

# Introduction

## Did the poor have art?

Rembrandt Duits

*Poverty has its whims and shows of taste, as wealth has.*

Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*

Not long before his death in 1929, the art and cultural historian Aby Warburg stated that he had become convinced ‘that primitive man, no matter where on earth, produces a fundamental equivalent for that which in so-called high culture is understood as an aesthetic event.’<sup>1</sup> Warburg’s solemnly worded observation chimes distantly with the ideas of modern anthropology. The anthropologist Donald Brown, for instance, includes aesthetics in a list of ‘universals’ of human culture – traits that appear in all human societies around the globe.<sup>2</sup> It is probably fair to say, however, that in Western art history, aesthetics are rarely studied evenly across populations. The surviving physical evidence of much of art history is skewed towards elite production and consumption, and the argument can be made that the narratives and vocabulary of art history have reinforced this bias, equating a narrow band of elite works with a ‘high art’ that is often considered normative for the collective tastes of past cultures.

For the period of the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it is undoubtedly true that we know rather a lot about the tastes and preferences of what Warburg called ‘high culture’, represented by the art patronage of a small group of rich and powerful people, but still comparatively little about the tastes, preferences and art of almost everyone else. Yet, as this volume will seek to demonstrate, this is one case in which an absence of knowledge should not be mistaken for knowledge of an absence. The late Middle Ages and Renaissance may in fact be the first period in Western history to provide us with ample surviving physical and documentary evidence to reconstruct an art market beyond that of the elite production for nobles and wealthy religious institutions, encompassing virtually all social strata. Moreover, the study of such a broader art market is particularly relevant for this particular era, which gave rise to the first narratives of art history and contributed much to our modern understanding of what constitutes ‘art’ in the narrower sense that art history tends to describe.

There has of course been a sporadic interest in the art of the ‘common people’ of this era. Already in the late nineteenth century, the socialist and champion of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris, presented an idealized picture of the medieval village craftsman and his artistic output, positing that ‘the throne of the great

Plantagenet, or the great Valois, was no more daintily carved than the seat of the village mass-john, or the chest of the yeoman's good-wife.<sup>3</sup> Morris's views were echoed by others, such as Charles Hutchinson, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, who, in an address at the opening of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1916, argued emphatically for a non-elitist vision of art: 'Art is not destined for a small and privileged class. Art is democratic. It is of the people and for the people.'<sup>4</sup>

Yet, as we learn from the chapter by Jacqui Pearce in this volume, Morris's contemporary, the chemist and ceramics expert Sir Arthur Church, called late English medieval pottery produced for ordinary households a 'rude' art, and the later expert Robert Lockhart Hobson, a contemporary of Hutchinson, spoke of 'uncouth objects' unlikely to 'have found a place at the tables of the rich and noble.'<sup>5</sup> We may be inclined to condemn such opinions as snobbish today, but they are reflected in the fact that examples of the same medieval pottery are exhibited in the 'archaeological' collection of the Museum of London, while the artefacts we find in dedicated art museums, and which are hailed in surveys and tourist guides as the great masterpieces of art history, predominantly derive from the patronage of the 'rich and noble'. Significantly, the poor as a subject in the art of the Renaissance rich have been studied much more than the actual art of the poor.<sup>6</sup>

The question of whether poorer people even had art in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance has in recent decades been met with a range of answers – from an emphatic, if rhetorical, 'no', to a cautious 'maybe', to an optimistic 'there might be more than you would think'.<sup>7</sup> Even publications that acknowledge that there was an art of the poor tend to regard it as separate from the art of the rich, adhering perhaps inadvertently to Pierre Bourdieu's principle of social distinction in suggesting a fundamental divide between a self-fashioned elite and the underprivileged masses.<sup>8</sup> Virginia Nixon states that 'textual records and the quantity and variety of surviving objects make it clear that large numbers of paintings, sculptures and prints were made expressly to be sold to people in lower income strata', but proceeds to qualify these works as a 'popular art' that was technically crude and iconographically simplified compared to the art of the elite, in line with contemporary elite assumptions about the poor being uneducated.<sup>9</sup>

The present volume, based on a conference held at The Warburg Institute in London in June 2018, will take a different approach. It will positively seek to confirm the existence of an art of the poor, or at least of the 'non-elites', in the period that established the conventions of the art of the rich in the Western world. It will show that the study of the art of the poor can be a separate field within art history, dealing with its own range of primary sources, materials of manufacture and methods of production and marketing. It will, however, not set apart the art of the poor as essentially distinct from the art of the rich, but argue instead that both were part of the same continuum within material culture – a continuum of artefacts that were adorned and valued beyond the merely functional, and were deliberately made with a potential for aesthetic appreciation.

Before outlining the structure of the volume, this introduction will attempt to answer three basic questions:

- Who were the poor?
- What was art? (or rather, how should we define 'art' in order to speak constructively about an art of the poor?)
- Why does the art of the poor matter?

Together, the answers to these three questions will provide an essential framework for the discussion that is to follow, defining the parameters of the new field that is the study of the art of the poor and providing the motivation for this expansion of the traditional discipline of art history.

Who were the poor? Poverty is a reality to those who are poor and a mere idea to those who are not. Where the line between poor and not-poor is drawn is in a sense arbitrary, depending on methods of measurement and the perceptions of the people involved. Modern, broadly accepted analyses of the proportion of poverty in society are underpinned by an array of statistics and abundant documentation, but these go back perhaps some 200 years;<sup>10</sup> it is not surprising that, as noted by several authors in this volume, historians engaging with the subject of poverty in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance have put an emphasis on the relativity of poverty and the difficulties of making precise distinctions between poor and non-poor.<sup>11</sup>

Medieval and Renaissance societies in Europe had their own understanding of 'the poor', referring mostly to categories of people who were in want of financial assistance for their mere day-to-day subsistence – those who depended on institutions such as almshouses and were the beneficiaries of the so-called Poor Laws that were introduced in Elizabethan England.<sup>12</sup> Historians and historical anthropologists discussing poverty tend to adhere to this historical understanding of the term, although they have also adopted a range of modern concepts to facilitate analysis, such as the 'structural poor' (e.g. those with a disability that prevented them from working), the 'episodic poor' or 'crisis poor' (e.g. those who were impoverished as the result of a poor harvest or an arbitrary fluctuation in the job market) and the 'life-cycle poor' (e.g. those who fell into poverty owing to old age).

