Antwerp in Metamorphosis

Among all the signs of God’s providence and power, of which countless indeed have shown forth in recent times from this our Belgium, truly none stands out more glaringly than the metamorphosis of Antwerp. For what greater thing can be said or imagined than that this city seems to have become the most perpetual and secure abode in which Spanish tyranny has affixed itself? —Bonaventura Vulcanius to Johannes Junius

The history of art and intellectual life in the Low Countries pivots on a crisis and a rebel cause. The Dutch Revolt emerged in the 1560s as a civil uprising against Spanish imperial rule. It grew into the first successful fight for political and religious freedom of the early modern period. Yet the early decades of conflict with Spain were uncertain at best, and they left their psychological scars on the population who witnessed the war’s seismic destruction and dispersal of culture. When the Leiden professor Bonaventura Vulcanius decried this metamorphosis in his letter to the Antwerp burgomaster Johannes Junius, he was speaking of an upheaval that seemed to him all the more devastating in its resulting stasis: the imposition of Spanish tyranny on his native land.

Vulcanius did not chance upon the word “metamorphosis” to describe this narrative arc. Inscribed again and again throughout the margins of one of his personal manuscripts, in which he preserved a copy of this letter, is a fragment from the opening lines of Ovid’s Metamorphoses: “Before there was sea and earth and the sky that covers everything, the face of nature was the same throughout the whole world: only chaos” (fig. 1).

The verse, sometimes crossed out or partially erased, registered his dismay over the miseries of war that he often describes at the center of the page. As Vulcanius would have known, Ovid goes on in that first chapter of the Metamorphoses to recount the creation of humankind. He describes us as the beings in whom Nature’s chaos finally resolved, and who—unlike other animals—inclined our heads not down to the earth but rather upward toward the heavens. And so we remained, pure and without vice, until the corruptive ages of Silver and Bronze.
Vulcanius strained to imagine a time when humanity was untouched by violence and discord, but his imagination failed him. The revolt had shaken his faith in a fundamental tenet of moral philosophy. The notion of human exceptionalism, first expounded by Ovid’s Hellenistic forefathers, scarcely seemed valid at a time when the human condition had fallen to such a deplorable state. Among Vulcanius’s intellectual compatriots, the very concept of a “golden age” appeared ever more vanishing over the years that the conflict with Spain unfolded. Was Ovid right to say that humanity once existed in exceptional harmony with nature? Nature’s laws of change seemed instead to forever pit vice against virtue, ignorance against knowledge, baseness against honor.

The merchant-scholar Jacob Coels surmised that “if a golden age is nothing other than that described by Ovid, in which ‘spring was eternal,’ and in which ‘rivers flowed now with milk, now with honey,’ it is certainly to be sought beyond this world, and sought there alone.”

At the same time, Vulcanius’s language is visceral and emotive, and his attempt to make sense of the revolt through signs and portents was as unscholarly as it was aligned with popular sentiment. Take the artist and rhetorician Hieronymus van der Voort, whose verses vilified the pestilent Spanish as “locusts who devour all that is green” and railed against their transformation of the Low Countries into a barren wasteland. Or the Antwerp diarist Godevaert van Haecht, who mapped Spain’s harsh edicts against the Netherlands onto events in the firmament: the fearsome lightning, which struck the abbey church at Middelburg in January 1568 and destroyed Jan Gossart’s famous early sixteenth-century altarpiece, affirmed for him the war’s epic scale as a battle fought in the heavens as on earth.

Most significant of all is what Vulcanius shared with each of his contemporaries mentioned above: the impulse to counter the destruction of war through a productive fervor of scribbling, versifying, and chronicling. In his effort to process the ramifications of the revolt, he looked to the other side of Janus-faced Nature: the capacity for creation and renewal that she bestowed as a virtue upon all her creatures. The catharsis that Vulcanius sought in his persistent return to Ovid’s opening line, or that van Haecht experienced in the keeping of his diary, derived from the power of repetitive making and doing. The very act of engaging in generative material practice offered a means to recuperate from loss, and to reestablish faith, against the backdrop of a radically unstable world order.

This book grounds its exploration of that practice and its historical contingency in an individual case at once anomalous and exemplary: the life and works of the Antwerp-born polymath Joris Hoefnagel (1542–1600). Hoefnagel too experienced the revolt’s transformations of his native Low Countries. He turned repeatedly to ancient writers and the scriptures in an endeavor to comprehend the metamorphoses of his personal circumstance and the larger historical events surrounding him. Most significantly, however—and more than any other member of the Netherlandish community during these fraught years—Hoefnagel...
responded by immersing himself in a ceaseless study of the natural world. His oeuvre provides an exceptional window into what, why, and how nature signified in his wartime context, and into the ways that war gave new purpose to the creative act itself.

