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Catherine Levesque
William & Mary, cmleve@wm.edu

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NATURE DISCERNED: PROVIDENCE AND PERSPECTIVE IN GILLES VAN CONINXLOO'S *SYLVA*

Catherine Levesque

Karel van Mander begins the life of the landscape painter, Gilles van Coninxloo,[1] by framing the account of his art with reference to a well-known paragone debate:

> I have seen dialogues as well as other kinds of writing by two or three different Italian authors in which the two arts of painting and sculpture are discussed as to which is the most important; and they argue to the advantage of our art that the painter makes everything that the eye of mankind can comprehend visually; the heavens, the sky, diverse variations on the weather by which the sun sometimes allows its rays to fall through the clouds onto cities, mountains and valleys, sometimes dark and cloudy, rain, hail, snow; all varieties of green in trees and fields as laughing spring spurs on and arouses the birds to song – the which the sculptor cannot possibly do with his stone – with more and other arguments by which they show that painting is a more attractive and important art than sculpture.[2]

He then offers Coninxloo's art as proof of his argument noting, 'This would be confirmed and the victory augmented by the artistic works of the excellent landscape painter Gilles van Coninxloo of Antwerp […]'.[3] Noteworthy in Van Mander's account is the emphasis on the artist's

[1] Mander Karel van, *The Lives of the illustrious Netherlandish and German painters from the first edition of the* ~~Schilderboek~~, ed. H. Miedema – trans. D. Cook-Radmore, 6 vols. (Doornspijk: 1994–99) vol. I 328–331; vol. V 74–84. See also idem, *Dutch and Flemish Painters*, ed. C van de Wall (New York: 1936) 306–308; Briels J., *De Zuidnederlandse Immigratie in Amsterdam en Haarlem omstreeks 1572–1630* (Ph.D. dissertation, Utrecht University, Utrecht: 1976) 94, 220–225, 231–244. For the most recent studies on Coninxloo, see Papenbroek M., *Landschaft des Exils: Gilles van Coninxloo und die Frankenthaler Maler* (Cologne: 2001); Büttner N., "Landschaften des Exils? Anmerkungen zu Gilles van Coninxloo und zur Geschichte der flämischen Waldlandschaft aus Anlass einer Neuerscheinung", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 66 (2003) 546–580; and Franz H.G., "Der Landschaftsmaler Gilles van Coninxloo", in Hürkey E.J. – Bürgy-de Ruijter I. (eds.), *Kunst, Kommerz, Glaubenskampf: Frankenthal um 1600* (Worms: 1995) 103–113.

[2] Van Mander, *Lives* 329–331.

[3] Van Mander, *Lives* 329–331.

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ability to paint anything the eye can see – describing not only the landscape but the processes of nature itself. At the end of the biography Van Mander reasserts the connection forged in Coninxloo's landscape paintings between artistic processes and natural processes by affirming, '[…] I know of no better landscape painter in these times; I see that in Holland his manner of working is beginning to be followed a great deal; the trees which stood here somewhat withered begin to grow like his, as far as possible, even though some husbandmen or planters would only grudgingly admit it'.[4]

Van Mander treats landscape painting in the Coninxloo biography as exemplary of the craft of painting itself. The landscape painter's ability to 'paint anything the eye can see' accords with the way he subsequently treats landscape in *Den Grondt*. In that volume – literally the ground or foundation of painting – the overall organization moves from a chapter on the 'action of light' (*lichtval*), specifically reflection (*reflectie*), to a chapter on landscape, which, in turn, moves from describing the phenomena of nature – snow, rain, the movement of waves, clouds and light passing through clouds, the sun) – to discussing the means for rendering those effects.[5] Here, as in Van Mander's earlier Bruegel commentary, landscape painting exemplifies both painting's capacity to imitate nature and the status of painting as a craft.

Coninxloo, we know from Van Mander and from the subsequent work of archivists and art historians, left Antwerp after its capture by the Duke of Parma.[6] He had traveled to France in his youth and after the fall of Antwerp, lived for a short time in Zeeland, for much longer in Frankenthal, and finally moved to Amsterdam where he died. Coninxloo came from an artistic family with longstanding connections to the Reformed faith. He himself must have been a committed member of the Reformed church since Frankenthal was a center for the most fervent religious exiles from France and the Netherlands.[7]

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[4] Van Mander, *Lives* 330–331.

[5] Mander Karel van, *Den Grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, ed. H. Miedema, 2 vols. (Utrecht: 1973). See also Melion W., *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon* (Chicago: 1991) 71–73, 181.

[6] Miedema, *Commentary* 79–80; Van Mander, *Dutch and Flemish Painters* 330–331; Briels, "De Zuidnederlandse Immigratie" 222.

[7] Roosbroeck R. van, *Emigranten: niederlandsevluchtelingen in duitsland (1550–1600)* (Leuven: 1968) 298; Hahn A., "'papier const' Zur Druckgraphik des Frankenthaler

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Van Mander rightly makes no claims for Coninxloo as the originator of forest scenery.[8] Nonetheless, he points to ways in which Coninxloo's late paintings of oak forests create a distinct and influential vision of a closed compact world of nature with airy yet impenetrable trees and a landscape that provides only glimpses of a human and animal presence. The qualities Van Mander singles out, the ability to paint anything the eye can see and to revivify withering trees via his art, are evident in these works and contribute to the paintings' hints of past and present metamorphoses. Coninxloo's exquisitely painted forests, beautiful and mysterious, are full of life. In their attention both to the raw material of nature – most notably in the rendering of trees – and also, despite a seemingly natural execution, to the representational craft of painting, these works evoke the classical *sylva*. Here, as in the *sylva* tradition, seeming disorderliness of form is premeditated and arises from a provisional hypothesis of order which remains, however, to be discovered and discerned.[9] While the concern with the sophisticated play between nature and art as well as sensitivity to the specifics of the natural world and to craft of painting are rooted in artistic tradition, they take on a new urgency in Coninxloo's scenes.

Coninxloo's forests carefully depict believable places, not some arcadian vision. In this they correspond with Calvin's emphasis, in the *Inventory*, that what one sees or observes as real, is real in this material sphere.[10] If, on the other hand, something is contrary to experience, or reason, then it must be considered false. This way of thinking marks a change in attitude towards the material world, and a specific mode of perception. Perception vacillates between the judgment of the eyes of sense and that of the eyes of faith. Coninxloo's paradoxical vision of nature, at once alive and beautiful, but also (at least potentially) a place of death, danger, and mystery would be especially compatible with a Calvinist view of Providence. For Calvin, nature's beauty and order,

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Künstlerkreises", in Hürkey – Bürgy-de Ruijter (eds.), *Kunst, Kommerz, Glaubenskampf* 132–137.

