

The Life of Johannes Stradanus, Celebrated Bruges Painter in Florence

So shall Flanders at least be comforted, to have had such a remarkable Bruges citizen, who made the beautiful city of Florence even more beautiful with his work

(*Karel van Mander, 1604*)

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[M A N F R E D S E L L I N K]



Johannes Wierix
(after a design by Stradanus),
Portrait of Johannes Stradanus
(detail from the frontispiece
of the series *The Passion of
Christ*). c.1580.
Engraving, 21.5 x 28 cm.
Museum Boijmans Van
Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Some artists from the past are familiar figures to those in the know and those with expertise in the field, but are entirely unknown to the general public. Johannes Stradanus – the Latinised version of Jan Van Der Straet, known in Italy as Giovanni Stradano – is one such artist. Born and raised in Bruges, he made his career in Florence in the second half of the sixteenth century, was one of the most important painters at the Medici court after Giorgio Vasari, and became famous particularly as the designer of hundreds of prints, some of which are among the most widely reproduced engravings in art history.

Assistant to Vasari

While at present there is no known archival material that provides incontrovertible evidence, from various trustworthy sources from his immediate circle we can deduce that Stradanus must have been born in Bruges in around 1523. His good friend the literary figure and artists' biographer Raffaello Borghini relates from first-hand information how Stradanus, after studying for a time with his father and the otherwise unknown Bruges master Maximiliaen Francken, left for Antwerp. There he further perfected his skills in the studio of Pieter Aertsen, where he mastered the pictorial language of the renaissance and became adept at depicting complex compositions. In 1545 Stradanus was admitted as a fully-fledged master to the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke. Like many other painters of his generation – such as Pieter Bruegel in 1552/53 – the young artist left shortly after that (in 1547?) for Italy, the Mecca for all those with artistic aspirations.

Johannes Stradanus,
View of Florence
(detail of *The Siege of Florence*). 1562.
Fresco. Palazzo
Vecchio, Sala di
Clemente VII,
Florence.



It was the lure of the ruins of antiquity, but also and equally the attractive power of the celebrated Italian Renaissance artists, that brought young and ambitious artists to Rome in particular, and to a lesser extent to Venice and Florence, in the sixteenth century.

Again according to Borghini, Stradanus travelled to Venice via Lyon, where he must have worked for a time with the painter Corneille de la Haye, himself of Dutch origins. In Venice too it was evident how important the network of fellow-countrymen was. The Bruges painter met (in 1550?) a Flemish tapestry weaver who was head of the recently formed *arazzeria medicea*, the tapestry workshop with which the Florentine dukes sought to rival the grandeur of the French court in particular, and who apparently persuaded him to travel to the Tuscan city and make it his base. While the archives tell us nothing of his first years in Florence, Stradanus clearly succeeded in securing an important position as a tapestry designer. In documents from 1557 on, the accounts regularly record that Giovanni Stradano was responsible for the designs and cartoons (the full-sized detailed patterns used by the weavers) for huge, extremely expensive and prestigious tapestries. Many examples of these can still be found in Florentine museums today – though seldom on display, more often rolled up in storage. It was through this work that the young Fleming soon came into contact with Giorgio Vasari. Nowadays Vasari is much more celebrated as an art theorist and author of *Le Vite*, the first systematic overview of the history of the fine arts; but in his own time he was renowned as the most influential painter, architect and ‘artists’ impresario’ at the court of the Medici. One of the biggest commissions his studio received in the ‘50s and ‘60s was for the decoration of the entire Palazzo Vecchio, the quintessential ducal palace and still one of the largest and most impressive attractions in Florence.

Few of the thousands of cultural tourists who admire the building and its omnipresent frescoes every day will be aware that, apart from Vasari himself, the greatest part is the work of a painter from Bruges. From 1557 to around 1571 Stradanus worked closely with Vasari and eventually became his chief assistant in the more than 20-strong studio that worked month in, month out on the wall and ceiling paintings, as detailed as they were complex, in the ducal palace. A sure proof is the self-portrait of the Bruges painter that is right next to that of Vasari in a monumental ceiling piece painted by both artists together in the Salone dei Cinquecento, the large court hall where the triumphs of the Medici family are immortalised in fresco and oils. In style, composition and technique the Fleming’s work blended perfectly with that of Vasari and his *bottega*: elaborate and complex compositions with a sometimes rather overdone display of virtuosity in the poses and contortions of the human body. The use of colour is also in line with the development of what later became known as Florentine mannerism: with greater clarity and more emphasis on chiaroscuro than previous generations. Little influence of Flemish painterly traditions is detectable in this period, probably partly because Giorgio Vasari had the programme for the palace decorations firmly in hand. What is remarkable is the high technical quality of the work and the accuracy and precision with which Stradanus painted, which most likely explains the rapidity with which his career developed in a Florence in which there was certainly no dearth of artistic talent in the third quarter of the sixteenth century.

