

## A Versatile Precursor

### Painter Jan Gossart

While certainly not a household name for the broader public, the Netherlandish artist Jan Gossart (c. 1478-1532) has long been recognized by art historians as a painter of the first rank with a great influence on the development of painting in the Low Countries in the first decades of the sixteenth century. While always represented in surveys of Netherlandish art - such as the canonic *Art before Iconoclasm* exhibition in Amsterdam (1986) - and studied in detail in contributions to scholarly magazines, Jan Gossart has rather surprisingly not been the subject of a monographic

exhibition since 1965 (Bruges & Rotterdam). The last *catalogue raisonné* by Saja Herzog also dates from this period (1968). While fundamental to much of the subsequent research, both these publications are now seriously outdated and the need for a systematic study of Gossart's oeuvre has long been recognized.

Thanks to a noteworthy initiative of Maryan Ainsworth curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and an established scholar of Netherlandish painting - both gaps have been filled at the same time. In combination with a splendid exhibition in New York - to be shown in slightly reduced format at the National Gallery in London - a hefty book has been produced that is both an exhibition catalogue and a thorough survey and

Jan Gossart,  
*Danae*, 1527, Oil on oak  
panel, 114.3 x 95.4 cm,  
© Alte Pinakothek, Munich.





Jan Gossart, *Sheet with a Study after the "Spinario" and Other Sculptures*, c. 1509,  
Pen and gray-brown ink, 26.3 x 20.5 cm, © Leiden, University Library, Print Room.

oeuvre catalogue of the life and work of Jan Gossart. The Metropolitan Museum and the Flemish publisher *Mercatorfonds*, which is responsible for the French and Dutch language editions, are to be congratulated for this beautiful publication, which meets the highest scholarly standards and will most certainly be the reference for future studies on Gossart and his environment for many years to come.

Jan Gossart was born around 1478 in Maubeuge, then part of the Burgundian Netherlands but French territory since 1678. Where he was trained is unknown. Both Bruges - specifically the workshop of Gerard David whose influence is strongly visible in his early work - and Antwerp, the city where he was registered as an artist in 1503, have been suggested. Very little is known about Gossart's life and work until the fall of 1508. Why and how it happened remains a mystery, but on October 26 of that year the artist was part of a mission sent out to the papal court in Rome by the regent Margareth of Austria and led by Philip of Burgundy, illegitimate son of Philip the Good, Admiral of Zeeland and Gossart's patron until his death in 1524. This journey, which lasted no more than a year and also took the artist to such cities as Trente, Verona, Mantua and Florence, was not only decisive in the development of his own work, but is above all an important reason why Jan Gossart came to be such an influential and innovative artist. He was surely not the first artist from the Low Countries to travel to Italy, but he was most certainly the first to draw copies of classical statues and architecture - such as his often reproduced drawing of the famous *Spinario* amidst fragments of other sculptures and used them to create a new pictorial language after his return. But it was not only the remnants of ancient culture which fascinated Gossart. As new in-depth research proves, he must have seen, admired and copied works of such contemporary Italian masters as Mantegna, Verrocchio and Donatello on his journey to and from Rome.

After his return to the Low Countries, Gossart settled in Middelburg - most probably to be close to one of the main residences of Philip of Burgundy in Suytburg. He quickly became one of the most sought-after artists of his generation, receiving prestigious

commissions from patrons at the highest levels in Mechelen, Brussels and Bruges. As Aynsworth and her colleagues demonstrate, Gossart's importance lies not only in the reflection of classical antiquity in his work but also in his technical mastery as a painter, draughtsman and experimental printmaker, his versatility in practicing such different genres as portraits, mythological subjects and religious themes, and the combination of a thorough training in the traditions of the 15th century Flemish masters (above all Van Eyck and Memling) and influences from antiquity and contemporary Italian and German art (most notably Albrecht Dürer and the sculptor Conrad Meit).

Although Gossart seems not to have had a workshop of any size, what is now left of his oeuvre is comparatively large: 63 paintings, 48 drawings and 10 prints are listed. His merits as an artist and his legacy are slightly overrated in the catalogue, which puts him at the same level as Jan van Eyck and claims he was the precursor of the developments of the entire 16th century leading up to Rubens. That is a bridge too far. Gossart was certainly a highly gifted, versatile and innovative artist. He was above all the precursor of a new generation of artists like Jan van Scorel, Jan Vermeyen, Lambert Lombard and, more indirectly, Lucas van Leyden and Dirk Vellert. We are indebted to Maryan Ainsworth and the Metropolitan Museum for spotlighting this fascinating artist with a beautiful exhibition and a comprehensive catalogue.

Manfred Sellink

MARYAN AINSWORTH ET AL., *Man Myth, and Sensual Pleasures; Jan Gossart's Renaissance*, New York, 2010 (Dutch language edition by Mercatorfonds, Brussels, 2010).

The exhibition that took place in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (October 5, 2010 - January 17, 2011) is on travel, in slightly reduced form, at the National Gallery, London, February 23 - May 30, 2011 ([www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)). Curiously enough the two institutions do not agree on the spelling of the artist's name. While the Metropolitan uses Gossart as found in autograph signatures and documents, the National Gallery prefers Gossaert, as the name has always been spelled in modern times.