[8] Gerzi T., "Bruegels Nachwirkung auf die niederländischen Landschaftsmaler um 1600", *Oud Holland* (1981) 201–229; idem, "Landschaftszeichnungen aus der Nachfolge Pieter Bruegels", *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 7 (1965) 92–121; idem, "De bos landschappen van Gilles Coninxloo en hun voorbeelden", *Bulletin Museum Boymans van Beuningen* XIII (1962) 66–85.

[9] Newmyer S.T., *The Sylvae of Statius Structure and Theme* (Leiden: 1979) 366.

[10] Eire C., *War Against the Idols: the Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, (Cambridge – New York: 1986) 230.

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despite being a manifestation of divine Providence, is also fragile and tenuous. As Susan Schreiner notes, 'In Calvin's view, nature serves both a positive and negative function. He is always eager to praise the beauty of creation and to encourage the contemplation of the cosmos. At the same time he stresses that nature humbles human beings and renders them inexcusable'.[11] Calvin argues, 'We see, then, that if we have our eyes open to contemplate the providence of God and the natural order that is proposed to us, that order ought to serve as instruction so that we put our full trust in him'.[12] Ultimately, though, both the 'order' of nature and the sudden changes in the cosmos are evidence of God's powerful rule and control over creation.[13] Disorder, too, must be acknowledged. The requisite stance delicately balances between providence and perception. Such an attitude demands constant trust and is inherently active.

If Coninxloo's forest paintings convey a reformed perspective on nature as evidence of God's Providence and wisdom, then Calvin's related discussion of nature as a reflection of the divine also deserves closer attention in the context of these works. Nature, Calvin says, allows us to see God 'in a mirror'.[14] As a corollary his discussions of Providence are filled with imagery of mirrors, theatres, insignias, and reflections of divine glory. This Reformed inflection emphasizes wisdom as the ability to see things as they are and the need for the properly qualified individual to supply a focus.[15] It calls for labor and attention in making, and for judgment and discernment in viewing.

With the exception of *The Judgment of Midas*, in Dresden, Coninxloo's pre-Amsterdam works are prints rather than paintings. Like *The Judgment of Midas* they are based on Bruegel's world landscape type. Unlike Bruegel's landscape prints, these engravings after paintings or drawings by Coninxloo were not originally published as series; many depict a particular narrative and are supplied with a text or texts. To varying degrees the prints combine woodland scenes with background valleys and mountains. Narrative emphasis, texts, and forest settings direct the viewer's associations and determine his relationship to each

[11] Schreiner S.E., *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Chicago: 1994) 141.
[12] Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 135–136.
[13] Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 136.
[14] Calvin Jean, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. McNeill – trans. F.L. Battles, (Philadelphia: 1960) 52, 160, 180; Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 141.
[15] Amico L.N., *Bernard Palissy: in Search of Earthly Paradise* (Paris: 1996) 181.

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scene. In these pictures Coninxloo reworks the Bruegel tradition. The prints are also quite different from his own later paintings. Nonetheless, the preoccupation with imitation and its implicit relationship with idolatry, already evident in the *Judgment of Midas*, raises questions pertinent for understanding Coninxloo's subsequent work.

Coninxloo's *Landscape with the Prophet Hosea* [Fig. 1] provides an unusual insight into a Calvinist visual hermeneutic.[16] It follows Calvin's prescription for religious imagery in that it is historical rather than devotional. The subject is even, to use Calvin's words, 'of some use for instruction and admonition' since it directly addresses the issues of failed leadership, idolatrous ritual, and the misuse of images raised by the prophet Hosea. Moreover, Calvin's use of Hosea to clarify the relationship between a prophetic vision as a sign or symbol provides indirect evidence of how pictorial signs might be understood. Calvin's opening quotation from Hosea sets the scene, 'The Lord places me [Hosea] here as on a stage (*in theatro*) to explain to you that I have married a wife, a wife habituated to whoredoms, and that I have begotten children by her'.[17] Calvin then goes on to articulate a remarkably suggestive statement on the potential role of images:

> All the people knew that he had done no such thing,
> but the prophet spoke like this to set before their eyes
> a painting—in color (*pictam tabulam*). Such then was
> the vision, the figure; not that the prophet knew it by
> a vision, but the Lord had bidden him to relate this so to
> say parable, that is, similitude, that the people might
> recognize, as in a living picture (*in viva picture*) their
> wickedness and unfaithfulness. Finally, it is an *hypotiposis*,
> in which not only is the reality explained in words
> but it is set before our eyes in, as it were, a visible form.[18]

Calvin's explanation suggests a complex relationship between words and pictures that enhances our understanding of the *Landscape with the Prophet Hosea*. Viewed in Calvin's terms the image is not a pictorial representation or replica, but rather a way of pointing beyond, of directing attention to what is not seen. Coninxloo's treatment of this

[16] Painted copies after Coninxloo's *Landscape with the Prophet* Hosea include: a watercolor on parchment in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp; an oil painting in the Galeria Caretto, Turin, and, until 1942, another oil painting (perhaps a fragment) in the Erkenbert-Museum, Frankenthal.

[17] Parker T.H.L., *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Westminster: 1986) 207.

[18] Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* 207.