Furthermore, apart from his work for the *arazzeria medicea* and Vasari’s studio, Giovanni Stradano managed to make a place for himself in the Tuscan

capital, in his private life as well as artistically. In 1563 he was accepted as a member of the prestigious Accademia del Disegno, together with painters such as Bronzino, Allessandro Allori and the celebrated sculptor Giambologna – this last likewise a native of the Low Countries. In the decades that followed Stradanus would hold official positions in the Academy on a regular basis. He was also automatically involved in the design and painting for major ceremonies in Florence, such as Michelangelo's funeral in 1569. Financially it must have been a good time for him, as he had a house and other property and every year gave generous donations to religious institutions. One of these was the convent of Sant'Agata, where his daughter Lucrezia took her vows under the name of *suor Prudenzia* in the summer of 1569. From his marriage to the (Florentine?) Lucrezia di Lorenzo Guardieri – who was still living in 1583 – Stradanus had at least one son, Scipio. He followed in his father's artistic footsteps, and worked with him on their many commissions for fresco decorations and altarpieces from the late 1570s until his father's death in 1605.

The realism of *Ioannes Stratensis Flandrus*

Stradanus' obvious success as a painter and tapestry designer at the Medici court gradually paved the way for other clients. It was still through his *padrone* that he was closely involved in Arezzo in 1564 in Giorgio Vasari's family chapel in Santa Maria in Arezzo, where among other things he painted an engaging portrait of the artist's parents. But it was entirely due to his own efforts that he received commissions a few years later for large altarpieces in the most important churches in Florence, beginning with Santa Croce in 1569, followed by SS. Annunziata, Santo Spirito, Santa Maria Novella and other churches. Gradually he also began to spread his wings beyond Florence, working in places such as Pisa, Prato, Arezzo again and Forlì. And in 1570 it was also independently of Vasari that Stradanus received one of his most important commissions: the painting of two panels for the *studiolo* of Francesco I di Medici. *The Alchemist's Workshop*, especially, is one of the highlights both of Stradanus' own oeuvre and of the decorative scheme, executed by fifteen artists, of the *studiolo* – a room which adjoins the Salone dei Cinquecento and which due to the fragile condition of the artworks is normally not open to the public. What is remarkable, apart from the harder colour schemes compared to earlier work, is the intense realism of this work, painted on natural stone. It is this realism that, in the eyes both of his contemporaries and of many later art critics, places Stradanus within the artistic traditions of the Low Countries. The striking signature '*Ioannes Stratensis Flandrus 1570*' suggests that the painter was himself very much conscious of this.

The period 1569-71 is a turning point in the career of the Florentine-Bruges painter. He managed to maintain his position despite fierce competition from high-quality rivals. This he needed to do because the influence of Vasari – who was to die in 1574 – was steadily decreasing in Florence and the stream of commissions from the Medici court was rapidly drying up. From various letters from Vasari and his immediate circle from the years 1571-73 it appears that Stradanus' dynamic approach was not appreciated and that there was a total breakdown of trust between the two artists. In the old master's entourage scornful remarks were made about his rival and the all too Flemish character



Johannes Stradanus,
*The Alchemist's
Workshop*. 1570.
Oil painting on limestone,
127 x 93 cm.
Palazzo Vecchio,
studiolo di Francesco I,
Florence.

of his work. The professional jealousy went so far that Vasari did everything he could to prevent a commission for an altarpiece for Santa Maria Novella being given to Stradanus and have it awarded instead to a painter whom he trusted – but without success.

Back to Flanders...

Until 1576 Giovanni Stradano – apart from a possible short stay in Rome in 1561 – continued to live and work in Florence. In that year he travelled to Naples, where he entered the service of Don Juan of Austria, a bastard son of Charles V who as commander of the Spanish-Venetian fleet had inflicted a decisive defeat on the Turks at Lepanto in 1571 and had been rewarded with the post of Vicar-General of the Spanish possessions in Italy. According to Borghini Stradanus' task was to paint the victories in battle of this Habsburg prince. It is doubtful whether much of this work ended up in Naples, since Don Juan was appointed Governor of the Netherlands in 1576 and had to set out immediately for this extremely troubled area. Again according to Borghini's biography, Stradanus followed in the Spaniard's footsteps and so returned to his native land for the first time in twenty years.

