

Bodybuilders in Haarlem

Startling Aspects of Cornelis van Haarlem's Art

112

[I L J A V E L D M A N]

Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem was born into a well-to-do Catholic family in 1562. He was four when the Iconoclasm took place and nineteen when Haarlem officially converted to the reformed faith. What was a budding painter full of ambition to do in a period when art was disappearing from the churches and commissions for religious art were dwindling? A generation earlier, painters had become famous for their monumental altarpieces. Cornelis' fellow townsman, Maarten van Heemskerck, who was his great example, had been able to demonstrate visibly to everyone in those altarpieces that - thanks to a year spent in Rome - he had mastered the style of Michelangelo, Raphael and the ancients.

Once commissions for the churches dried up, portraiture became an important part of a painter's repertoire. It was intelligent then of Cornelis' parents that they placed him in the charge of the portraitist Pieter Pietersz. As early as 1583 Cornelis obtained the honourable commission to paint a group portrait of the corporals of the Haarlem Civic Guard's Hall (1583). His example was Dirck Barendsz' *Banquet of the Eighteen Guardsmen of Squad L* in Amsterdam (1566), but Cornelis' composition is a lot livelier. He and his teacher, Pieter Pietersz, can be recognised in the two men at the top left. The motif of the inclined flag would be adopted later by Frans Hals in his portraits of guardsmen. In 1599 Cornelis was commissioned to paint the officers of the civic guard as well (Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem).

Collaboration with Goltzius and van Mander

Although he would still paint portraits now and then, portraiture was not really where the young Cornelis' aspirations really lay. He had become friendly with Hendrick Goltzius, a talented engraver and draughtsman, who had settled in Haarlem in 1577. Along with Karel van Mander, an emigrant from the Southern Netherlands who had moved to Haarlem in 1583, they established a sort of brotherhood, which they called an 'academy' in the Italian fashion, with the intention of drawing 'from life' together. Their most important subject was the nude male body. They probably drew very few live models, as that was rather unusual at the time. Instead they copied casts of ancient sculptures and



modern bronzes of very muscular male nudes like the ones Willem van Tetrode, a sculptor from Delft, used to produce. Drawings and prints also served them as models. After Van Heemskerck's death, Cornelis got hold of his Roman sketchbook, which contained many sketches of ancient sculptures. The three artists were much impressed by the work of Bartholomeus Spranger, too, the court painter of Emperor Rudolf II in Prague, who had worked in Rome for years. Goltzius made prints from some of his mythological drawings.

Cornelis had a predilection for extremely gruesome scenes, probably in an attempt to rouse respectable citizens with his knowledge of classical culture. His painting *The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus* (1588, National Gallery, London) shows a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Cornelis based it, amongst other things, on Van Heemskerck's *Torso Belvedere* in the Vatican, which would reappear in many of his figures with muscular backs. With the bitten-off head in the foreground, the picture could rival the bloodiest scenes from a modern science fiction film. Goltzius made an engraving of the painting and dedicated the print, 'as the first fruit of their partnership', to their common friend Jacob Rauwaert, a print lover and art dealer.

In the background of all the anatomical violence of Cornelis' *War of the Titans* (ca. 1588, Copenhagen) a tangle of falling bodies can be seen. Cornelis developed the motif in his print series *Four Falling Figures* (1588). The figures, brought down

Cornelis van Haarlem,
The corporalship of the Haarlem Civic Guard's Hall, 1583,
oil on panel, 135 x 233 cm,
Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem



Left: Hendrick Goltzius after Cornelis van Haarlem, *Fall of Ixion*, 1588, engraving, Prentenkabinet Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam



Right: Cornelis van Haarlem, *Fall of Ixion*, ca. 1588, oil on canvas, 192 x 152 cm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

by their pride or sinfulness, are Phaeton, Tantalus, Icarus and the less well known Ixion, who was thrown out of heaven because he had tried to seduce the wife of Jupiter. Paintings on that subject existed as well, but only the *Fall of Ixion* has been preserved (Museum Boijmans, Rotterdam). Cornelius did not reserve his muscular nudes only for mythological representations. A print like *Cain slaying Abel* shows that the Bible, too, offered opportunity enough for what seemed almost to be Cornelius' obsession: the depiction of human figures in hopeless situations, from which, despite their physical strength, they cannot escape.