The present volume, too, will work with modern concepts of 'the poor'. Compared to the familiar historical picture, however, it will greatly expand the segment of the population included in its scope. It will, in fact, focus not so much on those who were acutely destitute (although they will be part of the story, for example in the chapter by Shannon Gilmore-Kuziow), but on the social strata of peasants, unskilled and skilled labourers, small-time and occasionally even middle-bracket artisans – in short, on those who did not have the financial means to commission or purchase the works of art that have entered the accepted canon of art history. A working definition of this broader social group might be 'non-elites', although, as will be discussed later, modern interpretations of the notion of poverty certainly permit us to qualify them with the less clinical-sounding phrase 'the poor'.

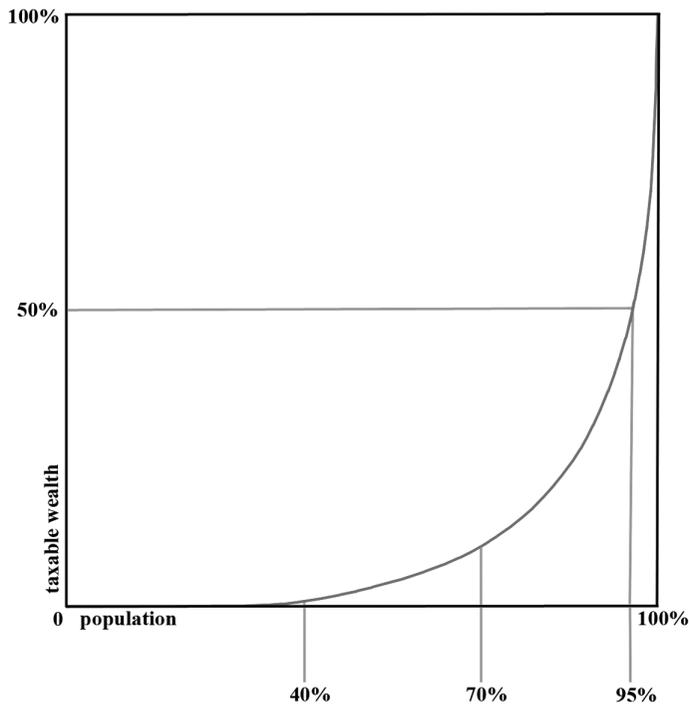
The United Nations institution, UNESCO, provides three different criteria by which to measure poverty:<sup>13</sup>

- 1) *Absolute poverty*. This is measured against a so-called poverty line, an income level below which people lack the most basic needs for subsistence. For example, the World Bank currently draws an international poverty line (for what it defines as 'extreme poverty') of \$1.90 per day.<sup>14</sup>
- 2) *Relative poverty*. This is measured as a percentage of income in a circumscribed geographical area, mostly in affluent societies where the percentage of people in absolute poverty is comparatively low. Britain, for instance, has defined a relative poverty standard of 60 per cent of median income, meaning that at the time of writing, just over 20 per cent of people in the UK are living in relative poverty.<sup>15</sup>

- 3) *Social exclusion*. This is measured not in financial terms, but by the degree to which individuals or groups are disadvantaged in their access to the benefits of the prevailing culture, such as education or health care. Importantly, this form of impoverishment can be the result not just of restricted financial resources but also of factors of social discrimination, involving issues such as age, gender or belonging to an ethnic minority.

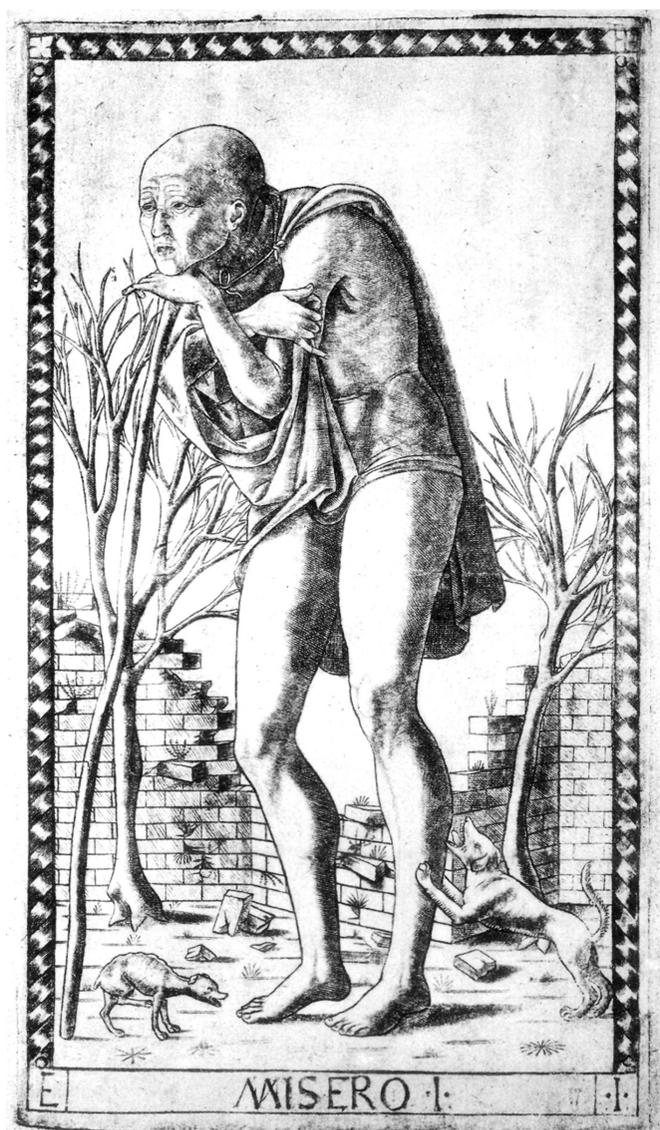
These UNESCO criteria, while designed for the modern world, can be applied historically, as can be demonstrated using the case study of Renaissance Florence, a city state for which we have a relatively rich vein of published historical evidence for the period between 1300 and 1600:

- 1) *Absolute poverty*. Officials of the Florentine tax office, the *catasto*, employed their own poverty line, set at an income of 14 florins per year during the fifteenth century.<sup>16</sup> This was the line below which a person was expected to struggle with subsistence (individually, let alone in support of a family). Over the course of the fifteenth century, the income of an unskilled worker in Florence appears to have ranged from well above this level around 1400 to barely above it around 1500.<sup>17</sup> David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber famously studied the wealth distribution of Florence and its territories based on the assessment of taxable assets of Florence and its territories produced by the *catasto* officials in 1427. Their analysis was presented as a Lorenz curve projecting percentage of total assets against percentage of the total population (Figure 0.1).<sup>18</sup> The curve suggests that perhaps 40 per cent of households may have been hovering around this bread line (the *catasto* recorded no taxable wealth for ca. 40 per cent of households, meaning these households generated enough income to subsist but not to produce surplus wealth).<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that the very poorest of society, for example, those reduced to a life of begging or other forms of social dependency, were not included in the *catasto* assessment, which was based only on households (Figure 0.2). The 40 per cent on the poverty line is likely to have included peasants in the Florentine *contado* and unskilled labourers, many of whom would also have worked seasonally on the fields (Figure 0.3). It is important to note that they would have been able to support themselves and their families during a good year of full employment, but could easily have fallen into destitution in times of crisis; as Tom Nichols notes in his chapter in this volume, which deals with the distinction between the structurally poor and crisis poor. The limited financial means of the 40 per cent of households living around the poverty line might suggest that they can be excluded from any discourse on art history. Yet, as Meriel Jeater demonstrates in her chapter, objects such as pilgrims' badges were within the financial reach of even unskilled workers, and may have been specifically manufactured for this market. Peasants engaged in the collective commissioning of village churches and their decoration, as discussed in the essays by Angeliki Lymberopoulou and Joanne Anderson. And the essay by Shannon Emily Gilmore-Kuziow shows how even the destitute could form part of the target audience of a miraculous image in a religious cult site.



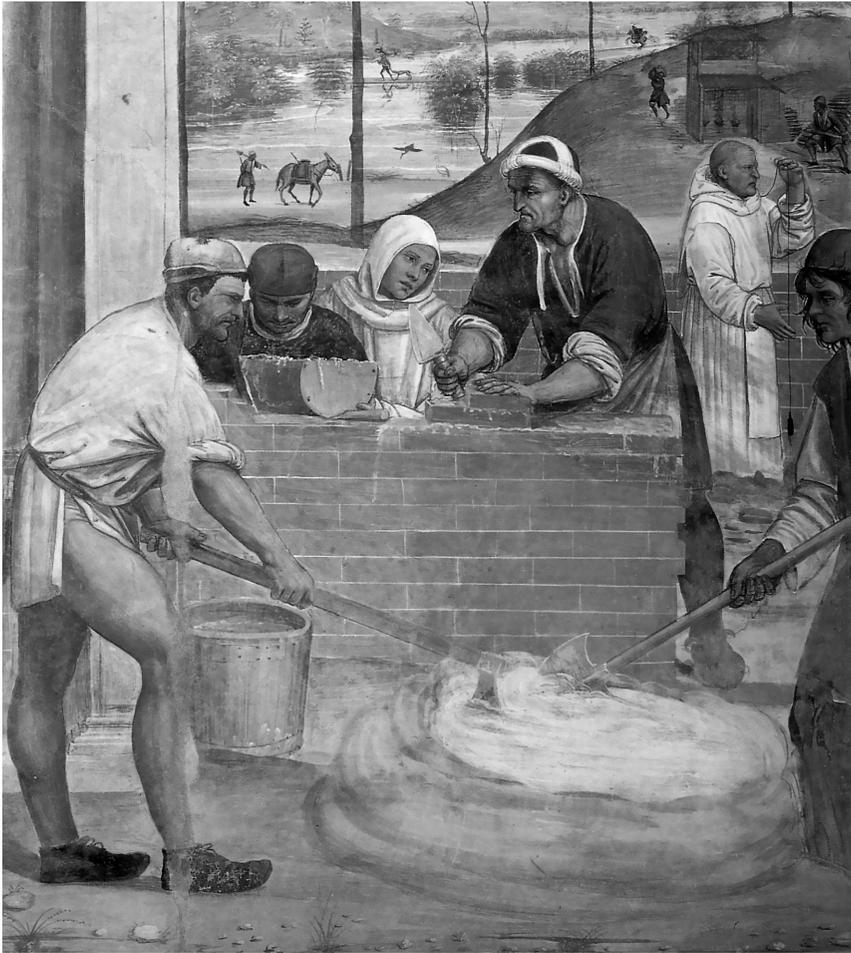
**Figure 0.1** Lorenz curve of the division of wealth in Florence according to the *catasto* of 1427. After D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles*, 250–1.

2) *Relative poverty*. As Renaissance Florence was an affluent society in its day, the criterion of relative poverty is relevant. If we use the standard as defined for modern Britain (60 per cent of median income), we can estimate that about 70 per cent of people in Florence and its territories lived in relative poverty (Figure 0.1).<sup>20</sup> This group would have included a large base of skilled workers whose income was up to twice that of unskilled workers, but who nonetheless lived on short-term job contracts and were therefore significantly exposed to fluctuations in the economy.<sup>21</sup> They were the foremen on construction sites (Figure 0.3) and the main workforce of the textile industry – people such as the late fourteenth-century wool carders Chimento Noldini, Giusto di Luca Petrini, Luca di Filippo and Bardo di Piero, the wool beater Salvatore di Francesco, and the burler Giovanni di Baldo with his wife Monna Jacopa, all of whom appear in contemporary legal documents published by Gene Brucker.<sup>22</sup> They are not normally associated with art patronage, and yet we will encounter representatives of their ranks throughout this volume: the Aretine greengrocer who bequeathed money for paintings for the altar of his confraternity, referred to by Samuel Cohn; the members of a minor confraternity who commissioned a painting by Carpaccio in Venice, discussed by Thomas Schweigert; and the Danish journeyman brewer Pouell Pedersen, whose modest wardrobe inventory



**Figure 0.2** North-Italian, *Beggar*, from the set of playing cards known as *Tarocchi*, engraving, late fifteenth century. Photo out of copyright (The Warburg Institute, Photographic Collection).

is analysed by Anne-Kristine Sindvald-Larsen. They may have formed part of the intended market for certain manufacturing industries, such as the London decorated pottery presented by Jacquie Pearce. They may have owned, and played, some of the popular musical instruments that are the subject of the chapter by Roger Blench. And they would have grasped the pun displayed on



**Figure 0.3** Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, known as Il Sodoma, Builders on the construction site of a new monastery: unskilled workers mixing mortar (foreground) and a master laying bricks (background), fresco, early sixteenth century, Abbey of Monteoliveto Maggiore, Great Cloister. Photo out of copyright (The Warburg Institute, Photographic Collection).