My title, Insect Artifice, takes its inspiration from Hoefnagel’s endeavors as artist, poet, and microhistorian _avant la lettre_. I use “artifice” primarily in its original sixteenth-century meaning as referring to artistry and ingenuity, but also in its more modern association with trickery and cunning. Hoefnagel was an artificer in both senses. He was a master at disguising his thought and beliefs under a veil of emblems and allusions that only his true friends might fully grasp. He employed art as an encrypted means of communication.

Hoefnagel was also an ingenious master of miniature painting in an age of print, whose works represent the last great flowering of the Netherlandish tradition of manuscript illumination.

At the same time, Hoefnagel employed his chosen medium in ways, and under circumstances, that set him apart from his precursors. His most seminal manuscript production—and the one most central to this book—is his work now known as the _Four Elements_: a four-volume compendium of the natural world comprising some three hundred miniatures and over a thousand accompanying inscriptions. Executed on parchment in watercolor, gouache, and gold, its illuminated folios are as stunning in their preciousness as they are replete with learning and observation. Hoefnagel’s meticulous depictions of animals, plants, and insects across the volumes would seem to position him as a natural historian and founding father of protoscientific inquiry.

Yet the _Four Elements_ manuscripts share far more with Vulcanius’s private volume of letters, poems, and Ovidian jottings than their splendid execution and descriptive mode of representation might suggest. In both content and design, they suggest neither a luxury commission nor a work motivated by objective aims. They suggest instead a project of ruminative invention: the product of a mind racked by troubles but buoyed up by the guidance of Nature herself. I argue throughout that Hoefnagel found in the making of the _Four Elements_—in the manual processes of collecting, inscribing, painting, and pasting—a stimulus for his contemplative engagement with nature as both subject and site of inspiration.

And in this pursuit, insects came to have pride of place. Although Hoefnagel’s oeuvre reveals his interest in all manner of natural species, his representations of nature’s most minuscule beasts are the most remarkable achievement of his career, and certainly the one for which he became best known. The _Ignis_ volume of the _Four Elements_, the storehouse of his insect studies, was conceived decades prior to any published treatise on the subject. In his manner of enlivening these curious creatures on the page, Hoefnagel was far less interested in classification than he was in staging uncanny relations between subject and viewer, between the insect kingdom and humankind, and in recognizing the insect as an artificer in its own right.

Hoefnagel’s Folio LXIX of _Ignis_ is a case in point (Pl. 39). A congregation of bees and wasps seem to buzz with life despite their organized composition within the ovular frame. Their depiction to scale; the shadows they cast; the translucence of their membranous wings; the fuzz and reflective sheen of their bodies—all give us the sense that if we reached out to touch them, they might really be there. The verses in purple ink surrounding the miniature declare that these busy creatures “harbor great spirits in tiny breasts” and that
“they all have one job, and one respite from labor.” Through this excerpt from Virgil’s *Georgics*, Hoefnagel positions the bees as exemplary in their communal industry. At the same time, he represents them each as independent actors, united by symmetry yet divided by spatial disunity—some at flight, others resting against the flat parchment surface, and others perching as if on a receding ground plane. This tension registers in the second pair of inscriptions surrounding them, penned in red capitals, which declare that “there is no honey without bile; there is no rose without thorns.” Bees may be models of virtue, but they also sting. Both insect and man are double-sided in nature, and disharmony always lurks behind their endeavors to establish order.

Here “insect artifice” describes more than Hoefnagel’s own artistic production or approach to his subjects. It speaks to the way that individuals pursue their life as small units within a larger and ever-changing world. The metaphor of the bee that persisted from the writings of Homer, Virgil, and Seneca, and remained ubiquitous throughout the early modern period, figures the insect both as an actor endowed with singular ingenuity and as a participant in a larger sociopolitical body. The tension between the itinerant bee and his belonging within the hives between which he travels parallels the way that Hoefnagel and his compatriots navigated the ramifications of war. As individuals within a now-unstable polity, they were compelled to fall back on their natural defenses: the arts of concealment, adaptation, invention, and reinvention of self. The backdrop of civil strife was what motivated Virgil to figure the bee as a model for overcoming political discord. So too for Hoefnagel, the pursuit of knowledge was inextricable from the revolution underway in the country that always and ever remained his home, however far he traveled from its shores.