Working for the Stadholder and the Prince's Court in Haarlem (1590-1593)

Goltzius himself left for Italy towards the end of 1590 to study ancient art. In the meantime Cornelis had made such an impression with his new style that the commissions were pouring in. His *Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem* (1590) is a monumental composition in which unbelievably muscular naked male bodies carry out their murderous work in complicated positions amidst women fighting back, pale lifeless babies and babies that are only just alive. Because the subject demanded so much action and drama it was popular in the print art from the school of Raphael. Cornelis endeavoured to surpass all his predecessors by producing a painting with strong colours in gigantic format. Such cruelty, inflicted on defenceless women and children, was an unusual theme and will have been perceived as a form of realism by the Dutch public. Nonetheless, we can point to an example from antiquity of faces drawn by anguish: the agonised faces of Laocoön and his sons, the famous statue from the Vatican in Rome. There is a provocative motif here of which Cornelius' was particularly fond: a naked man in the foreground, kneeling, with his behind towards the viewer. It is thanks only to the refined use of shadow that we



do not look straight at the man's pendulous sexual organs. Where bodybuilders are shown from the front their private parts are covered by a flimsy scarf. As it is mentioned in the inventory of the Oranges in the 18th century the painting was probably made for Naaldwijk Palace, which the States General put at the disposal of Stadholder Maurits.

Cornelis van Haarlem, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1591, oil on canvas, 268 x 257 cm, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. Photo by Tom Haartsen

Cornelis must have enjoyed success with this work, because shortly afterwards the burgomasters of Haarlem gave him an honourable commission to produce paintings for the walls of the Prince's Court, the residence where Stadholder Maurits stayed when he was in Haarlem. Cornelis had to make a new centrepiece to go with the two side panels of Van Heemskerck's *Drapers' Altarpiece* (1546) - which had been transferred from Saint Bavo's to the Prince's Court - as the middle had been lost during the Iconoclasm. Once again Cornelis opted for a *Massacre of the Innocents* (1591, Frans Hals Museum). The second version shows the same gruesome details and anatomical tours de force. The question is why anyone would come up with the idea of presenting a picture like this to Stadholder Maurits and his court. Probably we should see the Biblical massacre of innocents as an allegory for massacred innocence and King Herod, who ordered it, as the prototype of a tyrant. The tyranny of Philip II was still fresh in people's memories. Haarlem had had to withstand a long siege and plundering by the Spaniards and it was the task of Stadholder Maurits to continue to safeguard the Republic from despotism. So the paintings could be seen as a (very present) visual exhortation.

A second painting - even larger than the *Massacre of the Innocents* - was destined for Maurits' bedroom. It depicts the *Marriage of Peleus and Thetis* (1592/93). In the foreground naked gods and goddesses feast on fruit and drink. Ceres and Bacchus, entwined in the middle ground, catch the attention immediately, the symbol of delicious food and drink. The extremely muscular figure seen from the back in the left foreground is Vulcan. On the left Pan embraces a pale nymph. In the bottom right-hand corner a muse, lying in a rather daring pose, is served wine by Ganymedes. The muse to the left of her adds to the merriment by playing on her lute. Inconspicuous in the far background - a typical Mannerist trick - the bridal couple, the real subject, sit at table feasting.

Cornelis van Haarlem, *Nun and Monk*, 1591, oil on canvas, 116 x 103 cm, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. Photo by Tom Haartsen



This subject was not only chosen for its eroticism. For those who knew their classics this marriage was the start of much misery. Eris, the goddess of discord, who is flying away in the top left of the picture, had thrown a golden apple into the assembled company with the inscription 'for the most beautiful'. Paris, Prince of Troy and the only jury member in the beauty contest that followed (depicted in the right background), chose neither Juno, who promised him wealth, nor Minerva, who would give him wisdom. He chose Venus - or sensual love. In return she gave him the most beautiful woman on earth. Unfortunately, however, the beautiful Helen was already married. Her husband started the Trojan War, with dramatic consequences for all concerned. The lesson an erudite person might draw from this was mainly the importance of making the right choices.