AQ: Please note that 'late fifteenth century' has been mentioned in the list of illustrations in Prelims. Please suggest the appropriate to make it consistent.

the door of the town holding cell for drunks and other minor social offenders, mentioned by M. A. Katritzky.

- 3) *Social exclusion*. This volume will not deal systematically with forms of social exclusion resulting from discrimination, although repeated examples will be given from the ranks of at least one social group whose lives were impoverished by both law and the conventions of society: women – from the woman donating 70 kilograms of salt to finance the building of her village church in Venetian Crete, discussed by Angeliki Lymberopoulou, to the widow from Southampton owning seven brass candlesticks, referred to by Anne-Clothilde

Dumargne. In terms of social exclusion based on economic status, it is worth noting that in fifteenth-century Florence, 50 per cent of all economic assets were in the hands of just 5 per cent of households (Figure 0.1).<sup>23</sup> It is probably safe to argue that the full benefits that Florentine society had to offer in terms of education, health care, political representation and cultural participation were accessible only to this top 5 per cent, and that conversely, up to 95 per cent of the population was subject to a degree of social exclusion. To this we may also add a form of retrospective social exclusion. Art-historical discourse tends to focus on a range of aesthetic objects generated mainly by the top 5 per cent of richest people. The discipline of art history has developed its own socially excluding vocabulary for works that do not belong to this top 5 per cent league: ‘craftsman-like’; ‘derivative’; ‘minor’; ‘crude’; ‘coarse’; ‘primitive’; ‘regional’; ‘provincial’, to name but a few. Extending the definition of ‘the poor’ to all of those who have been treated poorly by art history would include the upper echelons of artisans, such as the Italian tailors whose own sense of fashion is analysed in the chapter by Paula Hohti (Figure 0.4). This social stratum, to which, in fact, most of the famous Renaissance painters and sculptors would have belonged, was not poor by purely economic standards, yet it deserves to be considered as part of this initial exploration of the art of the poor. They were among the owners of the mass-produced maiolica now hidden away in museum storage, discussed by Clarisse Evrard; the cast-iron firebacks presented by Lucinda Timmermans; the brass candlesticks whose social status is examined by Anne-Clothilde Dumargne, and the catechism prints whose iconographical variants are analysed by Ruth Atherton – none of them objects that would be likely to grace the pages of a regular survey of Renaissance art history.

A final point to make is that wherever we draw the border between ‘poor’ and ‘not-poor’, it was always a permeable boundary. People fell into poverty, such as the Florentine Barone di Cose, who found himself living in the city’s debtor’s prison in 1393; given the size of his debt of 79 florins, he is likely to have been a man of modest substance at some point.<sup>24</sup> Upward mobility, on the other hand, is evident in the case of several renowned Florentine Renaissance artists. Antonio and Piero Benci, for instance, became famous under the name of the profession of their father, a poulterer, or Pollaiuolo.<sup>25</sup> And the son of the tanner Mariano di Vanni has become known to us as Sandro Botticelli.<sup>26</sup> Both the Pollaiuolo brothers and Botticelli ended up working for the pope in Rome, the most prestigious patron of Renaissance Italy. The social background of these masters alone is a reason to take an interest in the question whether the poor had art.

What was art? Whether we can say that the poor of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance had art depends partly on how we define ‘art’ – a concept, needless to say, that is even more protean than that of ‘the poor’. The Renaissance itself has bequeathed to us a framework that still guides the Western understanding of art and art history today, centred on painting, sculpture and architecture, and specifically on the ‘most excellent’ representatives of these three media.<sup>27</sup> Over the past century, the validity of



**Figure 0.4** North-Italian, *Artisan*, from the set of playing cards known as *Tarocchi*, engraving, late fifteenth century. Photo out of copyright (The Warburg Institute, Photographic Collection).

the framework has been questioned. Charles Hutchinson, already cited earlier, wrote in 1916:

At the present time when we use the word Art it is generally understood that we refer to painting, sculpture or architecture. This limited use of the word is unfortunate, since it has in a large measure led unthinking people to look upon Art as something apart from daily life.

The last thirty years have seen surveys of Renaissance art that remain largely within the traditional framework, but also ones that have explored different avenues.<sup>28</sup> There have been vocal critics of the framework, such as Marina Belozerskaya, who has argued for a different paradigm of 'art' for the grand princely courts of the period, revolving around media such as tapestry and goldsmith's work.<sup>29</sup> There has been an impact of material culture studies, as exemplified by the 2006 exhibition *At Home in Renaissance Italy* at the Victoria & Albert Museum, which displayed a broad array of luxury artefacts from households in Renaissance Florence and Venice.<sup>30</sup> And there have been anthropological approaches that have largely left the issue of 'art' aside and have looked instead at objects and images from a functional perspective, especially in the area of devotion.<sup>31</sup>

In the present context, it is worth noting that both the traditional framework and most of the alternatives that have been proposed for it are socially exclusive. Of the three media of the traditional framework, painting was materially the least expensive. Yet, in fifteenth-century Florence, even a small triptych made for a nun by Neri di Bicci (one of the lesser masters of the Quattrocento by modern standards despite his commercial success at the time) cost 4 florins – a challenging expenditure for someone living on the poverty line of 14 florins per year.<sup>32</sup> The bias of the framework towards the 'most excellent' masters pushes the art history it describes even more firmly into the realm of elite patronage. Belozerskaya's court art paradigm expands the range of media, but is by nature the very opposite of an art of the poor. The exhibition *At Home in Renaissance Italy* was more socially inclusive than the traditional framework, for example, by giving ample room to the material culture of women. Nonetheless, it contained only a few pieces of visual evidence (e.g. a painting by Vincenzo Campi that in itself was a work for an upmarket patron) revealing something of the material culture of the economically less privileged.<sup>33</sup> Only the functional anthropological approach has been fully inclusive of low-cost artefacts such as pilgrims' badges, treating them as religious images equivalent to paintings and manuscript illuminations, but it has done so by selecting objects according to a particular historical purpose and ignoring, at least to a degree, the aspect of their aesthetic appreciation.