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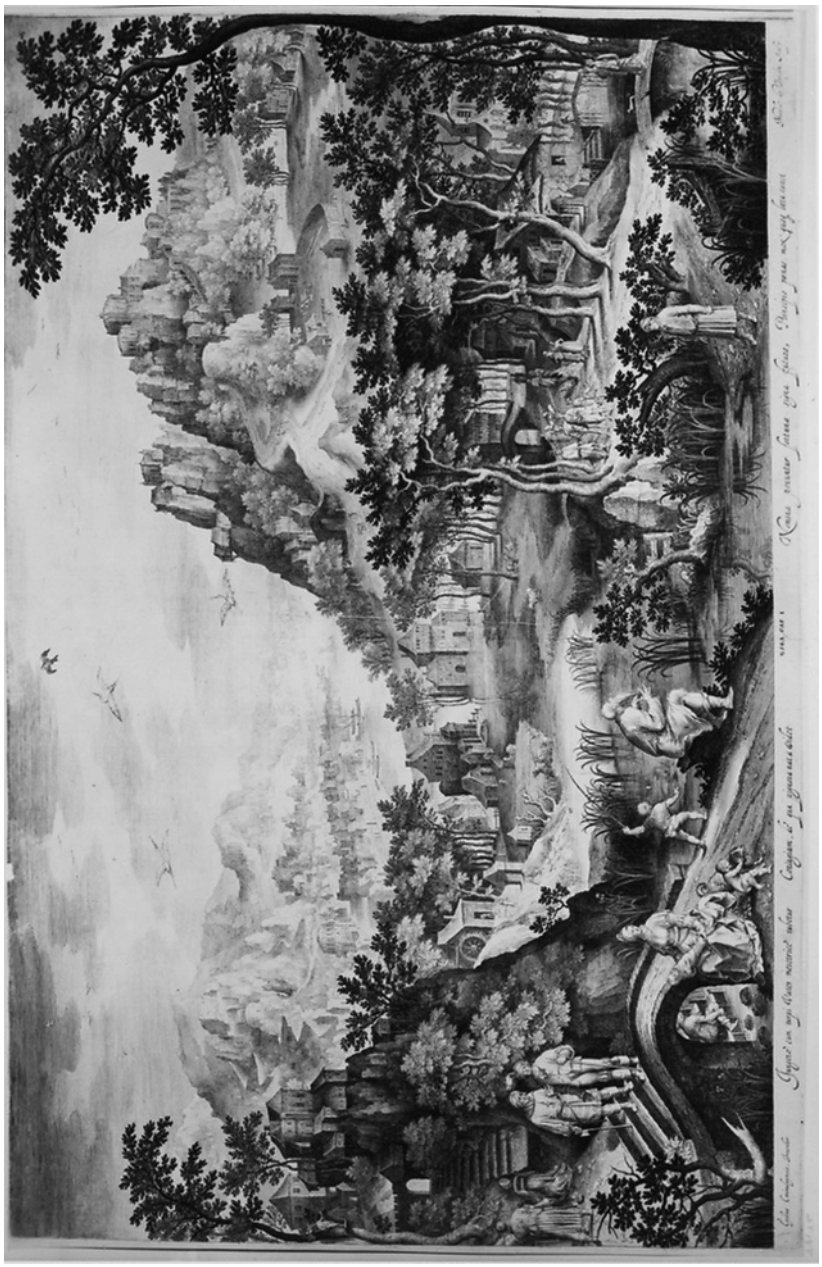

Fig. 1. Gilles van Coninxloo after Nicolas de Bruyn, *Landscape with the Prophet Hosea*. Engraving, Hollstein IV 50.

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subject is noteworthy in the way it combines history and landscape. Both history and nature play a significant role in Calvin's teaching on Providence and consequently suggest ways of understanding the role of landscape in Coninxloo's depiction of the Hosea story. In ~~both~~ the print, as in the passage from Hosea and in Calvins's commentary, two themes stand out: the corruption of the priests and leaders, and their idolatry. The forested wilderness – Coninxloo's specialty – is a commonplace allusion to the reformed community in exile as well as an integral part of the biblical story. Here, the forested area evokes the biblical wilderness, but it also has a specific reference to the Hosea story since the prophet himself uses wilderness imagery to recall episodes of past exile and to indicate the bleak future of the people. Coninxloo develops the biblical imagery within his forest setting; it is a place of exile but also, potentially, the 'theater of God's glory'.[19]

Coninxloo's print is not to be seen as an illustration of Hosea, or even less, of Calvin's commentary, but rather as a tableau whose pictorial details guide the viewer through the biblical story of Hosea from a Reformed perspective, and point to its essential themes. This close ~~interpretation~~ of the print is predicated on a shared community of interpretation. The works of creation can be spoken of as the 'visible language' of the 'vesture' with which God clothes himself in his manifestation, or the 'mirror' through which he reflects his image.[20] But, as Calvin points out more than once, we require the spectacles of the Scriptures to read his revelation or 'the mirror of the word'.[21]

Recognizing the biblical subject and looking through the 'spectacles of Scripture' provides a context of reception for analysing the details of the print with reference to the pertinent pictorial as well as theological traditions. The organization of these elements within the composition leads the knowledgeable viewer through the narrative and enhances the work's significance. Coninxloo's subject certainly addresses the issue of idolatry directly; but seen in the context of Calvin's analogy between a sacramental sign and a prophetic vision or living picture we can appreciate more fully how his work embodies a Calvinist inflection of

[19] Schreiner S.E., *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham: 1991) 5. See also Calvin John, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's "De Clementia"*, eds. F.L. Battles – A.M. Hugo (Leiden: 1969) and Calvin, *Institutes* 58, 68, 72.

[20] Calvin, *Institutes* 52–53, 160–161, and 180.

[21] Calvin, *Institutes* 68, 70, 160–161.

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seeing in which earthly reality (whether sacramental or biblical narrative) may provide a testimony, a mirror, or a living picture that points to God, but does not embody or reveal Him. Calvin's argument about reality and the way it is perceived is most explicit in his writings on the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Calvin employs Augustine's reference to the sacrament as *verbum visible*, a visible word, 'because it represents the promises of God as in a picture, and places them in our view in a graphic bodily form'.[22] Idolatry is that which would equate the sign and the reality, as all the images we invent are idols of our mind.[23] Within these limits images have their place but not as copies, pictorial representations, or replicas; they are ways of pointing beyond to the unimaginable and undescribable but knowable God.[24] The Reformed viewer must confront the confusion of history and seek the glimpse of Providence in nature.

The scriptural associations of forest settings in biblical prints and commentaries also carry over into landscapes without obvious religious subjects. These reflect traditional artistic themes long associated with the *imitatio Christi* and the role of the psalms in personal meditation. Moreover, Calvin was himself familiar with the modern devotion.[25] This background might help to explain the centrality of the Psalms to his thought and his use of David as an exemplary model for imitation.[26]

Of course forests appear in the earlier series of tapestries and print series where landscape and animal scenes were interspersed with biblical narratives. The Wawel and Borromeo tapestry series and several anonymous print bibles now in the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam all contain examples where context, and perhaps an emblem or inscription, serves to indicate the meaning of a setting.[27] One example,

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[22] Plank K.A., "On Unity and Distinction: An Exploration of the Theology of John Calvin with Respect to the Christian Stance Toward Art", *Calvin Theological Journal* 13 (1978) 30–35; and Kibbey A., *The Interpretation of material shapes in Puritanism* (Cambridge – New York: 1986) 48–60.

