

Lantern Bearers and Pathfinders

The Journey to Italy in the Sixteenth Century

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[L E E N H U E T]

Italy: sun, the Mediterranean, beautiful landscapes, delicious food, cities and villages filled with art. This is how we northerners now view this southern land. Our ancestors in the sixteenth century had a somewhat different list: terrifying Alps, sun, art, the pope in Rome (even a Dutch pope at one point), Ottoman pirates on the Mediterranean, fellow subjects of Emperor Charles in Naples and deeper down into the boot, where they would feel at home; Virgil's birthplace, in Mantua; Virgil's grave, in Naples; the Lago di Averno, where Virgil's Aeneas descended into the underworld; good business deals. Anyone who spoke and wrote humanist Latin could, with the right recommendations, go to Italy and find an interesting career as a secretary or a librarian. Those who had mastered the universal language of art could work anywhere in the country, in studios both large and small. Travellers from the north, who were all, for the sake of convenience, known as *fiamminghi* (Flemings), were usually quick to find work in what Italians considered their speciality: painting landscapes. As Michelangelo, the greatest Italian artist of the sixteenth century, declared in 1547, 'To be honest, in Flanders they paint to deceive the outwardly focused gaze, either by depicting scenes that are pleasant to the eye, or by choosing subjects about which nothing bad can be said, such as saints or prophets. In their tableaux, it is all laundry, ruins, green fields, shadows of trees, rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, and here a whole throng of figures and there a whole throng of figures. And all of this, although some people seem to find it beautiful, is in reality done without reflection or artistic sensitivity, without a sense of symmetry and proportion, without discernment and playfulness, in short, without any substance or power...'.¹

Fiamminghi

In the sixteenth century, people in Italy were accustomed to travelling artists from the north, who came to study the artistic masterpieces of antiquity and of the Renaissance. This had not always been the case. A hundred years earlier, a Sicilian artist, Antonello da Messina, had travelled to Bruges in an attempt to meet Jan van Eyck and to learn the secret of his oil-painting technique from



Jan Gossaert, *Colosseum*,
1509, Staatliche Museen
Preussischer Kulturbesitz,
Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin

him. At least, this is what Giorgio Vasari wrote in his standard work about the lives of the famous Italian painters, sculptors and architects, and it was widely believed.² After the blossoming of the art of the Flemish Primitives, the artistic centre of Europe shifted to the south. In the Low Countries, art experts assume that Jan Gossaert van Maubeuge (1478-1532) was the first *fiammingo* to travel to Italy to become acquainted with the works of the Renaissance masters. Gossaert travelled to Rome on a diplomatic mission in the retinue of his patron, Philip of Burgundy. Philip, the illegitimate son of Duke Philip the Good, was there to negotiate with Pope Julius II. The humanist Gerardus Geldenhauer Noviomagus noted in his biography of Philip: 'Nothing gave him greater pleasure in Rome than the holy monuments of her Antiquity, which he commanded his very famous painter, Jan Gossaert, to capture for him.'³ Gossaert stayed in Rome in 1509 and after his return was the first northerner to paint 'poesie', poetic mythological scenes in the Italian style, for Philip after he became the bishop of Utrecht. One striking work is Gossaert's drawing of the Colosseum, a dilapidated monument of enormous proportions that would develop in the minds of northern artists into a symbol of the Tower of Babel. Jan Gossaert was, incidentally, not the only artist in the service of Philip of Burgundy. The Venetian Jacopo de' Barbari (?-1516) worked for the bishop in Utrecht for some time and subsequently became the court painter for Margaret of Austria, governor of the Habsburg Netherlands, in Mechelen. Gerardus Geldenhauer, who knew both men, called them the Zeuxis and the Apelles of the Netherlands, a flattering comparison to the most famous painters of ancient Greece.⁴

Maarten van Heemskerck,
*Self-portrait, with the
Colosseum, Rome, 1553*,
oil on panel, 42 x 54 cm,
Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge



Some years later, the only Dutch pope, Adrian VI, born in Utrecht, attracted many Netherlanders to the south, including the outstanding painter Jan van Scorel (1495-1562). Van Scorel had previously spent time in Venice and as a pilgrim in the Holy Land. In 1522, Pope Adrian appointed him as the keeper of the antique sculptures in the Belvedere. Those sculptures included the famous *Laocoön Group*, which was excavated from a Roman vineyard on 14 January 1506. Van Scorel succeeded none other than Raphael in this role. The Dutch dream in Rome did not last long. Adrian VI died suddenly in August 1523, and Van Scorel returned to the north and settled as a canon and artist in Utrecht. His best student, Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574), later followed in his footsteps and travelled to Italy. Van Heemskerck left behind an impressive self-portrait with the Colosseum in the background.