**ICONOCLASM AND REVOLT**

The Revolt of the Netherlands had its first roots in mounting spiritual unrest that had begun in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. From the 1520s onward, the rising adherence to the new faith was met with significant efforts by Emperor Charles V—the first Habsburg ruler of the Netherlands—to curb its foothold in the region. In 1555, when Charles abdicated power to his son King Philip II of Spain, a still more vehement campaign against Protestant factions began under Philip’s staunch direction. As the Spanish Inquisition emerged with newfound force, members of the Netherlandish nobility took on the guise of “Beggars” (*Geuzen*) and brought a plea to the local government in 1566, then headed by regent Margaret of Parma. The nobles called for an end to religious persecution and to Spain’s external infringement on their privileges and authority. Although their request was granted, the reprieve would prove short-lived.

The momentary change following the Beggars’ petition had an immediate and unanticipated effect: the rapid spread of Calvinist open-air preaching across the Low Countries. The growing allegiance to this more radical faith culminated a few months later in the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566, when Calvinists instigated the rapid and wide-scale destruction of works of art from Antwerp to the northern Netherlands. Philip II responded in kind by sending his general, Ferdinand, Duke of Alba, with troops to crush the uprising and reestablish his Catholic sovereignty. Although aged and reluctant to leave Spain, Alba duly followed orders.
Soon after his arrival, Alba initiated his so-called Reign of Terror, which involved the inquisition and execution of prominent noblemen and Reformist sympathizers, the gross taxation of local citizens, and much-maligned signs of Spanish dominion. The latter included, most scandalously, the construction of a citadel along Antwerp’s waterfront for the Spanish troops, which Alba crowned with a monumental bronze statue representing himself as conqueror of the rebellious Low Countries (see fig. 49). Cast by the Netherlandish sculptor Jacques Jonghelinck from cannons that Alba had captured in a victory against the rebel army, it proved a monument to the general’s hubris. In 1573 Philip called him back to Spain, recognizing that Alba had done more harm than good for stability in the region, and ordered the statue swiftly removed. This was only the first chapter in a conflict that would escalate into the Eighty Years’ War and continue well into the seventeenth century. The formation of the Dutch Republic would be its ultimate result. But the first decade of the revolt defined the narrative of the war more than any other, and gave rise to a body of images that established its rhetoric and ideologies for long thereafter.

Among the propaganda prints produced during the revolt’s earliest years is an anonymous engraving from 1569 that expresses the growing anti-Spanish sentiment in the Low Countries and foreshadows the tenor of Vulcanius’s later letter to Junius (fig. 2). Here Alba is the central target: the scapegoat for all Spain’s cruelties. The general sits in ornate armor on a throne mockingly labeled “Behold the rod of God” (ecce virga dei). Beside him, the bishop Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle is blowing the empty air of a bellows into his ear. A devil, to whom Granvelle is chained at the waist, holds a papal tiara and a crown over the bishop’s head, signifying that he is a corrupt mouthpiece for the dictates of Spain’s Catholic king.

A group of women shackled to Alba’s throne personify the subdued provinces of the Low Countries. Among them, the foremost figure displays an open book inscribed “The word of God” (Gottes wort). She bears witness that the true faith is that of the persecuted in the hellscape of the print’s upper register: the spiritual martyrs and dissenting nobles indicted under Alba’s regime. The dukes of Horn and Egmont, whose infamous execution took place in the public square of Brussels in 1568, appear prominently at its center. As the blood of the beheaded martyrs flows off the executioners’ platforms, it feeds a lake where the pillaged riches of the nation are fished out to enrich the coffers of Spain. Meanwhile, the men of the Netherlandish governing body stand as unmoving herms on the far right, covering their
mouts in forced silence. The print as a whole affirms that although the revolt may have had its origins in religious dissent, it quickly grew into a war that was about something far more complex: a hydra of economic, spiritual, and political oppression.

Images like the 1569 propaganda print are those most often used to tell the story of the Dutch Revolt, as they refer explicitly to its major events and attest to how the outcry over Spanish atrocities—both real and exaggerated—shaped the construction of its history. In many ways, the revolt is the first conflict that motivated the formation of what would constitute a political image in the course of subsequent modernity, and it has been compellingly described as a “paper war” in its proliferation of both printed images and written pamphlets. The propagandistic image, however, is only one form of politically sentient art, and only its most obvious manifestation.

The broader historiography of art in the Low Countries during the latter half of the sixteenth century—to the extent that it acknowledges the revolt’s ramifications at all—has focused on how the 1566 Iconoclastic Fury transformed artistic production and art theory, and on the polemical debates it spawned about decorum in religious works of painting and sculpture (fig. 3). The numerous treatises written both before and after the Council of Trent—by Catholic and Protestant authors alike—not only set forth a range of iconographical prescriptions but also gave rise to stylistic experiment. Likewise, the emergence on the Antwerp art market of new visual genres like landscapes and market scenes, which had begun even before the iconoclasm, found new impetus in its wake.
Yet the iconoclastic attacks alone did not motivate the transformations in the Netherlandish art and culture of this period. Under Philip’s rule, the vehement campaign against Reformist factions in the region not only fomented the revolt itself but also meant that many Netherlanders found themselves divided by faith and compelled into exile for fear of persecution. The impact of the Spanish Inquisition and heresy trials, the devastation of the region’s economy by excessive taxation and wartime turmoil, and the resulting waves of emigration out of the Low Countries all had an equally powerful effect on how individual artists, merchants, and intellectuals reconceived their identities and practices in this period.

