Erasmus by Quentin Metsys of Louvain (at Hampton Court). Copyright reserved to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.
Seventh Annual Birthday Lecture:

Erasmus and Saint Jerome: The Close Bond and its Significance*

by John C. Olin

In the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore there is a painting of Saint Jerome in his study by Antonio da Fabriano that is of particular interest. Save for the halo about the head of Jerome it bears a striking resemblance to the Quentin Metsys portrait of Erasmus that was painted at Antwerp in 1517. The Fabriano painting dates from the mid-fifteenth century, but there is little likelihood that Metsys ever saw it or even knew of it. Fabriano's painting of Jerome in his study, of course, is neither an original nor an unique representation, and there is a long tradition of depicting authors and scholars in such a setting. The similarity between the Metsys and the Fabriano portrayals, however, seems to me especially remarkable. Together the paintings vividly express, I feel, the close and intimate bond that existed between the two great Christian humanists, and they can serve therefore as a starting point—and an iconographic representation, if you will—for the subject we are going to discuss tonight.

You are familiar, I know, with the Metsys portrait. The extremely pensive figure of Erasmus in black cloak and cap in his study, writing at his desk in a large copy book, has often been reproduced. There are actually two copies of the painting—one, long thought to be the original, at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome, the other in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court.

Margaret Mann Phillips has suggested that the Hampton Court portrait may well be the original because of the handwriting in the copy

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