Networks

Jan Gossaert and Jan van Scorel are still well known for having paved the way for all Dutch artists who wanted to delve into the stylistic idiom of the Renaissance and Mannerism. They are the most striking figures in what could be called the Utrecht Network, which originated around Bishop Philip of Burgundy. Jan van Scorel enjoyed an even greater reputation with later artists, as he had not travelled to the south in the company of a noble, but on his own initiative: Frans Floris called him 'the lantern bearer and pathfinder' of the Romanists, the painters and sculptors who had visited Rome.⁵

Out of the Utrecht Network, the Liège Network developed, crucial for artists in our region. The Liège painter Lambert Lombard (1505/6-1566) may have had lessons from Jan Gossaert and Jan van Scorel, and he later became a court painter in the city of his birth. Whenever he could, he studied Italian paintings

in collections, analysing their composition so well that his contemporaries thought his work was that of a born and bred Italian. This fact is proudly recorded in Lombard's biography, written by the humanist Lampsonius and published in 1565⁶ – which is, incidentally, the only standalone biography of a Dutch artist from the sixteenth century. In 1537, Lombard finally received a commission and funding from the Liège prince bishop Erard de la Marck to travel to Rome, so that he could buy sculptures and become a first-class advisor on artistic matters. Lombard could only stay a year in Rome, but he emerged as one of the most original Romanists of the sixteenth century. His correspondence, for instance, reveals his interest in Romanesque and Gothic painting – the sort of artworks that in the sixteenth century were generally regarded as barbarian, completely outdated and ridiculous. In 1565, he wrote to Giorgio Vasari: 'It is my great wish, through your benevolent intercession, to receive a History [drawn composition] by Margaritone [second half of the thirteenth century], and also by Gaddi and by Giotto; I would like to compare them with the stained-glass windows that are to be found here in old monasteries, and bronze bas-reliefs in which one usually sees the figures standing on the tips of their toes, and yet which have given me more to think about than some works that are only one hundred years old.'⁷ This fondness for older art also sparked an academic interest in the archaeological and numismatic history of northern Europe. Lombard made studies of the Igel Column, a late classical burial monument in Trier. He designed prints based on classical themes for the publisher Hieronymus Cock in Antwerp, designs that were both aesthetically pleasing and academically sound, in their reproduction of clothing, objects and events from classical antiquity. His *Sacrifice to Priapus* is an attractive example of this thorough approach.

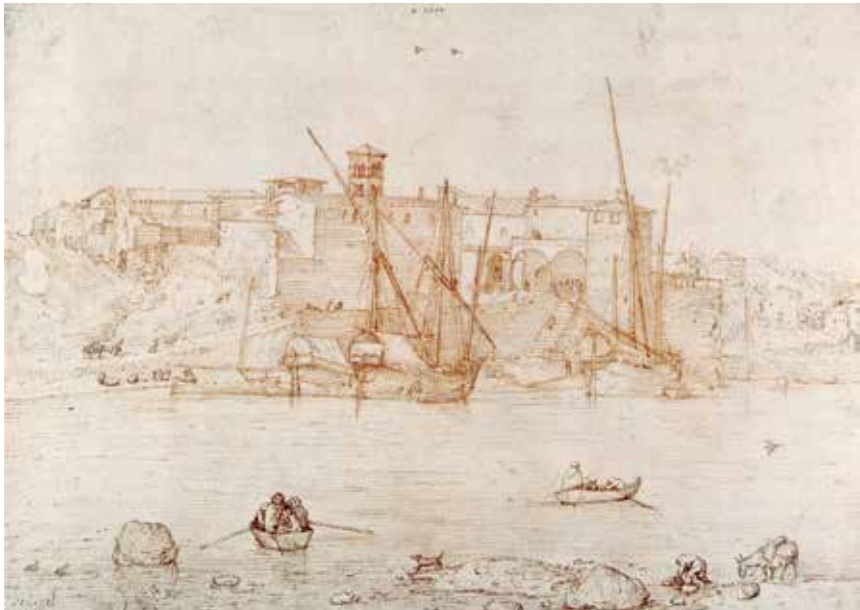


Lambert Lombard, *Sacrifice to Priapus*, 1540, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