[23] Torrance T.F., *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: 1988) 92; Eire, *War Against the Idols* 205–212.

[24] Torrance, *The Hermaneutics of John Calvin* 92.

[25] Torrance, *The Hermaneutics of John Calvin* 73–80.

[26] Pitkin B., "Imitation of David: David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, 4 (1993) 643–863.

[27] Among the print bibles I studied are: *Theatrum Biblicum* (Amsterdam, Nicolaes Visscher: after 1642); *Bilder Bijbel* (Amsterdam, Nicolaes Visscher: after 1648); *Theatrum Biblicum* (Amsterdam, Nicolaes Visscher: 1643); *Bilder Bijbel* (Amsterdam,

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a print by Paul Bril from an anonymous *Bilder Bibel*, identified in an inscription in the lower margin as '*de woestijne des Jootssen lants*', represents the biblical wilderness although it contains no specific allusion to a religious theme beyond the forest location, the seventeenth-century inscription, and its placement within a biblical series.[28]

In the case of Coninxloo, ties with the Frankenthal community suggest the relevance of their values to his pictures. The preponderance of biblical subjects in prints after his work speaks to just such an audience. It seems plausible, for example, that his *Landscape with Snipe Shooting* of 1600 [Fig. 2],[29] although lacking an explicit biblical subject might nonetheless have elicited scriptural parallels from an engaged spectator capable of recognizing biblical allusions and identifying them with his own experience. With its stress on personal application, this interpretive approach presupposes a fluid conception of meaning consistent with contemporaneous Calvinist poetry and meditational literature, but also pertinent to those of other confessions.

Although the *Landscape with Snipe Shooting* differs from the *Prophet Hosea and the Prostitute Gomar* in its lack of explicit biblical or didactic content, it does have a clearly defined structure. The main hunt scene takes place in the foreground while the middleground is dominated by roadways, bridges, and travelers. High mountains and a flat river valley spread across the background. Various episodes and motifs are distributed throughout the composition. The events in the fore and middleground are carefully juxtaposed: the hunters with horsemen near a village, the fox and bird with an elaborate manor house, and a living and dead tree with wanderers and a man crossing a bridge. Many of Coninxloo's contemporaries, well-grounded in Scripture, would readily associate the imagery that dominates *Landscape with Snipeshooters* – the forest, the sneaky hunters and their victims, and the wanderers and travelers – with biblical parallels. The figures, usual in woodland scenery, provide appropriate staffage for settings which might connote wilderness and exile. The primary motifs in *Landscape*

Rijksprentenkabinet: no title page); *Theatrum Biblicum, hoc est Historiae Sacrae* (Amsterdam, Nicolas Visscher: 1643), and *Imagines et Figurae Bibliorum* (Jacobus Villanus, n.p.: 1581).

[28] Levesque C., *Places of Persuasion: the Journey in Netherlandish Landscape Prints and Print Series* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University: 1987) 87.

[29] Hollstein F.W.H., *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, 4 (Amsterdam: 1951) (169) 221. See also, Papenbrock, *Landschaft des Exils* 71–74; and Levesque, *Places of Persuasion* 86–97.

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Fig. 2. Gilles van Coninxloo after Nicolas de Bruyn, *Landscape with a Snipe Shooting*. Engraving, Hollstein IV 168.

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with Snipe Shooting evoke imagery drawn from the Psalms, a source which might supply models for the wilderness as well as 'the way', 'the path', 'lost', 'wandering', 'hunter', and 'hunted'. A viewer sensitive to the scriptural significance of the setting and themes would be especially liable to tease out meaning from the potentially significant episodes drawn from commonplace biblical imagery.

Both Calvin and Bèza recommended the Psalms as models for mediation and poetry, a suggestion taken up by many writers that would have had implications for the viewing habits of Coninxloo's audience. In his biblical commentaries, sermons, and meditations, Calvin defines the words 'path', 'road', and 'way' as designating the customary manner or mode of living properly, that is, within God's law.[30] In his *Golden Booklet on the True Christian Life*, Calvin describes 'the plan of the scripture as a Christian walk [...] through the labyrinth of the world'.[31] Scriptural stories, so understood, would always have the journey of life as a subtheme. Calvin's definition provides a trustworthy gauge of the significance such words and images might have for his followers. In Calvin's works the word 'way', indicating the proper manner of living, is enhanced with vivid images of running, stumbling, turning, and walking.

The response to biblical events, 'not as a remote spectator but as one who knows about these things from his own experience' permeates Calvin's commentaries and sermons on the Psalms and actively promotes a model for an engaged spectator. Calvin's intense identification with themes from the Psalms explains the dramatic quality of his descriptive language. For Calvin, 'going through well-known territory' refers not only to the rhetorical commonplaces but also to the reenactment of an individual and particular experience.[32] His descriptions of walking, running, and traveling through the wilderness – described variously as mire, devilish woods or dark, dry, and unfruitful places – draws on traditional exegesis, but puts greater emphasis on self-identification. In his sermons, commentaries, and meditations Calvin conducts his reader through the places of the text and advises

[30] Calvin John, *Commentaries on the Psalms*, trans. Rev. J. Anderson (Edinburgh: 1865) vol. VI, 3, 250, 260, 290, 416, 549.

[31] Calvin John, *The Golden Booklet on the True Christian Life*, trans. H.J. Andel (Grand Rapids: 1952) 15.

[32] Calvin, *The Golden Booklet* 21.