The aim of the present volume is to argue instead for an art history that is fully inclusive. The volume will focus on the poorer segments of late medieval and Renaissance society as outlined earlier, seeking to sketch the contours of their rather neglected art history, but at the same time, it will attempt to break free of the conceptual 'ghetto' of an art of the poor that stood apart from, or was merely derivative of the 'real' art of the rich. It will examine both the arts of the traditional Renaissance framework and a broader array of material culture. It will attempt to open up a new field within art history – a field that perhaps even more than art history in general has overlaps with other disciplines, such as urban archaeology and historical anthropology. Yet, it will be distinct from those other disciplines in singling out artefacts exclusively for the fact that they were made with a degree of artifice, however modest, and may have been enjoyed because of it, regardless of their other functions. The evidence of aesthetic appreciation is of course particularly pertinent for those areas of material culture furthest removed from the established modern notion of 'art' (even the simplest painting can probably lay claim to the denominator 'art' more easily than the most luxurious pilgrim's badge);

various authors will discuss how even among categories of unostentatious or ostensibly purely functional objects there are signs of an aesthetic role of the artefacts (e.g. Jeater on pilgrims' badges; Sindvald-Larsen on lower-class costume; Pearce on basic pottery; and Dumargne on brass candlesticks).

Why does the art of the poor matter? Or, to put it rhetorically, why study pilgrims' souvenirs when we could be immersing ourselves in the intellectual and aesthetic pleasures offered by Michelangelo? There are at least three compelling answers to this question, which will be introduced here based on three paintings by Pieter Brueghel the Elder – the Renaissance master who is perhaps more than any other associated with the depiction of the poor, but who does not otherwise figure in the pages of this volume.<sup>34</sup>

- 1) The *Netherlandish Proverbs* of 1559, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.<sup>35</sup> Among the numerous characters that populate this panel is a rich man wearing a voided-velvet cloak died in an expensive shade of crimson; he is balancing a globe on his up-turned thumb, personifying the proverb 'the world is spinning on his thumb', that is he has all the advantages (Figure 0.5). Brueghel has given him a position of prominence in the composition, slightly off-centre in the foreground. It gives the sense that the rest of the world, less privileged than he, revolves around him like the globe turning on his thumb. Directly next to the rich man is a poor devil crawling through a globe, or 'stooping to make his way in the world'. Famously, the painting also contains an inn sign that symbolizes the world turned on its head, possibly a subtle comment by Brueghel on the social relations of his time. Be that as it may, the rich man is surrounded by around twenty other foreground figures, which make him a neat representative of the 5 per cent of people who owned 50 per cent of all economic assets in urbanized societies of the time.

Of all the characters in the painting, the rich man was surely one of the few who could have afforded to commission a painting from Pieter Brueghel.<sup>36</sup> Doing



**Figure 0.5** Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (detail: rich man surrounded by poor people), 1559, oil on panel, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie. Image in the public domain.

so would, among other things, have confirmed his exceptional social status, not just in terms of the wealth required to purchase such a luxury item but also in terms of the even greater wealth spent on the education needed to appreciate one of Brueghel's unique and clever pieces.<sup>37</sup> The fact that Brueghel's painting is now in a public museum is part of a process of democratization, in the modern Western world, of art forms that were once the exclusive domain of the rich.<sup>38</sup> It could be argued, however, that this process of democratization has been one-sided and in a sense still propagates the myth of the superiority of the rich man's tastes; it has not yet extended to allowing the tastes of the less privileged from the past to have a place in the museum alongside those of the rich. Completing this part of the democratization would fulfil a social and moral obligation towards the 95 per cent of society who did not belong to the elite, the forgotten people of the past. It would enhance both our understanding of the past and spice up the menu of its aesthetic heritage. We do not have to subscribe to Morris's exultation of the 'humble craftsman' to enjoy much of the art that is the subject of this volume – the iconographic and stylistic richness of murals in village churches on Crete or in the Swiss Alps that may have been the only paintings a villager from these regions ever saw, the inventive late medieval English pottery of which the Museum of London has such a fine collection, the subtle sophistication of sixteenth-century German catechism prints or the wit of a word-and-image pun that even Shakespeare thought good enough to be introduced into a play.

- 2) *The Peasant Dance*, painted around 1569 and now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. In the top right corner of this panel, we see, somewhat inconspicuously, a framed image of the Virgin and Child nailed to a tree as a modest religious tabernacle, to which a posy of flowers has been offered, placed in a clay jug hanging underneath it (Figure 0.6). According to a popular interpretation, the peasants, in their eagerness to join the village *fête*, are ignoring religion as represented by this religious shrine, although other readings have also been put forward.<sup>39</sup> The meaning of the detail aside, it is interesting that Brueghel has rendered the devotional image as a woodcut, with the figures outlined in black contours within a rectangular black border and a devotional text printed underneath; the artist has been meticulous in depicting the schematic hand-colouring of the woodcut in transparent water colours. Evidently, Brueghel, whose knowledge of rural material culture appears to have been extensive, considered such a woodcut an appropriate medium for a tree shrine in a Flemish village.<sup>40</sup>

There can be no doubt that in the sixteenth-century Netherlands, there was a market for woodcuts that were affordable to people with small purses. In early sixteenth-century Antwerp, for example, the confraternity of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-Lof produced black-and-white devotional prints for the sum of 0.1 Brabant denier a piece.<sup>41</sup> Even if sold at a 400 per cent profit margin, these would have fallen well within the purchasing power of both skilled builders, whose average daily wage was 10–14 deniers at the time, and unskilled workers on building sites, who earned around 8 deniers per day.<sup>42</sup> The medium of woodblock printing aimed at the mass-reproduction of images in inexpensive materials,