An artist with the intellectual vigour of Lambert Lombard attracted ambitious students, all the more so because he also truly dedicated himself to teaching, developing a curriculum in his home to give young artists a broad intellectual education: the first academy in the Low Countries. His most famous students were Frans Floris, Willem Key, his later biographer Lamponius and the Bruges humanist Hubert Goltzius. Goltzius produced such ground-breaking work with his illustrated publications in the field of numismatics that, in 1567, he was offered the citizenship of Rome, a great accomplishment for a humanist from the north. By way of comparison, this honour was never granted to our most renowned humanist, Desiderius Erasmus. Frans Floris became the tutor of the painter-poet Lucas d'Heere in Ghent, who in turn taught Karel van Mander. In 1604, Van Mander published the *Schilder-Boeck*, or 'Book of Painters', the first major study of art in the Low Countries, still an essential source for art historians, and a late fruit, it might be said, of Lombard's intellectual approach to art. Dominicus Lamponius became the teacher of Otto van Veen, who later tutored Peter Paul Rubens, just about the apotheosis of the humanist artist in our region.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the artistic traffic on the roads to the south increased. Study trips to Italy remained expensive and risky undertakings though, and only for the most highly motivated of artists. Travellers could earn a living on the way by taking on commissions, but they would certainly have required a lot of savings before setting off, not to mention the social capital of self-confidence, letters of recommendation, and connections. The



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *View of the Ripa Grande, Rome*, c. 1553, pen and brown ink, 20.7 x 28.3 cm, The Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth House



Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
Tower of Babel (detail), c. 1563,
oil on panel, 114 x 155 cm,
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna

most remarkable Romanist was undoubtedly Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525?-1569). At first glance, his oeuvre contains few traces of Italian influence. Yet he spent two intense and educational years in Italy. We can follow his trail from Mantua to Venice and Milan, Bologna, Rome, Naples and Sicily. In Venice, he studied Titian's woodcuts, and in Rome he became friends with the miniaturist Giulio Clovio, 'Michelangelo in a small format'.⁸ He painted a Tower of Babylon on ivory for Clovio, probably a precursor to his famous and magnificent Towers of Babel, inspired by the Colosseum and preserved in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Like Lambert Lombard, Bruegel had an eye for older forms of art: manuscript illuminations, medieval frescos depicting the Triumph of Death, paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and Jan van Eyck in Italian collections. And the Alps, too, made a great impression on him: after his return to Antwerp, he came to fame with a series of designs for prints of stunning mountain landscapes, published by Hieronymus Cock.



Giambologna, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (details), 1582, marble, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence



We can consider ourselves fortunate that Pieter Bruegel returned to the flat north. Not all *fiamminghi* did so. Some of them built up fine careers in Italy. Jean de Boulogne (1529-1608) from Douai became a first-class sculptor in Florence under the name of Giambologna, and every tourist there nowadays sees his unrivalled *Rape of the Sabine Women* in the Loggia dei Lanzi. Jan van der Straet (1523-1605) from Bruges set up shop in the same Italian city in around 1550, where he worked for the court painter Giorgio Vasari. Van der Straet was from then on known as Giovanni da Strada or Giovanni Stradano. 'Like a cunning Circe, the greedy, flower-filled Florence keeps this Bruges artist away from his

homeland and makes him grey and white there with her', Van Mander wrote on the subject.⁹ Stradano contributed to frescos in the Palazzo Vecchio, created designs for tapestries that complemented the wall paintings, and designed many series of tapestries and prints of hunting scenes, which appealed to an international audience with their elegance and wealth of details. He also illustrated Dante's *Inferno*. Stradano did not break all ties with his homeland; most of his prints were engraved in Antwerp, including some by Bruegel's publisher, Cock. So he was well placed to provide Giorgio Vasari with information about his northern colleagues for the second edition of his *Lives of the Artists* (1568), still our most important source of knowledge about Renaissance art.