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that one apply personal experience to the Psalms even as he urges the application of lessons learned to one's own spiritual journey.[33]

Other Calvinist writers who either translated or commented on the Psalms included such figures as: Théodore Bèza, Clement Marot, Philippe de Mornay, Jan van de Noot, Lucas de Heere, Marnix van St.-Aldegonde, Petrus Dathenus, Gaspar van der Heyden, and Franciscus Junius the Elder. Variations in tone and interpretation among these writers reveal the individuality one would expect in personal prayer and meditation. The Psalms of Petrus Dathenus became important lyrics of the reformed liturgy after 1566, and were adopted as the official version of the Psalms for the Reformed Church in 1578. They were written, moreover, while Dathenus was preacher for the Flemish speaking community in Frankenthal.[34] Dathenus' translations and commentaries on the Psalms emphasize Calvinist identification with the Israelites of the Old Testament, and draw parallels between the two peoples – persecution, exile in the wilderness, and the founding of a promised land. In the preface to his translation of the Psalms, Dathenus justifies their use and explains their significance for his contemporaries. Dathenus' strong sense of identification with the Israelites of the Old Testament surfaces in his correspondence, as in this letter of 22 April 1561, to fellow minister, Godfried van Wingen, 'Therefore, my brother, we here are not free from unending difficulties […] the people whom you lead are still under the Egyptian oppression, while mine have thrown off that yoke of tyranny and are free, they are the people in the wilderness […]'.[35]

The division of the people into those directly threatened by oppression and those who wander in the wilderness describes a theme that runs through Dathenus' commentaries and that Coninxloo evokes in the *Landscape with Snipe Shooting*. In the engraving, as in commentaries and meditations, our attention moves between the hunters and the hunted and between the hunted and those who traverse the landscape. Coninxloo's choice of a snipe hunt exploits the common lore that snipe are generally attacked from undercover (literally sniped at). This fact stresses the unheroic character of the hunt and places the

[33] For Calvin's use of the rhetorical places and application of traditional rhetoric for his own intense, dramatic, and very descriptive imagery, see Breen Q., *Christianity and Humanism, Studies in the History of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: 1968) 107–129.

[34] Ruys T., *Petrus Dathenus* (Utrecht: 1919).

[35] Ruys, *Petrus Dathenus* 33.

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marksmen in an unfavorable position – lurking in a dark corner.[36] The resemblance of the snipe to storks or cranes might also connote piety, a virtue often associated with those birds.[37] Hunting is also a recurrent motif in the Psalms and in Calvin's commentaries. His reading of *Psalm* 5:8, 'lead me Lord, in thy righteousness, because my enemies are on the watch; give me a straight path to follow', evokes the perilous situation of the snipe, 'God would lead his servant in safety through the midst of the snares of his enemies, and open up a way to him of escape, even when to all appearance, he was caught and surrounded on every side'.[38]

Calvin's commentary on *Psalm* 11 ('In the Lord I have found my refuge; why do you say to me, "Flee to the mountains like a bird; […] see how the wicked string their bows') develops this image further. He writes, 'I answer, it is true that he was unsettled like a poor fearful bird which leaps from branch to branch, and was compelled to seek for different bypaths, and to wander from place to place to avoid the snares of his enemies'.[39] His description evokes the situation of the bird in the foreground and the wanderers in the middleground of the print.

Coninxloo's print expresses fully the state of affairs suggested in Calvin's commentaries. Across the print from right to left we see the snipe in four circumstances: dead, in danger, taking flight, and soaring safely above the earth. The repetition conveys a narrative sequence. The episode in the lower right corner is a powerful image of persecution, danger, and death; a small boy (a page) stands with a dead bird in his hands as the hunters creep forward to attack their unwary prey. The two birds flying above seem to presage the hope of survival hinted at in Calvin's commentary. The tension between predator and victim is continued in the center foreground where the fox seated at the base of a dead branch watches a bird at the other end. The surrounding brambles and iris' are well-known symbols of persecution.[40] At the

[36] Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms* 145–148, 162.

[37] For examples, see Joachim Camerarius, *Symbolorum et emblematum ex volatilibus et insectis* […] (n.p.: 1596) nr. 25 ("Nil fulgura terrent"); nr. 42 ("Natura dictante feror").

[38] Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms* 59.

[39] Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms* 161.

[40] Georgia Montanea, *Monumenta emblematum Christianorum virtutum tum Politicarum, tum Oeconomicarum chorum Centuria una adumbrantia rhythmis gallicis elegantissimis primum conscripta, Figuris aeneis* […] (Frankfurt, Joannes Carolus Unkelius: 1619) nr. 39 ("Sic amica mea inter"); Joachim Camerarius, *Symbolorum et Emblematum ex re herbaria desumtorum Centuria* […] (Nuremberg, Johannes

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far left, the half living and half dead tree is reminiscent of a common emblem indicating the possibility of spiritual rebirth.[41] Overall, the foreground motifs present a situation of danger which requires vigilance, but which is not hopeless. The prospect of later happiness is reinforced by the text of the Latin inscription in the lower margin:

> When the day passes without a cloud, the wind stand still in the air,
> and the threatening wave sinks calmly on the dry shore,
> And the sun shows the lands to the heavens, and sky to the lands,
> and each traveler takes the broad road.[42]

The first two lines of the inscription, from Propertius III, 10,5–6, a birthday poem to Cynthia, convey the beauties of nature (within time) but within the larger context of the poems and the landscape they also acknowledges its transience and danger.[43] The passage from Propertius acknowledges the role of Providence (the order of nature) and so suggests an interpretative accommodation rather than one meaning, an interpretative stance also appropriate to Coninxloo's image.

The Psalms – implicitly about faith, perception, and providence – instruct through their depiction of faith in action. Coninxloo, no less than reformed writers, drew on the Psalms as a book unified by its paideutic journey; a journey of wisdom learned through suffering. Here, even more explicitly than in literary works, nature (like Scripture) reveals Calvin's complex understanding of providence. Both function as a metonymy for God's creativity, together they were books wherein to read his wondrous works. In Calvin's understanding of Providence, a fragile and often endangered world of nature and history stands in radical dependence on the will of a powerful and sovereign God.[44] Nature in Coninxloo reveals evidence of life and death as a

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Hofmannus – Hubertus Camoxius: 1590) nr. 89 ("Semper inclyta virtus"). See also Boström K., "Das Sprichwort vom Vogelnest", *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 18 (1949) 84–85.

[41] Guillaume de la Perrière, *Le Theatre des Bons Engins, auquel sont contenuz cent Emblems moraulx* […] (Paris, Denys Ianot: 1539) nr. 80 [Way of Life] and Johann Mannich, *Sacra Emblemata* […] (Nuremberg, Joannes Fredericus Sartorius: 1624) 54 ("Ab Uno Vitaque Morsque – Sirach 11: 5").