He cannot have done much painting for Don Juan; he had his hands full with the political and military disintegration of the Netherlands and in any case was to die near Namur in 1578. His stay in the Low Countries was a turning point, however. It is virtually certain that the artist paid regular visits to Antwerp during these years and established close contact there with the engraver and print publisher Philips Galle. Since 1574, while still in Florence, Stradanus had been working with the ambitious international operator Galle from Florence in the production of some engravings, as he had done a few years earlier when he supplied designs to the Antwerp print publisher Hieronymus Cock who died in 1570. Until then the drawing of designs for engravings had been a sideline – a spin-off from compositions he had previously produced for an altarpiece or tapestry – but from 1576 right up until his death this would be one of his most important activities. The first series of prints that Philips Galle and Stradanus produced was closely connected with Don Juan: it comprised a series of forty ‘portraits’ of horses from the Governor’s stable, engraved on copper plates in 1577/78 by various employees of Galle’s print studio and dedicated to the Spaniard. It is a series that sets the tone for Stradanus’ print designs throughout the next twenty years: magnificently drawn often innovative subjects, engraved, printed and published in Antwerp with great technical expertise, mostly by Philips Galle and his studio, and distributed by the latter in large editions throughout Europe.

... And back to Italy

Precisely when Johannes Stradanus returned to Italy remains unclear. He was certainly working in Naples in 1580, and he seems to have worked mostly outside Florence at least until 1582 – even though he was firmly rooted there both professionally and in his private life. From 1583 on he was definitely living and working in the Tuscan capital. His advanced age, for the time in which he lived, was no hindrance whatsoever to coping with a constant stream of work. Together with his son Scipio he worked continuously on commissions for frescoes and altarpieces in Florence and its immediate surroundings – though these are less prestigious projects than those he had worked on up to 1576, and indeed, to be honest, noticeably inferior in quality compared to the earlier works.

As we have said, it seems that Stradanus invested all his inventiveness and technical skills in the many hundreds of drawn designs that were engraved on copper plates and printed 1500 kilometres further north in the print studios of Antwerp. In the '80s and '90s he supplied designs not only to Philips Galle but to his sons Theodoor and Cornelis Galle – both of whom had spent some time in Italy – and his sons-in-law Adriaen and Johannes Collaert, and also to the studio of the brothers Wierix. As regards subject-matter, this appears to have been dictated on the one hand by what the international market for Antwerp engravings demanded, certainly after the capture of the city by Duke Farnese in 1585: Counter-Reformation themes are clearly visible in two magnificent passion cycles, series showing the lives of Mary and John the Baptist, as well as series and countless single prints with devotional subjects. On the other hand there is a clear contribution from Stradanus to topics closely related to what interested the Florentine intellectual and literary elite of the day. The writer and scholar Luigi Alamanni – whose name features in several inscriptions and ded-

ications on prints – must have been an important contact. It is most certainly this Florentine humanist who inspired Stradanus to illustrate the entire *Divina Commedia*, the merits of which were at that time the subject of heated discussions in the literary academies, with a magnificent series of drawings. Of this unfinished project only the impressive Canto 34 of the *Inferno*, where Dante and



Johannes Stradanus, *Count Ugolino in the Ninth Circle of Hell* (from the series of illustrations to Dante's *Divina Commedia*). 1587-88. Drawing, 27 x 21 cm. Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence.

Philips Galle (workshop of, after a design by Johannes Stradanus), *The Workshop of the Printmaker* (from the series *Nova Reperta*). c.1590-95. Engraving, 20 x 27.5 cm. Groeningemuseum, Steinmetzkabinet, Bruges.