I aim to move beyond a narrative of wartime privations that emphasizes their deleterious effect on creative and intellectual pursuit, and to consider the ways that they motivated, however paradoxically, new strands of knowledge and modes of engagement. In seeking to recover the personal stories of tragedy, displacement, and rebirth that arose in the revolt’s wake, I look beyond the propaganda prints produced by both sides and the church altarpieces targeted by iconoclasts. I take up the approaches to organizing and processing the experience of war that manifest themselves in works of a very different kind.

The many quiet and guarded ruminations that unfolded in the space of Netherlandish albums, letters, drawings, and miniatures across the later sixteenth century were entwined with the ever-growing ubiquity of print. In an age of inquisition, the retreat into manuscript culture provided a fertile field as much for personal contemplation as for exchange and preservation: a means to reinforce the bonds of friendship and scholarship that the war threatened to sever. Embedded in the works produced in this context are a wealth of oblique reactions to the revolt. They carry a metadiscourse about establishing common ground through shared experience rather than shared religion, about reuniting in defiance of spiritual discord and political dissent. In sum, they reveal how the war became a generative stimulus, and how the act of making could reemerge as a positive endeavor in the face of loss. In the minds of Hoefnagel and his colleagues, the two opposing and cyclical trajectories of nature—toward destruction and toward growth—mirrored the plights of the present.

**MUTABLE NATURE AND CRUEL FORTUNE**

For the contemporary understanding of nature in the Netherlands, the rise of natural history is a crucial starting point. The development of this pursuit in the early modern period was very much a pan-European phenomenon, stimulated by the exchange of discoveries and specimens across borders. Two seminal early publications—the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner’s *History of Animals* (1551–58) and the German botanist Leonhart Fuchs’s *Remarkable Commentaries on the History of Plants* (1542)—not only crystallized the emergent field but also paved the way for mobilizing visual illustration as a means of imparting knowledge about plant and animal species. Yet it was precisely during the 1570s, as the revolt began to play out in full force, that both artists and scholars in the Netherlands took up inquiry into the natural world. The emergence of this interest was not a coincidence.

The primary topos in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century study of animal, insect, plant, and mineral specimens was a belief that the study of nature provided a means to come closer to God. Through a multiconfessional emphasis on reading the Book of Nature, contemporary scholars framed their queries into the natural world far less as a matter of
objective interpretation than as the pursuit of spiritual guidance. This accounts for the prominence given to moral, proverbial, and emblematic wisdom within natural history treatises of the period. Central to early modern natural philosophy at large was the notion that animals and humankind belonged to the same chain of being. According to Pico della Mirandola, humankind’s distinguishing feature was our ability to “fashion” (effingere) ourselves on the model of any and all of nature’s forms. His point was not that we were the center of the universe, but rather that all God’s creations—from the most savage beast to the smallest insect—had something to teach us.

The cultivation of natural-historical knowledge so came to be perceived as an antidote to the revolt’s destructive forces. Communal labor toward understanding nature’s cycle of life and regeneration suggested the possibility of salvation for humanity during troubled times. Perusing the 1576 treatise *On the History of Plants* by the Netherlandish botanist Matthias de l’Obel, one might never suspect any such motivation underlying the work’s creation. Its elegant compositions of carefully observed specimens—displayed from flower to root, and from bud to full bloom—are glossed by reference to ancient authors and origin stories of the local gardens from which l’Obel’s studies derived.

Yet as l’Obel writes in the introduction, his project was inseparable from the context of its making. He opens by lamenting that he cannot but “weep pious tears” over the plight of his homeland, “torn apart so miserably and inimically by this detestable and wretched civil war.” The Muses, who had fled Greece and assembled in the verdant Low Countries so long ago, now found themselves thwarted by hostility and violence. This was all the more grievous given that the southern Netherlands was “the most celebrated emporium of all Europe” and a region “most fertile with brilliant minds, who excel in every branch of art and knowledge (artium et scientiarum).” L’Obel even goes on to equate the calamities of the revolt with the inhospitable northern climes that compelled his countrymen to band together in their horticultural endeavor:

However unsuitable this tract of northern sky may be for nourishing innumerable plants, because of the savagery of the frosts and long winters, and the unbroken, lasting, and oppressive storms of the sky, and its damages; nonetheless, it is the industry of its inhabitants— their assiduity and unyielding diligence in safeguarding more tender plants from the aforementioned troubles—through which no species can be found in the whole world that is not reared and eminently nourished here by new arts, enormous labor, and the tireless works of the most celebrated heroes and illustrious men, with no expense spared. Whence not without cause I may offer foremost praise to the Netherlanders in better cultivating knowledge of plants, a most ancient study and one most worthy of the greatest men.

