Renaissance Inventions: Van Eyck’s Workshop as a Site of Discovery and Transformation in Jan van der Straet’s *Nova Reperta*

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*Color Olivi*, or *Oil Paint* (fig. 1), forms part of *Nova Reperta* (New Inventions), a magnificent print series cataloguing the great technical discoveries and inventions that were regarded as modern in the late sixteenth century. The series was designed in Florence in two phases during the 1580s and 1590s by the Flemish artist Jan van der Straet, or Stradanus (1523-1605), for the Florentine nobleman Luigi Alamanni (1558-1603). The plates were engraved in Antwerp at the workshop of Philips Galle (1523-1612); the engravings are not dated, but the expanded series of twenty plates, to which *Color Olivi* belongs, was published circa 1600.

Inscribed, ‘Oil colours. The famous master Jan van Eyck discovered oil as a convenience for painters’, *Color Olivi* celebrates, in black and white, oil paint, with its transparency and intensity of colour, as a significant invention on a par with the printing press and gunpowder.

The engraving focuses not, however, on the moment of invention, but rather on Jan van Eyck’s (c. 1395-1441) deployment of his innovation within his workshop. In line with the documentary function of the *Nova Reperta*, *Color Olivi* offers a schematic visual demonstration not only of the preparation and manipulation of oil paint, but also a late sixteenth-century imagining of Jan van Eyck’s fifteenth-century workshop practice.

Since *Nova Reperta* focuses on invention within the context of the workshop, *Color Olivi* belongs partly to the tradition of representations of the trades. Like the rest of the engravings in the series, it also highlights the historical and cultural implications of the discovery. Ernst van der Wetering, in *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, has treated the engraving as indicative of workshop practice during Stradanus’s lifetime. In representing van Eyck’s workshop, Stradanus was able to draw on his own experience as a *Netherlandish* painter. As numerous studies have shown, representations of the artist in the workshop were vital expressions of artistic self-consciousness and pride in Stradanus’s native Netherlands. Till-Holger Borchert and others have demonstrated that images of the artist in the workshop were intended to raise the status of the visual arts in the Netherlands and therefore had the same polemical agenda as theoretical treatises on art published in Italy, such as Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pictura* or Leonardo’s *Trattato della Pittura*. Perry Chapman, in her essay ‘The Imagined Studios of Rembrandt and Vermeer’, identified *Color Olivi* as an initiative by a Netherlandish painter to define...