



INTRODUCTION

Behold what the narrative encompassed in these little
tomes reveals
Of a land, which the swelling sea everywhere surrounds.
If you census this place, it will be but a small corner of the
large world,
No distant milestone marks the boundary of its shores.
Yet there are many delights within such a trifling stretch
That would charm and move you in miraculous ways.

JASON PRATENSIS IN JAN REYGERSBERGH,
The Chronicle of Zeeland, 1551

The early modern Low Countries and the image of its history were profoundly shaped by a sense of scale. The region's cultural achievements, and attendant local pride, have always swelled beyond the limits of its small geographical domain. The learned doctor Jason Pratensis was no exception. He perceived his narrow corner of the world as an epicenter of intellectual life, and he rejoiced at the publication of the first humanist chronicle devoted to the history of Zeeland, the Netherlandish province he called home. The dedicatory poem that Pratensis penned in its honor extols Zeeland's venerable narrative as surpassing even the humble volume that contains it. Any province so ancient, and still so vibrant today, could never again be dismissed as a minor outpost on the global seas.

Detail of Fig. 36

Pratensis was among several Netherlandish scholars of the early sixteenth century who employed the rhetoric of cultural richness to praise their native land. They sought to cultivate a renaissance on local soil, an ambition they shared with contemporary Netherlandish artists and patrons. To foster a local renaissance was to revive a region's distinctive past for the sake of nourishing learning and culture in its present. Beginning in the fifteenth century, as cities and regions throughout Europe pursued this goal for themselves, they drew on rediscovered historical texts and local archaeological finds.² They engaged in the writing of their own history.³ As Pratensis well understood, the pulling together of bits and pieces from the past was a creative endeavor, which required not only documented evidence but also vivid description and no small amount of invention.

How that pursuit manifested itself in the early sixteenth-century Low Countries is the subject of the present book. Central to its argument is a rejection of the long-held understanding of this period in Netherlandish art and intellectual history as defined by revelatory encounters with Italy and the rediscovered antiquities of Rome. Classical rhetoric, antique forms, and antiquarian pursuits did not seep into northern Europe passively and inevitably, like silt water after a deluge. On the contrary, it was the conscious effort to generate a flourishing culture in the north, a deliberate challenge to Rome's hegemonic claim to its Roman past and intellectual legacy.

My main protagonist is the artist Jan Gossart (c. 1478–1532), also known as Mabuse, who introduced mythological painting as an independent genre in the art of the Low Countries. With great ingenuity, Gossart took up the task of equaling (and so challenging) Rome's monumental ancient buildings and life-size sculptures. His mythological works invested his patrons with surrogate ancient monuments of their own that realized in full color and on grand scale a classical revival on local shores. Gossart was thus one of the very first Netherlandish artists to actively contribute to local historiography through the visual arts, a phenomenon that the Dutch scholar Henri van de Waal explored in his magisterial study of *geschied-uitbeelding*, or “the imaging of history,” in the early modern Netherlands.⁴

Gossart's project also aligns with the emergence of the mythological genre across Europe during the early modern period, which was always attended by claims to wit and erudition, and motivated by the yearning for sensual engagement with the past. The genre lent itself to appropriation in regions peripheral to Rome—whether northern Italy, Germany, or the Netherlands—where it gave tangible presence to the revival of antiquity.⁵ In his 1508 dialogue praising the city of Wittenberg, the German humanist Andreas Meinhardi described the palace of the elector Frederick the Wise brimming over with mythological pictures, asserting that their presence was the very index of cultural efflorescence.⁶ Meinhardi's dialogue is one of the earliest references to mythological images in northern Europe, and dates only a few years prior to Gossart's own forays into the genre.

Yet despite the significance of Gossart's achievement to the larger history of art in northern Europe, the story of his contribution has never been fully told or appreciated. Already in the later sixteenth century, Gossart was recognized for another unprecedented body of work that has confused the understanding of his mythological oeuvre. He is renowned as the first Netherlandish artist to draw the antiquities of Rome, a project he undertook in dialogue with his greatest patron, Philip of Burgundy (1465–1524), who was then admiral of the Netherlands. They traveled to Italy together in early 1509 and spent four months in Rome, affording Gossart the chance to study not only architectural monuments like the Colosseum but also large-scale ancient sculpture.

The presumption of causality between the two pillars of Gossart's fame—his Roman drawings and his mythological paintings—has resulted in a profound misunderstanding of his engagement with antiquity. The misunderstanding dates back as early as 1567, when the Italian merchant Ludovico Guicciardini in his *Description of the Low Countries* declared that Gossart was “the first to bring from Italy to this country [the Netherlands] the art of painting *historie* and *poesie* with nude figures.”⁷ A year later, the great Italian biographer Giorgio Vasari duly echoed the same assertion in the 1568 edition of his famous *Lives of the Artists*, thus canonizing Gossart's alleged debt to the south.⁸ Even Karel van Mander, the great early biographer of the Netherlandish artists, fell in line and iterated this same statement in his *Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters* (1604), though his own account of Gossart's life does not bear out Guicciardini's claim.⁹

Despite their inherent Italian bias, Guicciardini's words continue to resound throughout modern scholarship on Gossart. The notion that Gossart's Roman sojourn was the primary impetus for his turn to mythological painting has become a commonplace, upheld regardless of the fact that the first documented work he produced in the mythological genre dates a full seven years after his return from Italy.