A third painting, which Cornelis created for the Prince's Court and that hung above one of the doors, was a life-size *The Fall of Man* (1592, Frans Hals Museum). Adam and Eve are portrayed in graceful postures: ideal male and female beauties according to the ancient canon. Cornelius borrowed the composition from the famous engraver Albrecht Dürer. Apart from the pleasure that the nudes will have given, the violation of the commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge can be interpreted as a warning here as well.

The burgomasters of Haarlem also bought Cornelis' *Nun and Monk* (1591) for the Prince's Court. This satire of a monk, who,

under the influence of drink, pinches a young nun's naked breast, is highly appropriate for the stadholder's surroundings too. After all, Maurits was the figure-head of the Protestant faith, which had exposed the wrongdoings of the Catholic Church. It is typical that an attempt was made by a Haarlem city archivist in the 19th century to interpret the scene as a 'wonder', whereby wine instead of milk spurted from the nun's breast. That would prove that she was not pregnant as wicked tongues had claimed.

A real eye-catcher in a more homely environment will have been Cornelis' *Bathsheba* (1594). There is not a trace of King David. It is the viewer himself who acts as a voyeur, with a good view of the super white, naked Bathsheba sitting at the edge of a pool of water. Her feet are being carefully washed by a pitch black, naked servant helped by a white colleague. A bright yellow garment cast off by her lies provocatively in the foreground.

Cornelis' later period

It is not always an advantage, as a painter, to become so old. Cornelis had to make sure he kept up with all the developments in the art world, which was evolving incredibly fast at the beginning of the 17th century, especially in Haarlem. His later work is sometimes treated with a degree of pity. It looks as if he used up



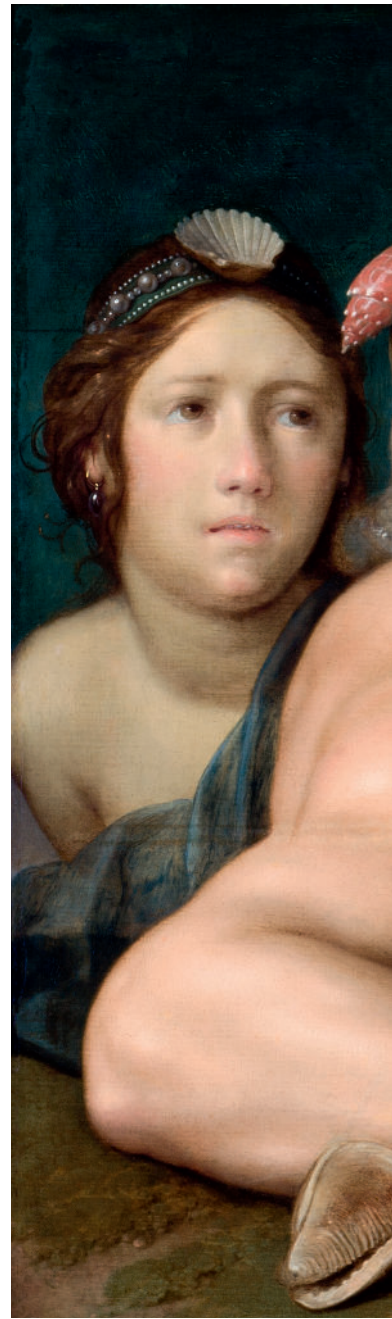
Cornelis van Haarlem, *Marriage of Peleus and Thetis*, 1592/93, oil on canvas, 246 x 419 cm, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. Photo by Tom Haartsen

