup>9</sup> The different needs and incomes of these patrons could be met by assigning different tasks to artists based on ability and experience. Thereby, artists could be trained while the workshop produced more works in many sizes, formats, and media to meet the needs of these patrons (Silver, 1984, p. 116 & p. 143).

In this more secular environment, artists were better able to assert their status as independent creators, working for customers, rather than anonymous craftsmen, serving the one true Creator. Before the sixteenth century, for instance, few artists contradicted their collective identity by signing their works. By the sixteenth century, few artists hid their individual efforts in anonymity. This emerging sense of individuality is evident, too, in the development of new genres, notably, the self-portrait exemplified by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528).

These socioeconomic developments affected how the body was conceptualized and represented.<sup>10</sup> Although physical differences were still commonplace, they were increasingly framed in terms of the individual's ability to work. The practical reality of fulfilling present livelihood gained precedence over the spiritual matters of sin and salvation. Those who could not fulfill their socioeconomic obligations were effectively disabled.<sup>11</sup> I call this model of disability the municipal model and turn to Matsys's portrait to examine the model's presence in sixteenth-century Northern art.

### Quentin Matsys and Art in Sixteenth-Century Flanders

Born in 1466 in Louvain, Quentin Matsys belonged to this transitional Netherlandish world and began his artistic activities there. In 1491, he moved to Antwerp, where he helped found its school of art.<sup>12</sup> By his death in 1529, his oeuvre comprised religious and secular paintings from his own hand and through collaboration with his workshop. These works were influenced primarily by Netherlandish painters of the previous generation such as Dirk Bouts (c. 1415 –1475) and, at the same time, belonged to the new sixteenth century, in particular, in their secular and Italianate elements.<sup>13</sup>

According to the current interpretations discussed above, Matsys's *Grotesque Old Woman* is an image of physical deviance and of the concept of disability. Yet, the medical model on which this understanding is based had not yet been conceptualized. Moreover, nothing in the picture indicates that the sitter was received as disabled. Closer inspection suggests, too, that this was not a painting about disability and physical defects, but about her life as a representative human being. Clearly, the painting has moved beyond the religious model of disability. But, does it represent the municipal model and how?

As indicated, the sitter, an aging woman, appears in an undefined space against a green background, and her only attributes are her body and costume. No decorative or religious elements are present. The portrait's non-religious content and format indicate that it originally belonged to a diptych, a standard domestic portrait of a middle-class or wealthy couple. To that end, the painting has been paired with several male portraits. These works are attributed to Matsys, represent men of a similar age as the woman, pose the men as the female sitter's mirror image, and, in the case of the paintings, are of comparable size.<sup>14</sup> Together, facing each other, the paintings would have served the conventional purpose, decorating the couple's home. It seems unlikely that the couple commissioned a domestic portrait to mock the wife and characterize her as deformed. Instead, the portrait's diptych format and minimal contents suggest that it represents the woman in the spirit of the times, realistically, as a wife and, thus, in her appropriate social role. This assertion not only follows the municipal model then in place but again suggests that the painting's primary purpose did not involve disability.

Sixteenth-century written and visual imagery supports these assertions. First, despite the lesser status accorded to women at that time, any physical differences did not prevent them from participating in civic matters, as wives and in other capacities. Women with missing or injured limbs, for example, were able to work and, in particular, to be wives (Newman, 2012, p.26). When women were characterized as disabled in texts and images, that designation most often dealt with deafness and/or inability to speak (Korhonen, 2104, p.33). Not surprisingly, disabilities were conferred along gendered lines. Sixteenth-century men typically acquired disability status when they were blind or blinded, a status which follows from the many men who lost their vision in industrial accidents associated with the textile industry (Farmer p.2; Wheatley, 2002; pp.194 ff.). Based on these conventions, the sitter can be interpreted as a working woman, rather than a disabled one.

Another of the painting's attributes, ugliness, was not considered inherently disabling in the sixteenth century for females or males. Instead, ugliness was connected with humanity more generally, as a manifestation of its inherent foolishness. Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511), mocks all humans for their ridiculous characteristics and behaviors, among them, being ugly or funny looking.<sup>15</sup> He does not, however, use the language of developmental or intellectual disability. He makes clear that all humans are fools regardless of their bodily characteristics. In *The Flemish Kermis* (1566-69; Kunsthistorisches Museen, Austria), Peter Brueghel (c. 1525 – 1569) depicts a motley group of peasants celebrating a wedding. Despite their bodily diversity, they were not considered disabled people, but rather foolish revelers pursuing leisure time activity. By extension, those who view the painting are also fools. Certainly, the sitter in the Matsys portrait is sexualized to the extent that her cleavage reveals her ample bosom, and she is hardly a conventional model of beauty. However, and in the spirit of Erasmus's work, these characteristics suggests that she is a rather typical woman for her time. She may be foolish by trying to appear younger than she is. But, for that reason she is all the more human in this, her appropriate social role. Again, in sixteenth-century terms, the sitter is not represented as disabled.