The catalogue to the 1902 exhibition of “Flemish Primitives” in Bruges inaugurated the modern study of Gossart's oeuvre by declaring that upon his return from Italy, Gossart “was seemingly so captivated by the Renaissance that he left behind all the traditions of his own school,” namely, the school of the early fifteenth-century Netherlandish painters like Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden.¹⁰ Yet the works attributed to Gossart on display in the exhibition itself included only one mythological subject, while the others were portraits and religious pictures very much in the local tradition.¹¹

Although Gossart's supposed breach with his early Netherlandish predecessors was hardly affirmed by his oeuvre, it became the basis for interpreting his artistic development and personal character.¹² In the resulting narrative, Gossart's trip to Italy marked his departure from local tradition and his eager embrace of the models of classical antiquity. Gossart was even championed as a pioneer among the “Romanists,” a term coined in early twentieth-century scholarship to describe Netherlandish

artists caught up in the “epidemic” of a renaissance closely associated with the rediscovery of Roman antiquity and a slavish devotion to its models.¹³

In more recent years, Gossart has experienced a renaissance of his own, encompassing important inquiry into the historical context of his works and a quiet revolt against the Italocentrism that defined his prior scholarly reception.¹⁴ New research has shed light on the artist’s working methods,¹⁵ on his courtly milieu in the Low Countries,¹⁶ and on his embrace of a stylistic plurality encompassing both antique forms and the flamboyant Gothic style of architectural ornament *en vogue* in the early sixteenth-century Low Countries.¹⁷ Despite monographic studies that have persisted in privileging Gossart’s southern travels in their analysis of his career, there has been an increasing acknowledgment that Italian models never compelled Gossart to abandon his artistic inheritance from early Netherlandish painting.¹⁸ Yet even so, the understanding of Gossart’s mythological paintings in particular continues to be informed by their presumed position relative to Italy.

This book sets out to rehabilitate Gossart’s mythological works in the milieu of their original creation by investigating not only the artist’s intimate courtly environs but also his place within the intellectual culture of the early sixteenth-century Low Countries. It contends that Gossart participated in a local renaissance—the revival of an alternative “Netherlandish” antiquity—through his antiquarian engagement with Eyckian painting, his selective use of Italian and ancient models, and his involvement in the recovery of the region’s ancient history. In this respect, Gossart’s mythological paintings offer a paradigmatic example of a much larger historical phenomenon. Gossart’s revival of the past was localized and specific, yet also runs parallel to similar local renaissances that emerged across the early modern period, both within other intellectual circles in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.¹⁹

I avoid the categorization of Gossart as a “Northern Renaissance” artist because such modern terminology problematically implies that the Renaissance was a period bifurcated between the poles of south and north, between Italy and everywhere else.²⁰ Underlying this label is a false confidence in the idea of the “Renaissance” itself as a fixed and stable entity that was translated to northern Europe wholesale after its initial southern flowering, and that resulted in a definitive break with local medieval tradition.²¹

Considering the early modern period instead as one in which the pursuit of a “renaissance” was being constantly redefined and reappropriated in a variety of locales, and for differing purposes, allows us to approach Gossart’s paintings on their own terms. The artist’s experience on Roman soil and knowledge of Italian models left an indelible mark on his subsequent oeuvre, but it should be stressed once again that he did not produce his mythological works under a spell of influence. Gossart’s contribution to the campaign for a local revival of antiquity was a singular experiment, which developed out of a transitional moment in the history of Netherlandish art, and in the larger political, religious, and cultural history of the Low Countries.

Hence my inquiry ultimately extends beyond the understanding of a few paintings, and of the artist who produced them, to revive the world of erudition that Gossart inhabited, that of Jason Pratensis and his colleagues. The sixteenth-century Netherlands was a breeding ground for active scholarship well beyond the patriarchal figure of Desiderius Erasmus, who is too often treated as the sole spokesperson for what was a diverse and eccentric humanist circle.²² Erasmus achieved great fame and notoriety across Europe through the wide circulation in print of works like his revised edition of the New Testament, and his endeavor to recover Christian history certainly exerted a stronger force among early sixteenth-century humanists in the Low Countries than the concern for the local pagan past. The many other Netherlandish scholars who took up the latter concern, and whom I introduce throughout the subsequent pages, did not share in Erasmus's international reputation. Most of their writings have never been translated and, in some cases, have been almost entirely forgotten. Nonetheless, their contributions—just as much as Gossart's mythological paintings—were seminal to the invention of Netherlandish antiquity.