L’Obel’s celebration of ingenuity and scholarship in his native land depends on the rhetoric of transformation. The effort to further knowledge of the natural world brought hope that the fertile minds of the Low Countries might continue to give rise to new learning, that the region might again become a welcoming home to the Muses. The pursuit of the “most noble arts” alone promised asylum from the ravages of war.
Here I return to Vulcnius’s well-chosen word “metamorphosis” as the motif that binds the personal and psychological upheaval of wartime to the cycle of nature. In Ovid’s poem, metamorphoses result from conflict or negative impulses—Arachne’s losing battle with Minerva or Narcissus’s idle passion for his own image—but their resolution is double-sided. Saved from suicide, Arachne is transformed into a spider, while the stricken Narcissus is reborn as a flower. In any metamorphosis, there is continuity within change. The traces of the past linger in the new forms and identities that result.

Individuals caught in the crossfires of the revolt found their own lives in a state of metamorphosis. Those who chose emigration had to forge a new notion of belonging defined by adaptation to unfamiliar conditions. Those who remained behind in the Netherlands faced a parallel necessity of acclimating to the turbulent changes around them, and, in some cases, of dissimulating their true faith in the public realm. The common denominator was a sense of loss and forced change that drove the reinvention of identity, whether individual or communal. Their native ties to the Netherlands were neither forgotten nor abandoned, but rather reconfigured in relation to a now-distant or inimical homeland.

In this process of reinvention, Ovid emerged as the poet of the moment. The popularity of the *Metamorphoses*, which had endured throughout the Middle Ages, only grew across the sixteenth century. The moralizing renditions of Ovid’s poem that dominated its interpretation in the medieval period were coupled with philosophical and humanistic readings. The Augsburg scholar Johannes Sprengius, in the introduction to his 1563 interpretive edition, summed up the emergent sixteenth-century understanding of the *Metamorphoses* as “a lustrous mirror of human life,” which revealed God’s command “over the transformations of human affairs, fickle fortune, and all mortal circumstance.”

Nor was Ovid known to his sixteenth-century readers as the author of the *Metamorphoses* alone; he was also the foremost exponent among ancient writers for overcoming the misery of exile through the exercise of ingenuity. Across the early modern period—and well beyond the Low Countries—Ovid’s exilic poetry, written after his banishment from Rome to the Black Sea, offered a paradigm of personal metamorphosis in which the poet figured his own natural talent (*ingenium*) as the vehicle through which to rise above the machinations of human affairs. On the one hand, Ovid laments that “the face of [his] own fortunes can be reckoned among those transformations (*mutata*)” of which he had sung at the height of his career back in Rome. Yet like l’Obel after him, the poet also employs the harsh setting of the Black Sea as a foil against which his divinely inspired genius continues to thrive. He takes comfort that, with the continued aid of the Muses, his poems might ensure his fame beyond the grave.

Ovid thus embodied a belief shared by sixteenth-century scholars and naturalists alike: that the course of life, death, and afterlife was beyond human control, and belonged only to the sway of Nature. During the early decades of the war in the Low Countries, the pursuit of natural philosophy, natural history, and the cultivation of natural talent cohered in a desire to comprehend this mysterious and mutable power, “the signs of God’s providence and might” shown forth in the visible world. Herein lies the story of the metamorphosis of nature in the Dutch Revolt, and of Hoefnagel’s place within it.
ART AS REFUGE

Hoefnagel, while still a child, was thwarted in his pursuit of art. Born to a family of merchants in Antwerp and reared to take up the familial trade, he is said to have vented his stifled yearning to draw through desperate scribbles in dust on the floor and doodles in chalk on the attic walls. It took a distinguished household guest to witness those doodles and convince Hoefnagel's parents to let the boy pursue the art to which Mother Nature disposed him, albeit alongside his other studies.

