

Title of Project: Late Medieval Girdle Purse

Historical Basis: Numerous archaeological finds from the Netherlands, as detailed in *Purses in Pieces* by Olaf Goubitz.ⁱ

Tools & Materials: Tools used include standard leatherworking tools such as drive punches, head knives, awls, rawhide mallet, ball pien hammer, rivet setter, anvil, shears, and large-gauge needles¹. The origins of these tools are lost in antiquity, but are identical in function to those used between 1300 and 1700, when these purses appeared in illustrations², and many of the extant finds of these items are dated to then (Goubitz 12). Any differences in the tools I used are only in fit and finish, not form nor function.

Materials used are cowhide for the main body of the purse, kidskin for the thinner pouchlets and decorative applique, and cow leather cord for the pouchlet closures. The strap consists of cow leather, pewter mounts, a brass buckle, buckle plate and strapend, and copper rivets. Stitching was done with waxed linen thread.

These are the same materials that would have been used in the period these purses were worn (Goubitz 15). However, I have chosen to use leathers that have a modern finish and tanning process used on them. The reason for this is simple: if I had used vegetable tanned leathers and dyed them myself, the purse would have constantly rubbed small amounts of dye off onto the tunic of the wearer. This effect would have been even more pronounced if the pouch ever got wet. As I intend to make a gift of this purse, I have chosen to use modern, factory-tanned leathers instead. I also have no experience making or using colored period dyes yet, so I felt that using factory-tanned modern leathers was no worse than using more period vegetable-tanned leathers with modern leather dyes.

I have no evidence for the use of black onyx on the pouchlet drawstring beads (they were chosen for reasons of aesthetics and commercial availability), however the beads themselves appear in period illustrations³. Onyx can be found in Germany, the UK, and the Czech Republic⁴ and was known to be used as far back as ancient Greece and Rome⁵.ⁱⁱ Therefore I feel that my use of black onyx beads here is entirely plausible and appropriate.

I did make some modern concessions in the construction as well. I used mass-produced replica fittings, mounts, and rivets, and a small amount of modern leather glue to assist with assembly. I also used the bottom of a beer bottle for the hole template in the belt loop; I'm quite sure they didn't have bottles of Negro Modelo in the 14th century. That said, the shape of the hole is entirely historical⁶ (Goubitz 23).

¹ Figure 1

² Figure 2

³ Figure 3

⁴ (Wikipedia)

⁵ "Onyx was known to the Ancient Greeks and Romans. The first-century naturalist Pliny the Elder described both types of onyx and various artificial treatment techniques in his *Naturalis Historia*." (Wikipedia)

⁶ Figure 4

Procedure: I first examined documentation, pictures, and illustrations of several examples of these purses, using both internet searches and referring to Goubitz's *Purses in Pieces*, to give me an idea of their size. It was important to me that this purse be of a useful size for today's reenactor, so it needed to be able to carry a large modern keyring, wallet, electronics, etc. I then developed a pattern on cardboard, using much trial and error, and made some practice pieces from scrap leathers, which I machine-sewed to save time. The patterning of the pouchlets, in particular, was difficult, involving many attempts and refinements; the shape of them is not at all intuitive⁷. Again, the illustrations in *Purses in Pieces* were invaluable. Eventually I settled on a design deep enough to be capable of carrying a modern large smartphone and wallet securely, yet still retaining the correct medieval silhouette⁸ (Goubitz 17).

Once I had a usable pattern, I cut out my pieces and sewed everything up, being careful to do things in the correct order, to avoid pitfalls such as needing to sew something on the inside of a pouch. The pouchlets and applique design were attached first, the applique being saddle stitched, while the pouchlets were first saddle stitched for strength, then had a decorative backstitch added. The top edges were folded over and stitched down, then the inside flap pockets were sewn on while the purse was inside-out, then the entire piece was turned right-side-in. Then, I folded over the sides and sewed them down (this is entirely decorative, using a backstitch), built the straps, and sewed the two halves together using a piece of kidskin lace I cut (making sure to attach the closure strap at this point), using a pierced backstitch. The final step was to cut out the hole in the top belt loop, and do a decorative backstitch around that.