[42] 'Cum sine nube dies transit, stant aere venti,/ Ponat et in sicco molliter unda minas,/ Et caelo terras ostendit et aethera terris/ Sol carpit latum quisque viator iter'. Cf. Propertius III, 10, 5–6: 'Transeat hic sine nube dies, stent aere venti,/ Ponat et in sicco molliter unda minas'. My thanks to Kenneth Rothwell for pointing out this reference and for help with the translation.

[43] Propertius, *Elegies*, ed. and trans. G.P. Goold (Cambridge: 1990) 290–293.

[44] Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 141, 145–146.

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dialectic between revelation and concealment, at once consistent with traditional hunt imagery and with Calvin's view of divine providence.[45] The appeal of such scenes, though not limited to a Calvinist audience, would have a particular resonance for them.

Coninxloo's painted forest landscapes, all of which postdate his move to Amsterdam in 1595, are beautiful and mysterious. The woodland scenery which plays such an important role in the prints after his work and in the Dresden painting, totally dominates the artist's later works. Trees no longer provide a frame or setting; instead the viewer is immersed in forested woodland and undergrowth with little or no vista. This emphasis on wooded scenery and the low point of view have precedents in tapestry, including a Frankenthal example, but the paintings, through scale and medium, lend both an intensity and opacity to such dense forest scenes.[46]

Coninxloo's painting in Vienna [Fig. 3] is exemplary in this regard. The viewer is provided no access into nor road out of the scene, but rather looks from a low vantage point past the foreground of meticulously rendered vegetation, dead branches, and marshy underwood into a substantial woodland. The firmly grounded trees with prominent roots, thick full girthed trunks, broad leafy branches, ample canopies of foliage encompass the entire scene. Despite their bulk, the trees are rendered with intricate and accurate botanical detail. Moreover, these meticulously depicted details are not merely descriptive but convey animation. Rich earth tones and green dominate the painting with only a hint of blue sky barely visible through the trees at the edge of the painting. The setting is marked by a play of light and dark; animals lurk in the shadows.

The slightly ominous quality of the Vienna painting is more explicit in other pictures. The late forest scenes in Vaduz [Fig. 4] and Speyer [Fig. 5] include hunts, but these appear as incidental details within the larger scene. The forest marsh, common to all the paintings considered

[45] Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 122.

[46] Papenbrock, *Landschaft des Exils* 170–171, Schilling H., "Religion, Politik, und Kommerz: Die europäische Konfessionsmigration des 16. Jahrhhunderts und ihre Folgen", in Hürkey – Bürgy-de Ruijter (eds.), *Kunst, Kommerz, Glaubenskampf* 31 und 34–35; Bütfering E., "Niederländische Exulanten in Frankenthal: Gründungsgeschichte, Bevölkerungsstruktur und Migrationsverhalten", in Hürkey – Bürgy-de Ruijter (eds.), *Kunst, Kommerz, Glaubenskampf* 38–41; Duverger E., "Bildwerkerei in Oudenaarde und Frankenthal", in Hürkey – Bürgy-de Ruijter (eds.), *Kunst, Kommerz, Glaubenskampf* 87–95.

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Fig. 3. Gilles van Coninxloo, *Forest Landscape*. Oil on panel, 56 × 85 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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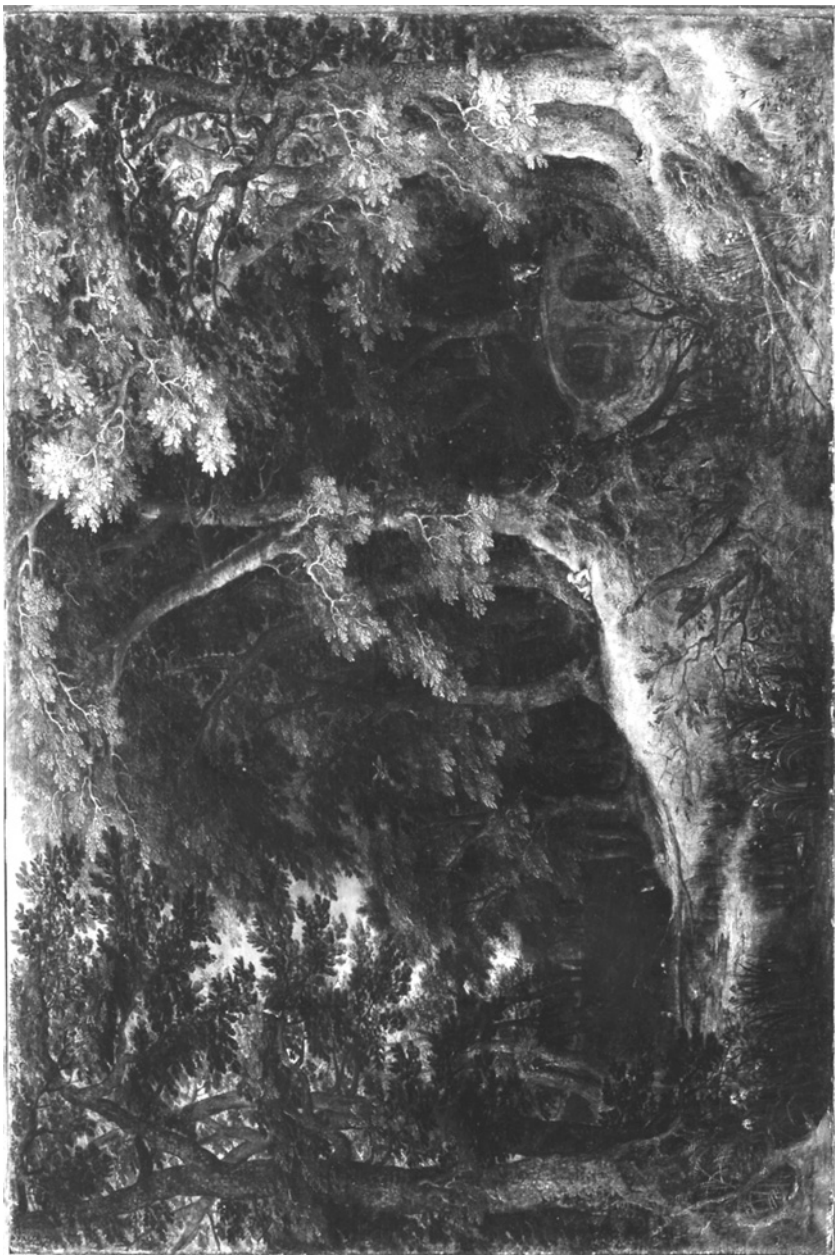

Fig. 4. Gilles van Coninxloo, *Forest Landscape*. Oil on panel, 44 × 63 cm, Vaduz, Leichtenstein Collection.