Although Hoefnagel’s first biographer, Karel van Mander, loved to fabricate stories of artistic origins such as this one, his account is not all fiction. What van Mander tells us of Hoefnagel’s later life is born out in his oeuvre, namely, that Hoefnagel began to pursue a full-fledged artistic career only when he was well past his youth. Hoefnagel’s father was a prominent merchant in Antwerp who dealt in tapestries, jewels, and other luxury goods. Through him, Hoefnagel entered the world of the southern Netherlands at the height of its strength and prosperity. He came of age in a metropolis where artists like Frans Floris and Pieter Bruegel the Elder led flourishing careers, and which Hieronymus Cock and Christopher Plantin had transformed into the center for print and book publishing of early modern Europe. He saw the great town hall, completed in 1564, rising up on Antwerp’s central square—a model of Renaissance architecture in the North and a monument to the city’s creative and commercial achievement. In short, he knew Antwerp before its fall.

Hoefnagel’s early years exposed him to an international culture of exchange, travel, and intellectual pursuit. His earliest known drawings were the fruits of these ventures during the early 1560s, when he studied at the universities of Orléans and Bourges in France and journeyed to Spain on business. Even among the Antwerp mercantile elite, Hoefnagel was notable in having both acquired and fully employed his university education. His knowledge of ancient and contemporary literature pervades his art and writings, and allowed him to foster close friendships with scholars at home and abroad. Van Mander singles out Hoefnagel’s skill at reading and writing Latin verse, linking him to the larger Renaissance tradition of artist as poet. Even in his youth, Hoefnagel was more than a merchant; he engaged in the sharing of cultural capital as much as he participated in networks of trade.

Then came the Iconoclastic Fury and the dawn of Alba’s reign. In 1568 Hoefnagel left his hometown, now occupied by Spanish troops, for a yearlong reprieve in England. There his first extant manuscript grew out of a reflection on the downfall of Antwerp, the plight of its mercantile community, and the imperiled future of Netherlandish artistic tradition. In London, he was surrounded by fellow merchants and artists—many of them Protestant—who had fled the revolt for better prospects across the Channel. Hoefnagel himself was not yet ready to emigrate permanently, though that time was close at hand. As he began to contemplate what it meant to pursue the making of art posticonoclasm, Hoefnagel turned his mind to the works of Bruegel, whose explorations of nature and human nature would come to haunt his own. He may have met the elder artist in person before his departure, but near the time of his return, Bruegel passed away (d. 1569), and Hoefnagel was left to grapple with his legacy.

The inception of the *Four Elements* belongs to the subsequent decade, after Hoefnagel returned to Antwerp and began to create his earliest extant miniature paintings. The first
dated miniature in the volumes themselves is from 1575, which indicates that, at least by this year, his collection of material had already begun—even if the project did not yet have a name or coherent form (Pl. 3). Van Mander reports that Hoefnagel received from an unnamed Netherlandish artist his first box of watercolors while abroad at the Spanish port of Cádiz, and took instruction from fellow Antwerp painter Hans Bol when he returned from his travels.⁶² Nothing short of precocity accounts for how quickly Hoefnagel mastered the medium, and we will see that he later claimed himself to be an autodidact (see fig. 14). Nonetheless, it makes sense that he would have sought study under Bol, who was versed in miniature painting and a devoted follower of Bruegel in his own landscapes and peasant scenes.⁶³ Additionally, several of Hoefnagel’s compositions in the *Four Elements* relate to those in a handful of surviving albums and collections of nature studies by Bol and other artists then circulating in Antwerp.⁶⁴ He thus benefited from a larger milieu of interest in natural history, both at the time and over the decades to follow.

Had Hoefnagel remained in Antwerp for the rest of his career, his study of the natural world might never have developed into one of greater urgency. But the major turning point in Hoefnagel’s life was still to come. In November 1576, a band of Spanish soldiers, frustrated over lack of pay and ceaseless battles, ransacked Antwerp. According to van Mander, Hoefnagel’s family was among those who lost their wealth to the foreign plunderers in the much decried event that became known as the Spanish Fury.⁶⁵ The ramifications were both political and personal. For Hoefnagel, his hometown was now even less secure than it had been before and offered meager prospects for rebuilding his mercantile career. The exigencies of war demanded that he leave the Netherlands behind.

And so in the following year, 1577, Hoefnagel set off for Italy in the company of his close friend the Antwerp cartographer Abraham Ortelius, presumably in the hope of finding new commercial opportunities farther south. Hoefnagel also brought along a handful of miniatures on their journey, including the early stages of the *Four Elements*, which perhaps were as yet only a collection of loose studies or folios.⁶⁶ Van Mander writes that during a sojourn in Munich, the two friends were received at the court of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria, who was so impressed upon seeing Hoefnagel’s portraits of himself and his wife, and “a small piece of parchment with little animals and trees in gouache,” that he not only requested to purchase the latter miniature but asked Hoefnagel to enter his service permanently.⁶⁷ The story compellingly suggests how Hoefnagel’s nature studies served as a calling card for his rare abilities as a miniaturist and helped to launch his transformation from itinerant merchant to émigré artist.⁶⁸