Future Improvements: If I were to make another of these purses, I would experiment with using the more-common slit pockets instead of the flap pockets I used. The medieval slit pockets seemed too small to be usable for modern reenactors on the size of purse I was making. I would try using some chamois leather for the pouchlets; they were sometimes constructed of this flexible leather to allow more "bulge" in the pouchlets (Goubitz 25). I might attempt to line it with a textile, as some extant pieces show (Goubitz 12), although I suspect this is entirely too "fiddly" for me. Finally, I might make an attempt at using a period leather dye on vegetable-tanned leather.

⁷ Figure 5

⁸ Figure 6

Figure 1: Author's own tools



Figure 2: Illustration of a monk using a head knife to cut leather straps, circa 1425.ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 3: Representation of beads, circa 1523.^{iv}

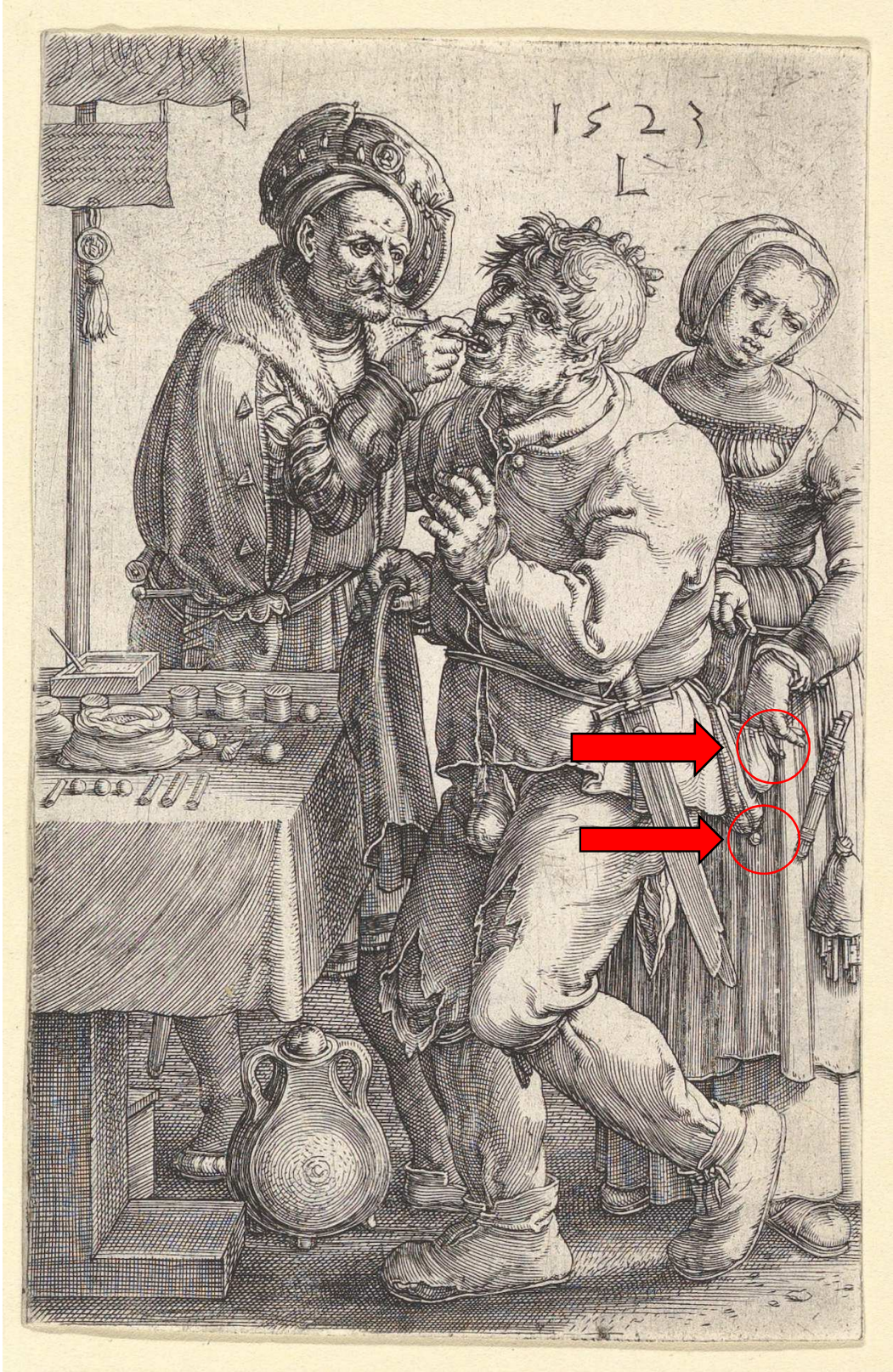


Figure 4: From *Purses in Pieces* (Goubitz 23)

