Patience Grows: The First Roots of Joris Hoefnagel’s Emblematic Art

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The story goes that Joris Hoefnagel, while still a child, was thwarted in his pursuit of art. Born to a family of merchants in the metropolis of sixteenth-century Antwerp and reared to take up the familial trade, he is said to have vented his stifled yearning to draw by scribbling in dust on the floor and doodling in chalk on attic walls. It was a distinguished household guest who saw those doodles and finally convinced Hoefnagel’s parents to let the boy pursue the art to which nature disposed him, albeit alongside his other studies.

Although Hoefnagel’s biographer Karel van Mander loved to fabricate mythical 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 only began to pursue a full-fledged artistic career well past his youth. After his family lost their wealth to plundering soldiers during the Spanish Fury of 1576—among the more devastating events of the Dutch Revolt—Hoefnagel left Antwerp permanently and found artistic patronage

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abroad first with Archduke Ferdinand II of Tirol in Munich and later with the Emperor Rudolf II in Frankfurt and Vienna. As Van Mander declares in the opening lines of Hoefnagel’s biography, art often proves to be a refuge, ‘especially in times of war and emigration’.4

Hoefnagel is best known today for his stunning manuscript illuminations of plants, animals, and insects such as those found in his volumes of the *Four Elements*, a project begun shortly before his flight from Antwerp [Fig. 6.1].5 The miniatures throughout these volumes, situated in oval frames and accompanied by an erudite array of Latin quotations and biblical verses, clearly derive inspiration from the thriving contemporary genre of the emblem book.6 Through his productive pairing of text and image, and his masterful mimetic skill at representing everything from dragonfly wings to porcupine quills, Hoefnagel explores the relationship between divinely created nature and his own creative powers as a painter. Indeed, Hoefnagel repeatedly inscribed his works with the phrase *natura magistra* (‘nature his teacher’), proclaiming nature as both source and object of his artistic efforts.7

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7 See Hoefnagel’s inscriptions in the *alba amicorum* of Abraham Ortelius (Cambridge, Pembroke College, ms. 2.113 fol. 6v, 1 September 1574) and Emanuel van Meteren (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 68 (21642) fol. 5 verso, 6 December 1575). See also Ortelius A., *Album