Wenzel Jamnitzer, one of the most important goldsmiths ever, was born in Vienna in 1508 and became master in Nuremberg in 1534, where he lived and worked till his death in 1585. His drinking cups, basins, jewel caskets, centre pieces and fountains were made for the Nuremberg nobility, counts and dukes, renowned electors, kings and four emperors. Over a period of fifty years he established an oeuvre whose quality has almost no equal. Today these pieces have found their way into many important collections.¹

Despite his popularity as a goldsmith, it is not well known that Jamnitzer occupied himself deeply in both the theory and practice of perspective, geometry, astronomy and mathematics.² One of his few hitherto known instruments is a silver measuring scale, a “Maßstab”, from Hamburg (Pl. I), which is unsigned. It can be ascribed to him because a nearly identical object is held by Jamnitzer in his portrait by Nicolas Neufchâtel, now in the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Geneva (Pl. II).³ The portrait, which must have been a commission by Jamnitzer himself in about 1562, was sold by his son Hans Jamnitzer fifteen years after his father’s death to the Nuremberg city council. It

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² The large exhibition celebrating Jamnitzer’s 400th anniversary—KLAUS PECHSTEIN ed., Wenzel Jamnitzer und die Nürnberger Goldschmiedekunst 1500–1700, Munich, 1985—dealt only marginally with his instruments.

can be regarded as one of the most important portraits of an artist of the northern Renaissance. The most remarkable feature and clue to the meaning of the painting is that Jamnitzer is not presented as a typical goldsmith. There are numerous portraits of other goldsmiths, which demonstrate the distinctiveness of Jamnitzer’s image in this painting. Besides the typical artisan portraits from the house-books of the “Mendelsche” or “Landauersche Zwölfbrüderstiftung”, which show the craftsmen with their tools and products, there are prestigious paintings in oil presenting established craftsmen and artists. One is the portrait of an unknown goldsmith painted in 1580 by Hans Hoffmann in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, which shows a wealthy and carefully-dressed middle-aged man with one of his works, a precious pendant. Also famous is the portrait of Jamnitzer’s godson Christoph Jamnitzer, from 1597 by Lorenz Strauch. Here the goldsmith is holding a wax-model of one of his works and a chasing-tool in his hands, focusing the viewer on the working process and his equipment. These examples of other goldsmith portraits show the protagonist either with his working equipment, with the finished piece of silver or working on a model.

Instead, Jamnitzer is presented in his portrait as an elder wise man in precious cloth with a long beard sitting behind a table. In his right hand he is holding a variable proportional compass or “Reduktionszirkel”, in his left hand the silver measuring scale already mentioned. Both are scientific instruments and not the tools of a goldsmith. An hourglass, a silver statuette of Neptune and a drawing of this statuette in a reduced scale and coloured golden, are lying on the table together with spectacles and a small book bound in red leather, probably a prayer.

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5 The “Landauersche Zwölfbrüderhaus” was a charitable institution founded in 1501 by Matthäus Landauer, where twelve elderly craftsmen lived in a kind of home for the elderly. Every time a new craftsman entered the foundation, his portrait was painted in the “Hausbuch”, which contains many hundred artisan portraits. Both manuscripts are kept by the Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg. For images of the artisans see Wilhelm Treue ed., Das Hausbuch der Mendelschen Zwölfbrüderstiftung zu Nürnberg, Munich, 1965, and Margarete Wagner, Nürnberger Handwerker. Bilder und Aufzeichnungen aus den Zwölfbrüderhäusern 1388–1807, Wiesbaden, 1978, and www.nuernberger-hausbuecher.de.