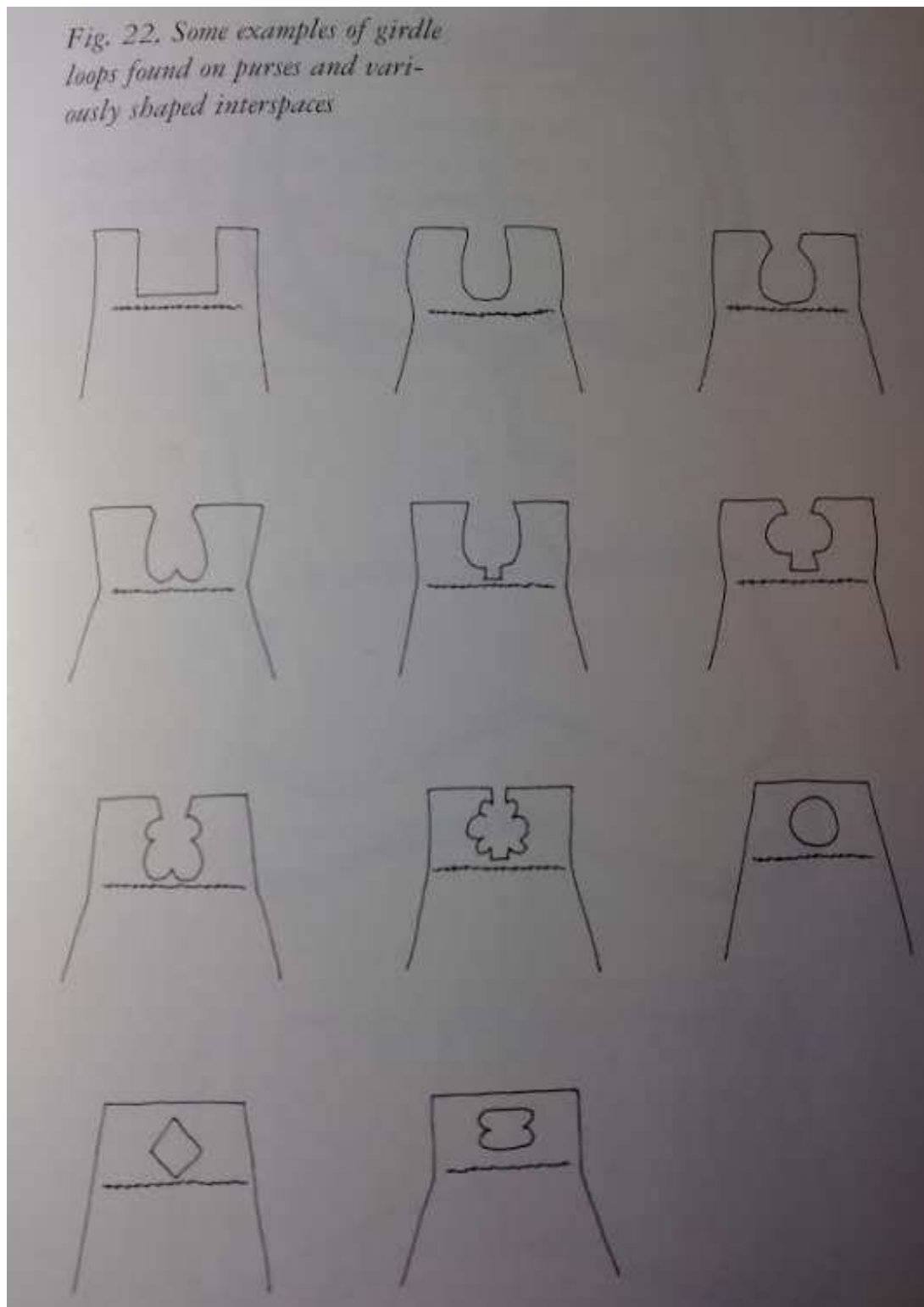


Figure 5: Author's own patterns

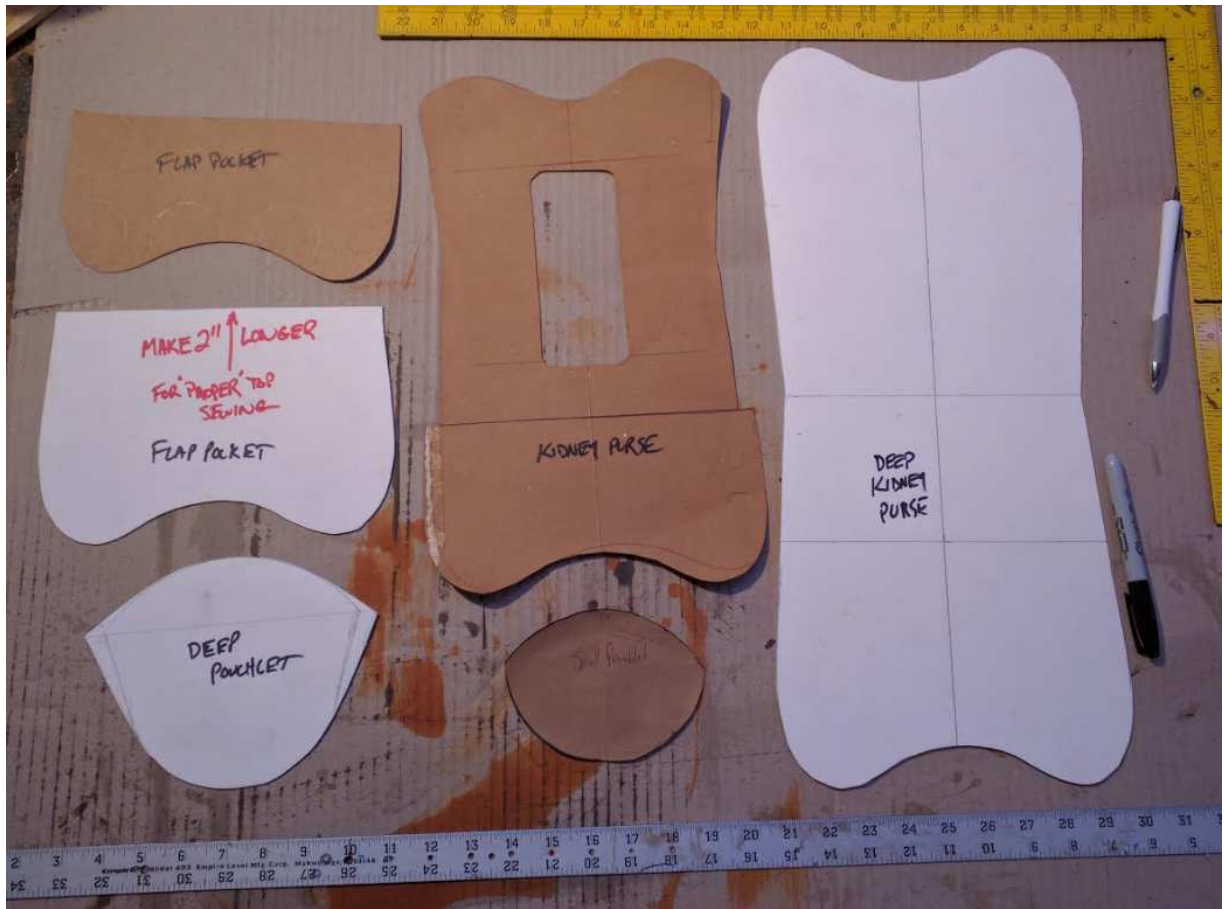
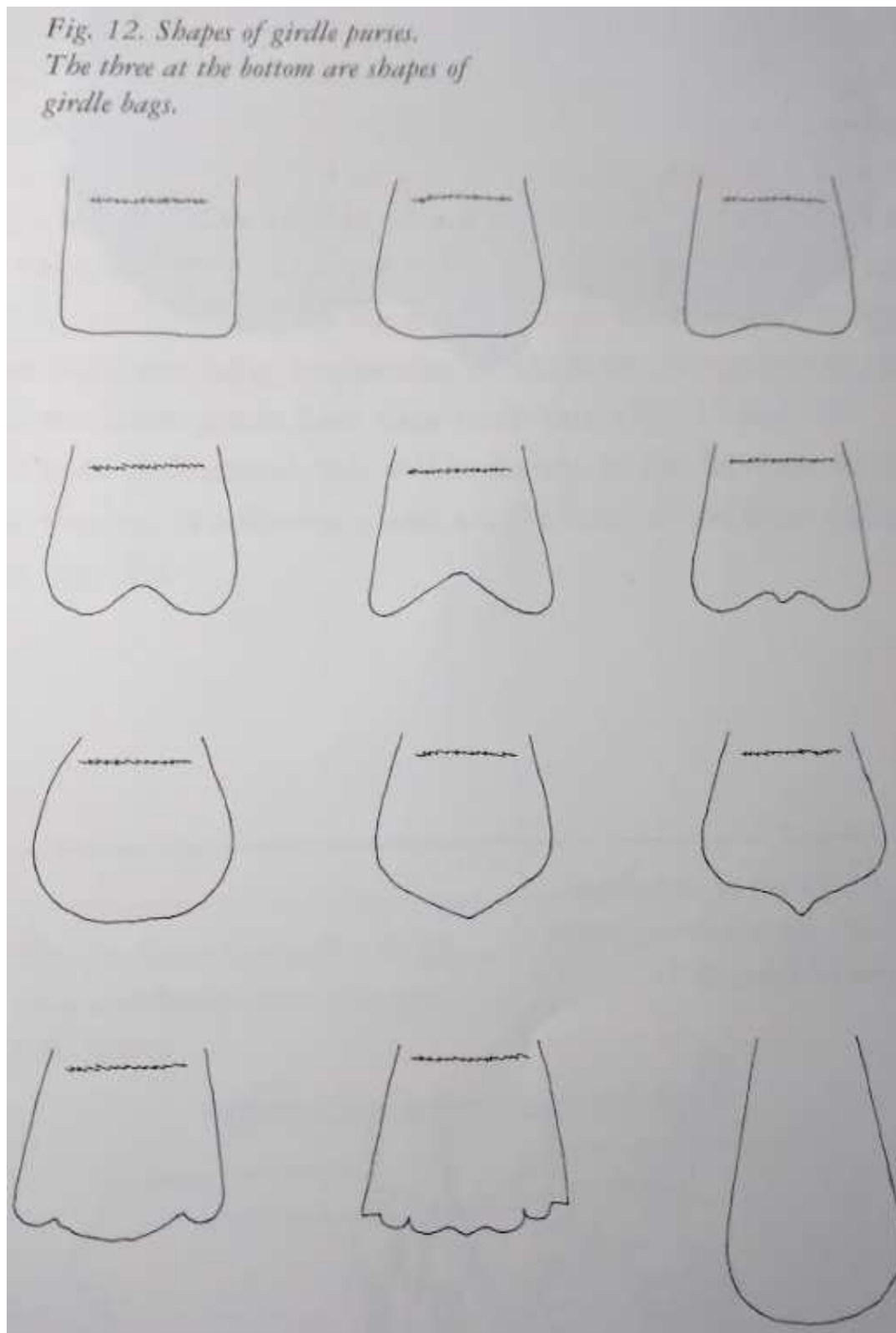


Figure 6: From *Purses in Pieces* (Goubitz 17)



ⁱ Goubitz, Olaf. *Purses in Pieces, Archaeological finds of late medieval and 16th-century leather purses, pouches, bags and cases in the Netherlands*. Trans. Xanda Bardet. Oakville: David Brown Book Co., 2009.

ⁱⁱ "Onyx." Wikipedia. <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onyx>> Retrieved 20 March 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Das Hausbuch der Mendelschen Zwölfbrüderstiftung zu Nürnberg*. Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg. German National Museum. <<http://nuernberger-hausbuecher.de/75-Amb-2-317-14-v>> Retrieved 20 March 2017.

^{iv} Van Leyden, Lucas. *The Dentist* (1523). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/364770>> Retrieved 20 March 2017.