

# Models of composition in fourteenth- and fifteenth century art and music<sup>1</sup>

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Recent studies have shown that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century polyphony was conceived in the mind rather than on paper and written down each voice separately rather than in a vertically aligned score. This seems incomprehensible to a modern musician: how could a composer work out a complicated four-part motet without the aid of a written score?

A comparison with working methods of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century artists shows that these relied extensively on previously assembled modelbooks when conceiving their paintings. The modelbooks contained examples of typical figures frequently used in paintings. Such figures were used repeatedly in any number of compositions. I will argue that, similarly, a polyphony composer acquired a memorial archive of typical contrapuntal figures which he reused over and over again. This allowed him to work out new pieces in the mind. A study of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century music theory shows that the central part of instruction consisted of memorization of countless note-against-note progressions. These progressions are music's equivalent of the artist's model book.

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