After completing his Italian travels with Ortelius in late 1578, Hoefnagel returned to Munich to take up his new position. He remained in court service through Albrecht’s reign and into that of his successor, Wilhelm V of Bavaria.⁶⁹ During these years, he produced miniatures and manuscript illuminations for other patrons as well—most notably, a program of illuminations in a splendid Roman Missal commissioned by Archduke Ferdinand II of Tirol, which took Hoefnagel almost a decade to complete.⁷⁰ Nor did he abandon his mercantile ways but began to collect and deal in old master drawings—an interest that he sustained for the rest of his life.⁷¹ He also continued to work on the *Four Elements*. The project seems to have benefited significantly from the contacts and resources that court afforded him, even if he had to pursue it alongside commissions and obligations to his
patrons. The last dated miniature in the volumes, which belongs to the year 1589 (Terra, Folio XXXIX), places the development of the manuscripts well into his Munich period. But his death in 1600 is the only secure terminus ante quem, and there is every reason to surmise that Hoefnagel continued to engage with the project under the auspices of his final patron.

This last court appointment resulted from yet another change in Hoefnagel’s fortunes. When new Counter-Reformation strictures under Wilhelm V required all members of the Munich court to make an open profession of faith, Hoefnagel was dismissed for failing to sign the credo. Having lost his position at Munich, Hoefnagel sought the protection of Emperor Rudolf II, who was known for his welcoming stance toward wartime emigrants from the Low Countries. In 1591, Hoefnagel joined a coterie of many other exceptional artists and scholars who had been lured into Rudolf’s employ under similar circumstances. During these late years, he moved between Frankfurt and the imperial courts in Prague and Vienna, and he illuminated two calligraphic manuscripts that were already in the emperor’s possession. His son and fellow artist Jacob Hoefnagel also entered Rudolf’s service and helped to perpetuate his legacy even after his father’s death through the production of prints and miniatures inspired by his works. Jacob, unlike his father, became an avowed Protestant during his tenure abroad.

Rudolf’s avid collecting of art and natural curiosities, for which he was already well known at the time, also fueled his interest in and eventual purchase of the Four Elements. When he acquired them is less certain, all the more so since they do not appear in the 1607–11 inventory of his collection. Van Mander writes that Rudolf paid Hoefnagel one thousand gold crowns for the volumes, but even this report cannot be accepted without question, as it is accompanied by a still more dubious assertion: that Hoefnagel explicitly produced the manuscripts on the emperor’s commission. As Lee Hendrix has already pointed out, to accept van Mander’s statement accords neither with the dates of the miniatures found within the Four Elements nor with the content and nature of the volumes as a whole. Most conspicuously, it does not accord with the fact that the manuscripts lack any indication of a commissioner or dedicatee, unlike those which Hoefnagel produced for Rudolf and other patrons during his career. So van Mander’s biography, while quite detailed and reliable overall, should be taken as incorrect on this point, and its author as comparably less well informed about Hoefnagel’s final years. What matters about this episode is that the Four Elements underwent their most significant repurposing within Rudolf’s ambit, becoming not only prized collector’s objects but also models for many subsequent artists and scholars engaged in the study of nature. This afterlife and audience went well beyond what Hoefnagel could have foreseen for his project at the outset.

Hoefnagel’s later career as a court artist Nonetheless continues to define and delimit the majority of scholarly studies on his works, and on the Four Elements in particular. We are told that his miniatures celebrated the power of human artifice to emulate nature’s wondrous creations, and did so in the context of collector’s cabinets abounding in other works of art and naturalia. We are told that they redounded to the credit of their courtly owners through their virtuosity and learning. All of this may be true, to some extent, of his final years. Yet the problem is this: the prevailing narrative emphasizes the conclusion of Hoefnagel’s story at the expense of his beginnings. It brushes aside the hardships that
Hoefnagel declared fundamental to his own course of life, and which have only recently been recognized as definitive both of his works at the Rudolphine court and of those produced by his fellow Netherlandish émigrés who also made a home there. If we follow instead the larger arc of van Mander’s narrative, we find that his account of Hoefnagel’s early career places the upheaval of the revolt front and center. Of all the artists whose lives van Mander surveys, he opens Hoefnagel’s biography alone with direct reference to the plight that was essential to his creative formation:

I find that a better custom prevails among us Netherlanders than is in use with other peoples—namely that parents, even when empowered by wealth, often get their children to learn one or another art or trade early in their youth; that can be wonderfully useful, especially in times of war and emigration. For we find that cruel fortune, the bane of this world, has less power over art than over riches, and that the art which one has learned in one’s youth is often the last resort in necessity and a refuge of consolation to avert the shipwreck of oppressive poverty. How true this is was discovered by the gifted Joris Hoefnagel of Antwerp.