The woman's costume supports this conclusion, suggesting specifically that she did not consider herself disabled in either the religious or municipal sense. True, her breasts are prominent, but that circumstance aligns with her portrayal as fool as well as with the sixteenth-century realistic portrait style. Additionally, the plunging neck line was popular in Europe at that time, perhaps giving feminine wiles a somewhat positive spin (Murray, 2004). The presence of the sitter's cleavage, then, might well have been a fashion statement, one which portrayed her as a fashionable wife as befits her representation in a couple's portrait. The sitter's costume reflects other late fifteenth- to early sixteenth-century fashion trends followed by fashionable sixteenth-century Northern women (Laver, 1983, pp. 74 ff.). Both her lacy Italian hat and collar were popular at the time, the latter appearing no earlier than 1510 (Davis, 1968, p. 94). Although the sitter's fancy garb may provide a foil to her physical appearance, those clothes also represent her realistically as a fashionable woman, a foolish human but not a disabled one.

In sum, the available historical evidence indicates that Matsys's painting was created at a time when disability was represented in terms of the municipal model of disability. But, the woman's noteworthy physical variations do not automatically render her disabled in sixteenth-century terms. Rather than a painting of disability and deviance, the portrait is a conventional and very realistic picture of an individual and wife, someone able to serve her social role as fashionable wife and perhaps even laugh at herself, as a foolish human. As such, Matsys's portrait captures an environment in which ideas about the body were less constrained by Church doctrine and more by urban issues.

My analysis, of course, is speculative, as are some of those I critique. Additional research would help support my claims. Nevertheless, my combined disability studies/art historical methodology offers a fresh interpretation of the painting and the possibility of examining other art works in a similar light. Finally, the approach demonstrates how an interdisciplinary, historically situated model exposes the ways in which contemporary thinking all too readily locates disability in appearances. We should not assume that past people understood the world in such arbitrary terms. Doing so creates the impression that disability and abnormality are universals and inherent to humanity. Although we reject any past vocabularies that punish humans on the basis of arbitrary physical and gender variations, we can now benefit from other wisdom the past may offer, for example, when it suggests that we see beyond simple appearances and stop finding disability in perceived and arbitrary cultural norms.

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#### Image Credits

Figure 1: Quentin Matsys, *Grotesque Old Woman*, photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, London.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>My thanks to the National Gallery of Art, London, both to their research staff and their photography library, for their support in this project.

<sup>2</sup>This paper focuses on the Western tradition. I use the term “disability” when I refer to the concept. I use the terms “physical difference” to refer to describe attributes which are present and considered abnormal in a particular

context. In so doing, I hope to maintain historical accuracy and acknowledge that human bodies do have similarities as well as differences; all of these may be visible but should not be judged in terms of abnormality.

<sup>3</sup>Because of space limitations, I have generalized a more complex story about the secularization process at this time. I do not mean to suggest the shifts I describe in any part of this paper were simple cause and effect, linear developments (Eisenstein).

<sup>4</sup>Obviously, physical differences are also apparent today; all humans face the possibility of disability, especially as the average lifespan increases. But, the quality of the presence is certainly different than in the sixteenth century, for example because of the many assistive technologies now available.

<sup>5</sup>According to scripture, disability was not simply God's punishment for earthly sin, though certainly many people thought such thoughts, then as now.

<sup>6</sup>Location unknown, see <http://www.ecclsoc.org/mouthofhell.html>.

<sup>7</sup>A vast amount of scholarship addresses issues of identity and self (see Coleman et.al, 2002).

<sup>8</sup>Portraits of individuals were commissioned in the fifteenth century, primarily by the wealthy and clearly in smaller numbers than religious paintings which may contain donor portraits.

<sup>9</sup>Many kinds of decorative and practical art works were produced at this time and earlier, works which were not necessarily based on written literature and are now lost. These works and their perspectives on bodies and disability are beyond this paper's scope

<sup>10</sup>See note iv. Here, I necessarily condense a complex history of industrial development.

<sup>11</sup>Korhonen (2014) holds this view and supports my argument in her work on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humor.

<sup>12</sup>No guild records were kept prior to 1494 in Leuven. However, historians believe that Matsys was trained there because he never registered in Antwerp as an apprentice.

<sup>13</sup>It is not clear if Italian influences came through direct contact or contact through his students, who included Joachim Patinir (c. 1480-1524; Silver, 1984).

<sup>14</sup>Various drawings and painting are associated with the female portrait (M. Davis, 1968, p. 93), for example, a signed *Portrait of an Old Man* by Matsys (c.1517; Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris) and a drawing of an old man in a private collection (New York; Davies, 1968, pp. 92-5; Silver, 1984, pp. 220-1). None of these works has received any scholarly attention either in general or disability terms. Instead, they are simply listed in the catalogues of the collections to which they belong. The portrait of the Old Woman was believed to be based on a lost work by Leonardo da Vinci, but it is now believed that Matsys influenced Leonardo.

(<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/oct/11/art-paintingRenaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian>, National Gallery, October 15-January 18). Although Panofsky argues that the painting was not a portrait but a satire (date of Panofsky, 1953 pp. 355-56), all available information indicates it was both (see below in text). Finally, the consensus is now that the painting is not a copy but the original by Matsys.

<sup>15</sup>Not incidentally, Matsys knew Erasmus, having painted his portrait in 1517 (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome; Campbell et. al, 1978; Gerlo, 1969).