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Fig. 5. Gilles van Coninxloo, *Forest Landscape with Hunters*. Oil on panel 58.5 × 83.5 cm, Speyer, Historisches Museum der Pfalz.

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here, is characterized as a place of life and death. Nature in Coninxloo's painted landscapes while lush and verdant is also a place of hidden danger. Dark, somber, and struck through with light, the paintings are carefully delineated yet mysterious. In the Vaduz Forest Scene (1598) large oaks emerge from the marshy land; they are viewed from beyond the broken trees, grasses and irises of the foreground. Human figures appear at the far right, while three hunters, a dog, and a vista with a stone bridge are visible at the left. More prominent is the man with staff (perhaps a shepherd), who stretches under a tree, lit by a patch of light.

These works accord with Karel van Mander's account of Coninxloo's painted forest landscapes. In the *Live*s, he evokes their generative quality as well as their combination of verisimilitude and artistry.[47] Van Mander's enumeration of what the human eye can see in his work – the sky, various kinds of weather, the sun piercing clouds and sending its rays to the earth, the mountains, and into the valleys; sometimes dark rain clouds; hail snow; all possible variations in green, of trees and fields, when spring smiles and birds sing – underscores that Coninxloo's paintings do not simply describe the landscape but also the processes of nature. This understanding of landscape is not unique to Coninxloo, it runs as a *leit motif* through Van Mander's chapter on landscape and imitation in *Den Grondt*. Coninxloo is distinctive only in the intensity of his vision. In his case, too, the choice of subject – forest (or *sylva*) – and technique are unusually well matched. Coninxloo's forest paintings are grounded in the careful observation of nature's material qualities. This focus on the careful observation of nature and seemingly spontaneous execution can be clarified by – though not fully explained by nor limited to – Coninxloo's Reformed perspective. His attention to what nature reveals and what lies hidden within it, in turn, can be understood in the context of Calvin's assertion of the fundamental division between material and spiritual and his emphasis on the impossibility of approaching the spiritual through the material. Carlos Eire spells out the implications of this view for iconoclasm, and in so doing explains the significance of iconoclasm for the Reformed.[48] This division has equally significant ramifications for the Reformed view of nature and of art. As a consequence of this

[47] Van Mander, *Lives* 329–331.
[48] Eire, *War Against the Idols* 97–200, 203–212.

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split, as Eire points out, the divine-human relationship can only be transacted in material terms and so the material world assumes its proper place.[49] The world, then, is definitely real, but only in a contingent and finite way.[50] For Calvin the material world operates through its own laws, and these are created, material, and finite.[51] As he says repeatedly in the *Inventory*, only that which one sees or observes is real in this material sphere; if something is contrary to experience, or reason, it must be considered false.[52]

As Eire points out, such an emphasis on the boundary between the sacred and profane was not unique to Calvin. Melanchthon's important commentary on *Colossians* (1527) contains his clearest statement on this interface between the natural and supernatural realms.[53] Melanchthon was eager to establish this separation in order to secure a place for the study of 'natural philosophy'.[54] In Calvin's understanding of Providence, a fragile and often endangered world of nature and history stands in radical dependence on the will of a powerful and sovereign God.[55] From his perspective the 'mirror of nature' could function at once as a reflection of God's glory and a place of danger. The combination of verisimilitude and mystery in Coninxloo's painted forests resonate with Calvin's view of Providence in nature as a dialectic between the seen and the hidden.[56] Coninxloo's painted forest landscapes evoke a tension between revelation and concealment consistent with Calvin's view in which nature provides a glimpse of God's Providence even as it acknowledges the dark and threatening aspect of creation.

Calvin in the *Institutes* emphasizes the need for Providence in a dangerous world as an 'attempt to find an indisputable foundation upon which to affirm a reliable God controls a rational universe'.[57] His understanding of purposive providential nature is sympathetic to, yet distinguished from Stoic determinism, as well as from the Christian optimism of his contemporaries. The exchange between Calvin

[49] Eire, *War Against the Idols* 230.
[50] Eire, *War Against the Idols* 230.
[51] Eire, *War Against the Idols* 230.
[52] Eire, *War Against the Idols* 230.
[53] Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory* 119.
[54] Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory* 119. See also Kusukawa S., *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: the Case of Philip Melanchthon* (Cambridge – New York: 1995).
[55] Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 92.
[56] Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* 93–95.
[57] Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory* 32–33.

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and Jacopo Sadoleto, a member of the Oratory of Divine Love and an exponent of Christian optimism, is instructive of the distinctions within providential thinking. For Sadoleto the seeds of learning must be wisely sown – learning or art perfects nature.[58] The Cardinal stresses the importance of imitation, and he contrasts the life of activity with the life of contemplation.[59] Sadoleto consistently emphasizes what human effort can achieve and the crucial role of charity.[60] Calvin ridicules Sadoleto's view that 'love is the first and chief cause of our salvation'.[61] He accuses Sadoleto of having 'too indolent a theology, as is almost always the case with those who have never had an experience in serious struggles of conscience'.[62]

Coninxloo, who owned a copy of Lipsius' *De Constantia*, appears to have had an interest in neo-Stoicism that can also be understood within the framework of Calvinist thought.[63] Stoic materialism and theories of imitation are especially pertinent for understanding his forest scenes. Nature, for the Stoics as for Calvin, was a mirror of God's glory, but also existed as raw material subject to time and transformation. Seneca speaks to this sense of nature. He writes in *Epistle* 41:

> If ever you have come upon a grove that is full of ancient trees which have grown to an unusual height, shutting out a view of the sky by a veil of pleached and and intertwining branches, then the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, and your marvel at the thick unbroken shade in the midst of the open spaces, will prove to you the presence of deity.[64]

~~He continues by saying:~~

> All things human are short lived and perishable, and fill no part at all of infinite time. This earth with its cities and peoples, its rivers and the girdle

[58] M.C. Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge* (Princeton: 1998) 146; Sadelato J., *Sadelato on Education: a translation of De peuris Recte Instituendis*, ed. and trans. E.T. Campagnac – K. Forbes, (London, 1916) vii–xxiii, 10.

[59] Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue* 149; Sadeleto, *Sadelato on Education* 138–141.

