The term ‘Northern Renaissance’ occupies an ambiguous place in the history of art, so problematic that ‘Late Middle Ages’ (Spätmittelalter) or ‘Late Gothic’ is sometimes substituted, or it is used simply to designate the art produced in northern Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries even though the ‘Renaissance’ component—that is, its relation to the art and literature of the ancient world—occupies a minor place in the author’s account. The difficulty arises in large part because it continues to be common practice to follow Erwin Panofsky and identify a Renaissance work by an ‘intrusion of Italianisms’—direct contact with Italian art and those qualities Panofsky associated with it such as formal properties of measure, idealization and rationality and subjects taken from ancient mythology, history and serious philosophy. Albrecht Dürer was Panofsky’s benchmark, a Renaissance artist because his debt to Italy is clear, while Hieronymus Bosch working close in time to Dürer was considered an eccentric, an anachronism whose art was more medieval than ‘modern.’ Because the art produced in the north before the 1520’s rarely meets Panofsky’s criteria, dissatisfaction with an Italian-driven conception of the Renaissance has gained momentum with one scholar describing the ‘Northern Renaissance’ as a flawed conception, irrelevant and misleading because it ‘only defines a handful of art works produced by only a few artists.’

Recent revisionist efforts have sought to modify the conventional conception of the Renaissance as a revival of Greco-Roman art and literature emanating from Italy by expanding the geographical areas considered and media included. This has increased the scope of the Renaissance to include areas distant from Italy, analyzing the travels and influence of Italian expatriates and the ways in which the imported style was affected by indigenous sources. It has also broadened the conception of a Renaissance work of art beyond the traditional areas of sculpture, painting and architecture to include other media such as tapestries, metal work, music and court pageantry. Yet there is little change in the stylistic features used to identify a Renaissance work of art. Panofsky’s criteria remains dominant and this has left a number of crucial questions unanswered. Foremost among these are the unprecedented paintings and prints produced in the north during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that do not follow Italian classicizing models or have a traditional religious, historical, or mythological subject.

The present study raises similar objections to an Italocentric conception of the Renaissance, but differs in a fundamental way. In recognizing a Renaissance work of art the creative use of ancient literary models takes precedence over stylistic criteria derived from Italian art. Rather than rejecting, or minimizing, the influence of the Graeco-Roman world the ancient inheritance is treated as an essential component in initiating many of the changes that take place in northern art. The confrontation
between past and present is the dynamic in any renaissance, the impetus for change
and source of new ideas. In this study it is proposed that the genre of satire and the
work of its principal exponents, Juvenal, Horace, Lucilius, Varro, Lucian, Persius and
Martial inspired some of the northerners most creative innovations.

The Genre of Satire

Satire is the genre inherited from the ancient world in which wrongdoing is exposed in
an entertaining way. It was ideally suited to serve the reformist interests of Christian
humanists in the north and its influence is already apparent in the Renaissance of the
twelfth century. In his De contemptu mundi (On Despising the World) for example,
Bernard of Morval writes, ‘hic satiram sequor’ (here I follow satire), he refers to his
ancient models, ‘Flaccus Horatius et Cato, Persius et Juvenalis’, and then launches
into a vivid attack on the vice and errors of his own time. In the fifteenth and six-
ten centuries this understanding of the genre as a vehicle for criticism indebted
to a specific group of ancient writers remains fundamentally unchanged. In his De
inventione dialectica written in 1479, Rudolph Agricola says in satire the practice
and the subject-matter is the same as in Horace, Persius and Juvenal, that is they ‘cor-
rect manners and behavior and censure vices (reprehendant vires)’. Erasmus, in his
Dialogus Ciceronianus of 1528, advises that if you wish to write satire follow Horace, if
comedy Terence, distinguishing the two genres on the basis of ancient models with
Horace placed first among the satirists as he was Erasmus’s favorite.

What is new in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is the extraordinary enthusiasm
that the genre evoked. Scholarly humanists analyzed it at length, produced lengthy
commentaries, and defended the educational value of the satirists. They debated its
sources, discussed its two branches - the prosaic claimed by the Romans as their own,
and fantastic or Menippean satire derived from Greece. Typical examples of their
efforts include Polydore Vergil’s discussion of satire and its origins in his influential
De rerum inventoribus first published in 1500, and Jacques Pelletier’s Art poétique
published in 1555. Pelletier defines satire as a ‘biting genre (La Satire est un genre de
poème mordant)’, discusses the etymology of the word, describes it is a genre filled
with people and things, and says the satirist tells the truth under cover of laughter.

With the advent of the printing press the influence of the genre expanded as ancient
satires became available to the mediocriter literati, a growing audience, urban and
literate, who valued the wisdom of the past as a guide in the present. The popularity
of Juvenal ‘both in the school curriculum and as a source of ethical precepts, freely
cited in religious as well as secular works,’ made his satires familiar even to those with
a relatively modest education. In the years around 1500 editions of Juvenal’s Satyrae
were published at Louvain in 1475, at Zwolle around 1495, Nürnberg in 1497, six
editions at Lyons between 1495 and 1517, at Paris in 1505/1506 and 1519, and Cologne
in 1510, with many showing a ‘trend away from scholarly research to works primarily
designed for the younger student.’ There is a similar increase in the number of extant
Horatian manuscripts and the use of Horace in the schools, and by the beginning
of the sixteenth century the satires of Horace and Juvenal were available in afford-
able printed editions, the satiric epigrams of Martial were published, there were
editions of Persius whose satires were prized for their moral philosophy, and the
often ribald satires of Lucian were translated from the Greek into Latin and enthusi-
astically received. Peter Gillis, for example, urged the pupils at the Latin school at
Antwerp to profit from the opportunity offered by the new golden age of classical
studies, praising the ‘Luciani dialogos ab Erasmo’ and recommending the value of the
‘genus sordidis’.

These lively ancient models encouraged the publication of new satires including