**Figure 0.6** Pieter Breughel the Elder, *Peasant Dance* (detail including the small tree shrine in the top-right corner of the painting), 1569, oil on panel, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Image in the public domain.

ink and paper, was inherently suitable for production for the poor, even if much more technically elaborate and iconographically sophisticated upmarket woodcuts also existed at the time.<sup>43</sup>

Historians of printing have cautioned us against the oft-made assumption that the single-leaf woodcut in fact started its existence in the fifteenth century as an art form for ‘simple folk’.<sup>44</sup> It is plausible, however, that the earliest religious woodcuts fulfilled a function analogous to that of pilgrim souvenirs, which were equally mass-manufactured and accessible to a broad segment of the population, as discussed by Meriel Jeater in this volume. Prints that may have

been designed deliberately as items for a collectors' market appear only later in the fifteenth century. Printing as a medium may have undergone a process of upward social mobility, possibly again in analogy with pilgrim souvenirs. Similar upward mobility may have occurred in ceramics, again a reproductive industry that developed an appeal to a higher market segment only with the introduction of tin-glazing during the fifteenth century, as shown by Jacqui Pearce in this volume, and perhaps also in glass, a medium that saw repetitively produced basic pieces in the fourteenth century followed by an upmarket production in Venice in the fifteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Such an upward mobility of media contradicts the widely held notion that art forms of the poor were invariably derivative of those of the rich. It would mean that art forms of the poor could have a direct impact on art forms of the rich, which would certainly be a reason for taking the art of the poor seriously.

- 3) *The Peasant Wedding* of 1567, also in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. In the lower left corner of the master's most famous work, we see a basket full of glazed clay mugs; a young man dressed in black has taken one out and is filling it with ale from a larger jug (Figure 0.7). It has been observed that this detail is one of the many in Brueghel's paintings that 'painstakingly describe the material life of everyday things', and that the artist here 'carefully articulates the grooved indentations and variegated colors of the assortment of drinking jugs held in the basket at the bottom left'.<sup>46</sup> The existence of such clay drinking mugs, with a moulded foot, a handle, a belly and a narrower neck, and a green or brown glazing, is confirmed by a range of similar items in the Museum of London. Interestingly, the examples in the Museum of London are local English wares, some of which are dated two to three centuries before Brueghel's painting.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, this was a type of manufacture that existed across a larger stretch of north-west Europe over a long period of time. The example indicates that an art history of the poor does not necessarily conform to the same patterns as the more familiar art history of the rich, which has a well-defined geography, with clear distinctions between particular centres of production and their hinterland, and an established chronology in which artefacts are often datable to a precise decade if not a particular year. The alternative parameters of the art history of the poor are reflected in the present volume, which deliberately covers a longer period, from the thirteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, a wide geographical area that includes most of Europe, and regions that in regular art history would be considered 'provincial' or peripheral, such as Crete or the Swiss Alps.

The more important issue, however, is whether a glazed clay beer mug, however marketable perhaps even if reproduced today, deserves a place in a study on the history of art. Was such a mug simply a functional item of material culture, or would its shape and the colour of its glazing have made it into one of the few possessions of a poor household that might have given their owners a modicum of aesthetic pleasure? Such speculations are raised above the level of the merely theoretical when we learn that a young man visiting a Basel fair around the middle of the sixteenth century experienced carved wooden biscuit moulds sold in a market stall as, in his own words, 'works of art', and spent time



**Figure 0.7** Pieter Breughel the Elder, *Peasant Wedding* (detail: man pouring ale into mugs), 1567, oil on panel, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Image in the public domain.

lingering at the stall in order to admire them.<sup>48</sup> Debating whether such objects as beer mugs and biscuit moulds should be incorporated in the discourse of the history of art forces us to rethink, on a fundamental level, where within general material culture we want to draw the boundary of a category of artefacts that were made to have a form of aesthetic appeal and to which we are willing to apply the label 'art'. Considering such objects as 'art' has the potential to bring our discussion of Western art closer in line with how we view many non-Western

artistic traditions. Few would object, after all, to seeing a clay vessel of modest shape and colour included in, say, an exhibition on the indigenous art of the Americas. The fact that it sparks such philosophical enquiries into the very nature of 'art' and the remit of art history is another eminent reason to study the art of the poor.

The chapters in this volume, based on a selection of the papers delivered at the aforementioned 2018 Warburg Institute conference, do not follow a single consistent academic approach. They instead present a range of methods, including archival statistics (Cohn; Dumargne); source text interpretation (Lymberopoulou); surveys of evidence (Sindvald-Larsen; Blench; Evrard); cultural-historical analysis (Gilmore-Kuziow; Hohti; Katritzky); pure art history (Nichols; Schweigert); iconographical interpretation (Atherton); object-based history (Jeater; Pearce; Timmermans); theory (Anderson); and combinations of the above. It is a deliberate choice not to force the first exploration of the field of the art history of the poor into a single methodological straightjacket but to examine instead what contributions different techniques of research and interpretation can make. Similarly, the contributors are from different backgrounds, including history (Cohn; Atherton), anthropology (Blench), archaeology (Jeater; Pearce), material culture studies (Dumargne; Evrard; Timmermans), costume history (Hohti; Sindvald-Larsen), art history (Anderson; Gilmore-Kuziow; Lymberopoulou; Nichols; Schweigert) and history of literature (Katritzky). Most contributors are university based, but three are museum curators (Jeater; Pearce; Timmermans), which is especially important as a lot of knowledge essential to the new field is object-based and held at museum collections of urban archaeology and material culture.

The chapters are arranged according to several broad thematic divisions. The first two deal with evidence for the world of the poor and their art: documentary (Cohn) and visual (Nichols). Then follow three contributions on painting – one on panel painting (Schweigert) and two on murals (Lymberopoulou; Anderson); the latter two also cover the theme of 'regional' art, crucial in the context of the art of the poor as the classic dichotomy of centre and periphery is often one between concentrations of wealth at courts and cities and the relative poverty of provinces. Two transitional chapters deal with objects of devotion: painting (Gilmore-Kuziow) and pilgrim souvenirs (Jeater). They lead to a section on broader material culture, divided according to media: costume (Sindvald-Larsen; Hohti); musical instruments (Blench); ceramics (Pearce; Evrard); and metal work (Dumargne; Timmermans). The volume concludes with two chapters that revolve around iconography in print culture (Evrard) and mixed media (Katritzky). There is no arrangement based on geography or chronology, except that thematic sections follow a chronological order where appropriate, and the final essay is also the one dealing with comparatively the most recent material, dating from the early seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries.