This book takes up van Mander’s notion of art as refuge and of poverty as a metaphor, one that refers not just to the loss of material wealth but also to the impoverishment of culture, which in turn motivates and undergirds cultural renewal. Tracing the trajectory of Hoefnagel’s career prior to his tenure at Rudolf’s court reveals that his drive as an artist arose directly from his experience of war and emigration. It reveals that the courtly sphere proves a false point of reference for uncovering the real impetus behind Hoefnagel’s art, which is far less about the curiosity cabinet and far more about a concern for the fragility of knowledge itself. To understand this concern demands looking not to the later history of its reception, but to the archive of his works themselves, the crucible of his learning and experience, which carries with it the story of Hoefnagel’s wartime displacement and preservationist efforts.

Finally, a word on Hoefnagel’s spiritual allegiances, in light of his emigration from Antwerp and subsequent departure from Munich in 1591. Never in Hoefnagel’s life or works did he openly espouse any one religious stance. For this reason, he has often been described as an irenicist who followed Desiderius Erasmus in his disavowal of spiritual dogma and pursuit of an ethical path to virtue. Hoefnagel has likewise been associated with the Neo-Stoic movement fostered by the Netherlandish humanist Justus Lipsius in response to the confessional conflict of the revolt. As a revival of ancient Stoicism inflected by Christian teachings, it was a movement focused on active virtue. This meant not only taking action to improve one’s own condition but also aiding others in their quest to live by the universal guidance of nature alone (sola natura).

No less dominant has been the body of past scholarship linking Hoefnagel to the Family of Love (Huis der Liefde): a contemporary reformist movement in the Low Countries founded by Hendrik Niclaes on the principle that true piety consisted of inward faith and communal devotion. The affinity of this movement with Neo-Stoic philosophy has been said to have invested it with particular appeal among individuals like Hoefnagel and his friend Ortelius. However, recent studies have convincingly dispelled the myth of
widespread allegiance to Nicolaes's ideology. While Hoefnagel's works do display some affinity with the ideas of Erasmus and Lipsius, any connection to the Family of Love should be dismissed as speculative at best.

Hoefnagel unquestionably adopted an irenic view on the war in hoping for peace and seeking a way out of contemporary discord. Yet this does not really address the matter of his faith. That many of his friends were openly Protestant, and his own son later a member of that faith, is certainly suggestive. But even his dismissal from Wilhelm's court provides no firm evidence, as a refusal to sign a religious credo is only a negative statement and not in itself a tacit vote for the opposing camp. Given that Lipsius—despite his Neo-Stoic reflections and expedient movement among Protestant circles for many years—proved an ardent Catholic in the end, I am wary of asserting too strongly that Hoefnagel was one thing or another, let alone that he was a neutralist outright. I am even more skeptical of attempting to recover a system of belief in his works, which record the process of thinking through questions of religion and politics far more than they express firm convictions. To bear oneself “discreetly and prudently,” as Lipsius himself wrote, was tantamount to surviving troubled times. Hoefnagel was a master at doing just that.

Part 1 begins with Hoefnagel's intellectual biography, as told through his personal mottoes, and then turns to address his place within the larger Netherlandish community of artists, merchants, and scholars whose plights and pursuits were fundamentally shaped by the war. I focus on the genres that most closely informed Hoefnagel's approach to the manuscript medium as a space of inquiry and identity formation: the emblem book, the atlas, and the friendship album. In the process, I endeavor to show how the revolt impacted the contemporary understanding and development of those genres themselves. In part 2, this foundation provides the ground on which to reinterpret the aims and content of the Four Elements. The conceptions of art, nature, and their respective histories, which emerge across the volumes, reflect the concerns that drove Hoefnagel’s turn to image making in the first place. The tensions between observation and imagination, between nature as object of inquiry and Nature’s ineffable power, are the most recurrent themes. I address Hoefnagel's work for Rudolf II only in passing and touch just briefly on his collaborations with his son Jacob in those later years. This is not a monographic study of Hoefnagel's oeuvre; rather, I attempt to reconstruct the larger world of thought and experience to which he belonged, even while aware that the writing of history is itself an act of artifice.

The Four Elements emerges in this alternative narrative as the site where Hoefnagel returned again and again to grapple with nature through art—not for its own sake, but for the sake of understanding the tensions and transformations around him. Within the space of his manuscripts, Hoefnagel sought to safeguard art and knowledge from the enemy forces that threatened them from the outside, and to create a body of work immune to iconoclasm and inquisition. Above all, Hoefnagel struggled with the same doubt that kept surfacing for Vulcanianus at the margins: the question of how to emerge from war with sustained hope for a second life.