Virgil behold Lucifer at the centre of the earth, was published as an engraving by Galle. Other subjects associated with such intellectual interests are the *Nova Reperta* (the 'new' discoveries of the day that contrast with what the antique period had produced), the discovery of America, and the illustrious deeds of Roman women. In yet another genre of print design, intended for a wider audience, Stradanus returns to subjects he had developed for the Medici several decades earlier as tapestry designs and frescoes in the Palazzo Ducale: a wide variety of hunting scenes, a series recounting the history and production of silk, and a long series on the military successes of the Medici. Prints such as these – and in particular his portrayal of the discovery of oil paint in the studio of Jan van Eyck, and the two prints showing the studios of the book printer and copper-plate engraver – are among the most frequently reproduced graphic works in the entire history of art. But even in his own lifetime prints of Stradanus' designs were widespread: Antwerp publishers such as Galle, Collaert and Wierix distributed their prints not only in Europe but also and very successfully in the newly discovered continents and the Far East, taking advantage of the new trade routes and the missionary zeal of the Jesuits. Striking too, is that

designs by Stradanus were copied many times, not only in 'traditional' media such as paintings, drawings and prints, but also in craft work of many kinds, up to and including carved and silver-mounted coconuts.

It is hard to say to what extent it was Johannes Stradanus himself who chose these subjects for prints and print series. Philips Galle in particular – who belonged to the inner circle of the Plantin Press and was in contact with the foremost academics of his time – had throughout his entire long and successful career demonstrated a sharp eye for the explosive growth in demand for complex, humanist-oriented images. However, it is most certainly the Florentine from Bruges who pointed the Antwerp engraver and publisher to new avenues and opportunities and suggested what for northern print producers were rather unusual subjects. It is also without doubt greatly to Stradanus' credit that he used his great talent as a draughtsman and his compositional skills to produce almost 400 print designs. Almost 700 of his drawings have been preserved, from odd scribbles and sketches to hugely detailed sheets that seem to have

Johannes Stradanus,
The Crucifixion. 1569.
Canvas, 464 x 291 cm.
Santissima Annunziata,
Florence



been intended as works of art in their own right. A sizeable portion of this body of drawing relates directly to the print production we have described. His drawing style is fairly characteristic, combining the drawing traditions of the Low Countries and Italy. As well as fluently drawn outlines, mainly in pen and brown ink, it is noteworthy that Stradanus usually finished his compositions with washes in blue and brown ink. This gives his print designs a tonal and painterly character, in contrast to the linear tradition of such great masters as Maarten van Heemskerck and Pieter Bruegel in whose work the precise and refined use of the pen dominates and the brush plays little or no part.

In November 1605 Giovanni Stradano died at an advanced age, remaining active until shortly before his death. He was buried in the chapel normally reserved for *oltremontani*, the Cappella della Compagnia di Santa Barbara in de Santissima Annunziata, the church closely associated with the Florentine academy and artist community. Today it still boasts an attractive bust of the artist, created after a portrait by his son Scipio and with an inscription which stresses his Flemish origins and his birthplace of Bruges. No matter how well Stradanus had adapted to life in Florence and had made his career among his colleagues, he seems never to have forgotten his roots in Flanders and to have cherished his Flemish heritage. His intensive contacts with the Antwerp print market are enduring proof of this, while the portrait of him drawn by Hendrick Goltzius during his Italian trip in 1591 shows that the old master was only too happy to receive talented fellow-countrymen. That in the three known versions of his will the beneficiaries included not only his children but also his sister Marta and her husband Joannes Merula who lived in Flanders demonstrates that, even decades after he had left the Low Countries, the painter had still not forgotten his ties to his native country. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

The most important contemporary sources for Stradanus' life and work are Raffaello Borghini's *Il Riposo* (Florence, 1584) and Karel van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* (Haarlem, 1604). Hessel Miedema's edition of Van Mander's biography is particularly well annotated (Doornspijk 1994-99, vol. 5, pp. 65-73). Apart from countless more or less detailed studies in the specialist literature there is only one recent extensive monograph devoted to the artist: Alessandra Baroni Vannucci, *Jan Van Der Straet detto Giovanni Stradano, flandrus pictor et inventor*, Milan and Rome 1997. For the mechanisms of the international print market in the second half of the sixteenth century – with Antwerp as its most important and innovative centre – and the role of Philips Galle and Stradanus, see my introduction to: Manfred Sellink and Marjolein Leesberg, *Philips Galle; The New Hollstein, Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450-1700* (four volumes; Rotterdam, 2001), pp. xxxi-lxxxii. The Groeningemuseum in Bruges will be hosting the first comprehensive exhibition of the work of Stradanus from October 2008, with an extensive accompanying catalogue in English and a general information book in Dutch and French (www.brugge.be/internet/en/musea/Groeningemuseum-Arentshuis/Groeningemuseum/index.htm).