The first chapter, by Sam Cohn, discusses documentary evidence for the art of the poor, highlighting the importance of such evidence for the study of art forms the physical remnants of which have largely disappeared. Based on wills, Cohn shows that in late medieval Tuscany, non-elites not merely purchased ready-made paintings and art-objects, but actively commissioned artwork, including entire funerary chapels

in parish churches. Cohn demonstrates that this market of non-elite commissions peaked in the decades immediately following the Black Death, when the decimation of the population brought about a redistribution of wealth as labour became a scarcer and therefore more expensive commodity. The trend buckled, however, after 1375; Cohn argues that this was the result of a deliberate effort by elites to maintain social distinctions.

Tom Nichols deals with visual evidence regarding the Renaissance poor and their world, which largely consists of representations of the poor made for the elite. Nichols argues that poor people depicted in the works of one of the well-known painters of rustic life of the later sixteenth century, Jacopo Bassano, were indeed viewed through the eyes of the upper classes. They were presented either as the victims of temporary hardship that were deserving of charity or as staffage that added a touch of charm to rural landscapes. Bassano masked the harsh reality of times of destitution, showing the poor in small numbers as the focus of the charitable efforts of the rich. Similarly, he depicted the poverty of peasants as a colourful feature of the countryside, where the real focus was on the herds of animals that demonstrated the wealth of landowners.

Thomas Schweigert turns our attention to a painting that was commissioned by the lower-class people from a minor confraternity in Venice. Schweigert points out that among the nine paintings by Carpaccio that decorate the ground-floor room of the present building of the Scuola degli Schiavoni in Venice, one stands out as an anomaly in terms of its artistic execution: *Saint Tryphon Tames the Basilisk*, which art historians have treated as a the poor relative of the cycle. In fact, Schweigert argues, the nine works were part of two different commissions – one of eight works by the rich Knights Hospitaller, and one single work by the poor confraternity of the Schiavoni, representatives of the Venetian dominion of Albania Minor on the Dalmatian coast, who ordered the painting of Saint Tryphon, their patron saint.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou continues along the lines of painting and collective commissions, and also introduces the theme of regional and, in this case, insular art as associated with relative poverty. Lymberopoulou discusses cycles of wall painting found in numerous small village churches on Crete dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Crete was a Venetian dominion. Inscriptions indicate that many of the churches and their decorations were communal commissions by groups of villagers, or occasionally even the entire village. These inscriptions, as Lymberopoulou shows, functioned as ledgers, with names recorded in the order of pledged contributions, and sometimes names added in a different hand after the closure of the initial ledger. Contributions were made in money, but also in kind, including olive trees and plots of land that may have financed the upkeep of the church.

Joanne Anderson elaborates further on the regional theme. Using the example of the Alpine bishopric of Chur during the fourteenth century, Anderson questions the assumption that small villages represent poverty next to the wealth of a cathedral city. Using the concept of 'relationality', she argues that poverty should be measured not merely on a relative scale, but in terms of the world that contemporary people would have related to. Anderson compares the cathedral of Chur, a regional centre of some 1,300 inhabitants, to the small churches of Dusch and Stuls/Stugl, villages of diminishing size at increasing distances from Chur. While the latter were not

remotely on the same scale as the cathedral, within the local world of the villagers, they stood for wealth rather than poverty, and their paintings should be assessed on those terms rather than dismissed as 'regional' or 'rural' art in a framework determined by twentieth-century connoisseurship.

Shannon Gilmore-Kuziow discusses a public painting that was appropriated by the poor as an object of devotion. The cult of Santa Maria delle Carceri in Prato centred on a fresco of the Virgin and Child Enthroned on the outside wall of a former debtor's prison: the fresco was recorded to have started performing miracles from July 1484; the cult was sanctioned by a papal bull from September of that year; and the painting was enshrined within a dedicated church in 1485. Gilmore-Kuziow points to a number of factors that contributed to the cult becoming particularly attractive to the poor from the city and the surrounding countryside, including the fact that Prato's principal relic, the sacred girdle of the Virgin, had become an exclusive cult object for the elite, controlled, like the city itself, by the Medici family from Florence.

Meriel Jeater, in the first of the three contributions by museum curators, shifts the focus to the broader material culture of devotion. She presents an overview of forms and functions of pilgrims' badges based on the extensive collection of the Museum of London. The base metal souvenirs sold at religious shrines were a form of devotional imagery accessible to a wide segment of the population. They were made of cheap metal alloys (mostly lead and tin in varying proportions) and mass-produced in reusable moulds that allowed for the simultaneous manufacture of multiple identical badges. They were sold in tens or even hundreds of thousands of copies per year at popular cult sites, at prices of a penny apiece, affordable even to ordinary workers. Many have been found in medieval landfill shoring up the old wooden quays of the River Thames, suggesting they were not treated as valuable items. Yet, they display a variation of in form and quality, which indicates that their aesthetic aspect mattered to prospective buyers.

Anne-Kristine Sindvald-Larsen takes us into the territory of secular material culture, specifically costume. She assesses the evidence that is available for the rarely studied dress of the lower ranks of artisans, for example, bakers, barbers, blacksmiths and butchers, in trading towns in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Denmark, with particular attention to Helsingør (Elsinore). She presents examples of relevant inventories, representations of dress, archaeological finds of actual clothing, sumptuary legislation, court cases documented in so-called 'town books', accounts by foreign travellers visiting Denmark, and personal documents, such as the rare diary that describes the lives of two generations from a butcher family from Helsingør. Each type of evidence has its advantages and limitations; in combination, however, the different sources present a rich and rounded picture of the style and cultural significance of costume among ordinary manufacturers and traders in early modern Danish towns.