Venice as a hub

Rome is often seen as the natural final destination of a journey to Italy, but as this essay has shown above, other Italian cities exerted an equally great attraction. The artists' personal preferences also played a role. Van Mander noted approvingly that the young Brussels painter Adriaan De Weert (1536?-1590) went specially to Parma to study the work of his favourite master, Parmigianino.¹⁰ The powerful trading state of Venice functioned in all respects as a hub for the contact between Italy and the Low Countries. Titian worked there as a portrait painter in the service of Emperor Charles V, and his interest in prints as a means of making his work more widely known led to fruitful collaboration with artists from the north. In 1565, he hired the engraver Cornelis Cort (1533-1578), who until then had worked for Hieronymus Cock. In Venice, Cort soon revealed himself to be among the very finest of engravers, achieving astounding results with large prints full of lively chiaroscuro based on Titian's compositions. Later Cort briefly worked with Stradano in Florence; he subsequently established himself in Rome as a freelance large-format engraver, the most widely imitated of his day.

Rubens

Family role models are an important form of social capital. In 1589, Pieter Bruegel's youngest son, Jan (1568-1628), travelled to Naples and possibly Sicily. He had undoubtedly heard stories as a child about the things his father had seen and experienced there. In Naples he received a payment for painting a clock that belonged to the abbot Francesco Caracciolo.¹¹ This is an early indication of his fondness for working on a small scale. In 1591, he went to Rome, where after some years he took up residence with an excellent patron, Cardinal Federico Borromeo. The cardinal, as we can gather from Jan's letters, had liberated the young artist from a Roman prison at some point. Borromeo purchased a large number of works by Jan Bruegel and later described them with great insight in a small guide to his collection, with the title of *Musaeum*. 'The painter Brueghel himself indicated the price of this flower painting in a particularly witty manner. He painted a diamond brooch at the foot of the vase. Anyone who saw it understood that the price of this painting was equal to the value of the jewel (even though this was already clear), and so that is the amount I paid

the artist.¹² When Borromeo was made archbishop of Milan in 1595, Jan travelled there with the rest of the household. He did not return to Antwerp until 1596. Throughout his life, he continued to correspond with Borromeo's agents and with the cardinal himself. A number of these letters were, incidentally, written by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), a good friend of Jan's and more comfortable with Italian. Family role models were also important for Rubens: his father had studied law in Padua, and his brother Philip stayed in Rome as the protégé of the humanist Justus Lipsius. Rubens's time in Italy in 1600-1608 is one of the best-documented journeys to the south, as we still have a good number of the letters that he wrote while there. Those letters show that the north only narrowly succeeded in getting back Rubens, the most important master of the seventeenth century. He was making a fine career for himself

Peter Paul Rubens, *Self-Portrait in a Circle of Friends from Mantua*,
c. 1602-1604, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 161 cm,
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne



with major commissions in Rome, when his mother died in 1608. Rubens came back to Antwerp for the funeral, with the firm intention of returning to Rome. 'Even to this day I do not know which decision I should best take, to stay here in my fatherland or to return forever to Rome, whence I receive offers under the best of conditions.'¹³ Thanks to orders placed by the citizens of Antwerp, flattering commissions from Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, and to the beautiful Isabella Brant, things turned out differently. ■

NOTES

- 1 F. de Holanda, p. 25.
- 2 Vasari, vol. 2, pp. 568-569. The first edition of Vasari's *Vite* was published in 1565, the second, greatly expanded, in 1568.
- 3 Geldenhauer, p. 233.
- 4 Geldenhauer, p. 235.
- 5 Recorded by Karel van Mander in his biography of Scorel. Quoted in Dacos, p. 237, note 2.
- 6 Hubaux and Puraye, p. 65.
- 7 Denhaene, p. 319.
- 8 L. Huet, pp. 105-146.
- 9 Van Mander, p. 164.
- 10 Van Mander, p. 90.
- 11 Bedoni, pp. 20-21.
- 12 Borromeo, pp. 182-183.
- 13 Rubens, p. 44. Letter from Antwerp to a friend in Rome, 10 April 1609.

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