all his energy with the visual violence of his early years. But he himself must have recognised that the success he had enjoyed earlier was over. Apart from (group) portraits there was hardly any work for large-format artists. The Court of Orange-Nassau was not interested in giving commissions during that period. And which ordinary citizen would want that sort of dramatic scene on the wall? With the growth of a middle class that was eager to buy, it was small, less expensive decorative paintings – known as cabinet paintings – that became fashionable. Cornelis bravely tried to adapt to the new fashions and to a certain extent he was successful. He produced a number of small paintings showing Bible stories that made attractive wall decorations for both Catholics and Protestants. Even his *Juda and Tamar* (1596), a rather spicy Bible story after all, was very decent. The style is reminiscent of van Mander, but Cornelis is better as far as composition and use of colour are concerned. Cornelis also tried the modern genre of half-figures, with a preference for mythological or allegorical characters. Especially witty and original are the rather melancholy looking *Neptune and Amphitrite* amidst rare shells (1616/17). The panel is considered to be a *portrait historié*, showing the Haarlem textile dealer Jan Govertsz van der Aar as Neptune.

At the end of his life Cornelis tried painting scenes from everyday life, a genre that was very popular in Haarlem at the time. But the heads of his smoking, drinking peasants are still reminiscent of his idealised gods from earlier years. Sometimes Cornelis did not know when to stop. One or two years before his death – he died in 1638 – he repeated the sexually explicit pose of the Muse in his *Marriage of Peleus and Thetis* in a panel with (naked!) children playing marbles (1636/7, private collection). But this time he used the pose for a completely naked, barely pubescent girl. Would that not have caused offence then? Gods and goddesses are forgiven a great deal, but in ordinary people – and certainly children – something like that quickly looks dubious.

Cornelis' reputation in later years

That Cornelis was one of the top Dutch painters during the years 1583-1599 is clear from the prestigious commissions he obtained. In social terms he was successful too. He had many pupils and belonged to various associations. In 1603 he married a wealthy widow, a burgomaster's daughter who died a few years later. The painter did not marry a second time, but he did have a relationship with his housekeeper, with whom he fathered a daughter who was to become the mother of the artist Cornelis Bega. Contemporaries considered Cornelis 'exceptionally diligent' and praised his use of colour in particular. But Constantijn





Cornelis van Haarlem, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, 1616/17,
oil on panel, 72 x 94,5 cm, P. and N. de Boer Fondation



Cornelis van Haarlem, *Bathsheba*, 1594,
oil on canvas, 77.5 x 64 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Huygens comments venomously in his biography that the painter can thank fortune that he was not born thirty years later, because his work at the end of his life was 'past it'.

It cannot be denied that it was with the exaggerated musculature of his early period that Cornelis won his spurs. Other painters, too, such as Utrecht-born Abraham Bloemaert and Joachim Wittewael, painted comparably dramatic scenes with nudes for a few years while they were under his influence, but were quick to revert again afterwards. It was exactly this extraordinarily Mannerist style that would later evoke distaste. The tragedy of all the Dutch artists who tried to introduce the modern style of the famous Michelangelo and the ancients into the North is that it really did not seem to fit into the canon of Dutch art as people had clung to it for centuries: typical Dutch landscapes, still-lives and genre scenes apparently taken from very ordinary, everyday life. Inventive and experimental painters like Van Heemskerck and Cornelis van Haarlem were the victims of that. They were shunned for a long time as 'too international', which is exactly what these painters had tried so hard to become.

Interest in the sixteenth century Dutch Mannerists was only revived in the 1960s. In 1999 the recently deceased Pieter van Thiel published his comprehensive monograph on Cornelis van Haarlem. But the first retrospective of the painter was staged only in 2012, in the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, of course. A retrospective like this is important, because much of Cornelis' work is privately owned and had therefore never been seen before. Paintings from every period of the artist's life and all the corners of the world were brought together. To complete the retrospective it would have been interesting and useful if a selection of the graphics designed by Cornelis had been on view as well, or a small bronze nude by Van Tetrode, for example. The real bodybuilder demonstrating his art in the educational film in the room before the *Massacre of the Innocents* was a nice idea, but visitors could have thought that up for themselves too. ■