Paula Hohti follows the thread of artisanal costume, taking Giovanni Moroni's famous portrait of a tailor in the National Gallery in London as her point of departure. She argues against assumptions that artisans wore only functional clothing and were curbed in their sartorial self-expression by sumptuary laws, presenting evidence to show that the fine and fashionable clothes worn by Moroni's tailor (sometimes used to question whether the painting is a genuine portrait of an actual tailor) were in fact

representative of the upper tier of artisans in sixteenth-century Italy. Hohti points out that master tailors in particular gained in social status at this time, emphasizing the intellectual element of design in their creations, and engaging in mercantile activities, trading second-hand clothes and in clothing accessories.

Roger Blench discusses the material culture of entertainment, presenting a survey of the evidence regarding popular musical instruments and musical performance in late medieval Europe. As with most aspects of culture, the surviving sources and the research based on them are biased towards elites. There is, however, scattered evidence from various corners of Europe that allows us to reconstruct some of the popular instrumentarium and performance practices that existed across the continent in the period between 1000 and 1500 AD, including stone and wood carvings on the column capitals of religious and secular buildings and the bosses of church vaults, paintings such as those by Albertus Pictor in south Sweden and Bernard Notke in Tallin, archaeological finds and surviving instruments, surviving folklore traditions and texts ranging from the eleventh-century Catalan *Biblia de Rodes* to Praetorius's *De Organographia* of 1618.

Jacqui Pearce, in the second contribution by a museum curator, takes us from entertainment to entertaining, discussing glazed ceramic table wares from London potteries in the late Middle Ages, based on the collections of the Museum of London. Pearce distinguishes between functional pottery, for example, cooking pots, and wares that were meant to be presented on the table during meals; both, however, were produced by the same manufacturers (based at Woolwich, Kingston and Mill Green for the London area). Pearce argues that these decorative ceramics were a widely accessible alternative to the exclusive silver and pewter tablewares of the elites. Using jugs with animal patterns and in the shapes of animals and people as examples, Pearce shows how the introduction of technical innovations (glazing and the potter's wheel) in pottery manufacture during the twelfth century was the impetus for a surge of inventiveness in design during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, brought to an end abruptly by the Black Death.

Clarisse Evrard continues on the theme of ceramics as an alternative to silverware, examining sixteenth-century Italian maiolica – not the well-known high-end production by artists such as Nicolò da Urbino or Xanto Avelli, but simpler, mass-produced items that tend to fall outside of the scope of regular maiolica studies and are often kept in storage by museums. Evrard asks if such items could be classified as the lower-class equivalent of the precious-metal tablewares of the elites. The scant visual evidence regarding the use of maiolica is inconclusive, but inventories demonstrate that even the maiolica found in the households of the rich was often relatively inexpensive, and that small numbers of jugs and basins specifically described as 'di maiolica' could be found in poor houses. Using Virginia Nixon's definition of 'popular art', Evrard demonstrates that a range of surviving examples of maiolica adheres to the characteristics of this category, for example, in the repeated reproduction of a simple design.

Anne-Clothilde Dumargne shifts the discussion to metal ware, surveying the evidence for the presence of copper-alloy candlesticks in regional England from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Dumargne makes a distinction between

spicket candlesticks, which have the candle mounted on a spike, and socket candlesticks, which have the candle inserted in a socket. The former were more suitable for exclusive beeswax candles, mainly used in a liturgical context, the latter for softer but less expensive tallow candles, the introduction of which enabled the widespread use of candles in the domestic sphere from the fourteenth century onwards. Yet, not all households contained candlesticks, and they were not systematically included in lists of essential household goods. Their presence does not seem reflective of the relative wealth of households. Their value was mainly determined by their weight in metal, suggesting that they sometimes functioned as a modest store of capital.

Lucinda Timmermans, in the third and last contribution by a museum curator, stays with metal wares, presenting a brief overview of cast-iron firebacks in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Such firebacks were mounted in fireplaces to protect the wall from the heat of the flames and project the warmth forward into the room. They were popular in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, although Timmermans also refers to examples from Germany and France. Their production was international, too; even though there is a tendency to speak of ‘Dutch’ firebacks, they were actually manufactured in iron foundries in Germany and perhaps Sweden. Their production was related to that of iron stove panels. Yet, whereas a cast-iron stove was a relatively exclusive item, the use of firebacks appears to have been widespread, ranging from farms to governmental and charitable institutions. And while stove panels were decorated with religious scenes, firebacks had their own iconographical tradition, often related to contemporary political events.

Ruth Atherton takes us to the medium of print, discussing woodcuts in post-Reformation catechisms – books of religious instruction for the laity, which were produced in various degrees of sophistication for audiences of differing levels of education and literacy. Atherton points to recent research showing that woodcut illustrations in sixteenth-century books can contain messages of their own that can supplement, or even deviate from, the text. Authorial control over book illustrations was limited; woodcuts could be added on the instigation of the publisher or printer. The same images could be reused in different contexts and thus given different interpretations. In the post-Reformation era, printmaking artists could work for both Catholic and Protestant publications. Atherton argues, moreover, that iconography could reflect local social concerns in the city of publication. She also presents two case studies demonstrating what she calls the ‘versatility and ambiguity’ of woodcut illustrations in their application on either side of the religious divide.

M. A. Katritzky concludes the volume with a discussion of a popular joke that is referenced in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and was disseminated in prints and reproduced in other media across Western Europe from the late sixteenth century onwards. The joke in question combines image and text: the image showing any number of fools and the caption referring in the first-person plural to that same number of fools plus one, thus adding the spectator as an extra fool (e.g. an image of two fools captioned ‘we three’). Katritzky traces this jest across examples as diverse as a stone relief on a holding cell for petty criminals in a town in Bavaria, a sixteenth-century German biscuit mould, friendship albums, popular poetry and prints. She demonstrates that the tradition was so successful that sometimes even images that

were not part of it were co-opted, for example, a genre painting by Carracci or a French medieval woodcarving.

Altogether, the sixteen chapters present evidence for and examples of art forms that were accessible to a range of non-elite audiences, from unskilled workers to artisans. They draw the outlines of a potential new field in art history and indicate directions of research within it. Most importantly, they demonstrate that this new field is a lively and productive area of academic investigation, and thus advocate the further study of art of the poor. They show how much the study of the art of the poor would enrich the traditionally elitist discipline of art history and make it clear that despite entrenched prejudices about what constitutes 'high art', the art of the poor should never be thought of as poor art.