[60] Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue* 149; Calvin J. – Sadoleto J., *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. J.C. Olin, (New York: 1966) 138, 141.

[61] Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue* 150; Calvin – Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate* 69.

[62] Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue* 150; Calvin – Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate* 69.

[63] Papenbrock, *Landschaft des Exils* 79–93.

[64] Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. by R. Campbell (London: 1969) 87 (*Epistle* XLI, 5).

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> of the sea, if measured by the universe, we may count a mere dot: our life, if compared with all time, is relatively even less than a dot; for the compass of eternity is even greater than that of the world, since the world renews itself over and over within the bounds of time.[65]

The emphasis here is not on *carpe diem* but rather the cycles of time and transformation. In the Stoic cosmos heat caused the generation of all things. Thus all things change through a process that is itself eternal. Within this system there is an economy of matter and energy.[66]

Coninxloo's approach to nature in his forest landscape paintings is consistent with the ideas of nature put forth in the neo-Stoic revival during the sixteenth century. More generally, as Van Mander's comments suggest, Coninxloo's work embodies processes of nature and art. It is Coninxloo's sense of life and growth in nature that informs Van Mander's praise of the artist's cleverness and his ability to exploit painting's capacity to create effects of nature – 'anything the eye can see'. This intertwined relationship of painting as a craft and landscape as a subject is reminiscent of Philostratus' conceit that truth in painting consists of painting itself.[67] It also exemplifies Stoic parallels between art and nature in which art's movement imposed from without mimics nature's inner movement.[68] Van Mander suggests a similar relationship between art and nature in the analogy he draws between the artist and the carpenter as agents who impart form to matter.[69]

Van Mander's attitude toward the parallel processes of nature and artistic creation is epitomized in his description of painting leaves, where he notes that, 'It is advisable, in a good picture, to obtain through practice a natural and expert manner of painting leaves; because in that lays your power and therefore you must be able to do it'.[70] Placing emphasis on the process of imitation and the imitation of process, he goes on to say, 'Always one must try many manners – whether after

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[65] Seneca, *Morale Essays*, trans. J.W. Basore, (Cambridge: 1932) vol. II 73–74 (Book VI, "To Marcia on Consolation" XXI, 1–2).

[66] Cicero, *Nature of the Gods*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: 2000) 147; Colish M., *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: 1985) 24.

[67] Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, ed. and trans. C.P. Jones (Cambridge: 2005) 181.

[68] Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 178–79; Watson G., *The Stoic Theory of Knowledge* (Belfast: 1966) 1.

[69] Van Mander, *Den Grondt* 214.

[70] Van Mander, *Den Grondt* 214.

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nature or after pleasing works of art – to bring forth leaves by means of a flourishing movement of ink wash on colored paper'.[71] Van Mander underscores the importance of movement and process, 'in hopes that in the course of time one achieves his goal; for unlike using the muscles of the body, it is not a skill that can be learned perfectly. Because leaves, hair and light are all spiritual things and can only be conceived and reproduced by the imagination'.[72]

The criteria Van Mander presents are not novel; Hessel Miedema notes in his commentary how in his *Moralia* Plutarch asserts that color more than line gives the illusion of life.[73] Van Mander's subsequent qualification of 'moving and living' suggests painterly qualities but also evokes the distinction between description and animation.[74] The distinction between light as reflection and light as illumination exemplifies this difference.[75]

In this context, Miedema's translation of *gheest* as *ingenium* is suggestive.[76] Ernesto Grassi defines *ingenium* as the power which determines growth, existence, and passing away; that is, the becoming of being.[77] More pertinently, perhaps, he traces the term to Vergil's 'ingenium naturalis', the property of the soil which encourages this generative process.[78] The power to create is brought down to earth to be cultivated in the meticulous observation of colors and shape of a particular twig, the general crown of foliage or the distinctive texture of the trunks, pale thin birches and furrowed oak bark.[79] Van Mander again uses generative language, 'and trees that are somewhat withered, begin to grow like his […].'[80]

Forest subject matter, no less than the emphasis on careful observation, experiment, and labor to convey specific natural effects, links Coninxloo's pictures to natural philosophy and experimentalism. Already in his day the classical *sylva* provided natural philosophers and experimentalists with an appropriate model for writing that drew

[71] Van Mander, *Den Grondt* 214–215.
[72] Van Mander, *Den Grondt* 214–215.
[73] Van Mander, *Den Grondt* 214–217.
[74] Van Mander, *Den Grondt*, Commentary 591, 556–557.
[75] Van Mander, *Den Grondt*, Commentary 513–517.
[76] Van Mander, *Den Grondt*, Commentary 355, 361, 426, 432.
[77] Grassi E., *Studies in Philosophy and Poetics* (Binghamton: 1988) 68.
[78] Grassi, *Studies in Philosophy* 68
[79] Van Mander, *Den Grondt* 216–217.
[80] Van Mander, *Lives* 330–331: '[…] en de boomen dat hier wat dorre stonden, worden te wassen na de zijne […]'.

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on fact gathering, experiment, and close observation.[81] *Sylva's* associated meanings of 'raw material' or 'material for construction' evoked both the Greek philosophers *hyle* (the uncombined first bodies of the universe) and the Roman poets more literal sense of timber (the stuff of forests and of building).[82] Increasingly the word became associated with natural history writing. In Bacon's *Sylva Sylvarum*, for example, the name implies a wood of experiments and observations; or a collection of materials, ready procured and laid up for forming particular histories of nature and art.[83] The *sylva* most always suggested spontaneous or unplanned growth, wild natural beauty.[84] The paradox of the *sylva*, though, is that its disorderliness of form is premeditated and arises from a provisional hypothesis of order which remains to be discovered and discerned, an approach to nature that is especially compatible with a Calvinist view of Providence and exemplified in the work of Gillis van Coninxloo.

[81] Bruyn F. de, "The Classical Sylva and the Generic Development of Nature Writing in Seventeenth-Century England", *New Literary* History 32 (2001) 357–362.
[82] Newmyer, *The Sylvae of Statius* 4.
[83] Stephens J., *Francis Bacon and the Style of Science* (Chicago: 1975) 8–9, 27, 110–111; McKnight S.A., *The Religious Foundations of Francis Bacon's Thought* (Columbia, Missouri: 2006) 62–64.
[84] Newmyer, *The Sylvae of Statius* 366.

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