At The Sign of the Four Winds

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The vital, cosmopolitan, and cultivated city that Antwerp was in the middle of the sixteenth century can forever be re-created in the imagination from the account of Ludovico Guicciardini. This intelligent and sympathetic Florentine made Antwerp his adopted city and there practiced commerce and finance. He described it as “la preclara et famosa citta, la bella citta, la nobilissima et amplissima citta.” He devoted to it sixty-five pages in the first edition of his *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi*, compared with only four pages each to Brussels and Ghent.

Guicciardini speaks with familiarity and in detail of the business transacted in this commercial center of the north. In the bourse assembled impressive numbers of merchants of all nations who carried on their affairs in half a dozen languages. Goods were transported by land and by sea: cloths of gold, silk, and silver from the Italian cities; pearls and ivory from Portugal; skins and birds’ plumes from Africa; mercury and copper from Germany; spices from the Levant; and much, much else. He wrote that there was nothing in which did not appear the riches, the strength, the pomp and magnificence of this excellent and illustrious city. But Guicciardini’s panegyric was in fact a swan song, for in 1567, when the *Descrittione* was first published, Philip II was on the throne, and it was his government that was to bring Antwerp to decline.

As vigorously as the people of Antwerp pursued their livelihood, so with equal force did
the Spanish persecute religious dissenters among them. Under the religious aspect lurked a political heresy. The edict of 1535, condemning all heretics to death, was no dead letter. It was the law of the land and mercilessly applied for twenty years. No fewer than fifty thousand died in the Lowlands, but that could not check people's conversion to Luther's or Calvin's teachings.

Gradually Rome ceased to be the spiritual center for the Low Countries. But for artists Italy continued as a magnetic attraction. They went there to learn and to study antiquities, for adventure, and to acquaint themselves with the most renowned men of their profession. One who made the journey in 1546 was Hieronymus Cock of Antwerp. Ironically he discovered that his future was not as a creative artist. In Italy he must have become aware of the commerce in prints which reproduced paintings, drawings, and sculpture, and he found this a calling closer to his heart.

Reproductive prints had been made in Italy in the fifteenth century, for example those of Antonio da Brescia after Mantegna and Cristofano Robetta after Filippino Lippi. The earliest Italian illustrated typographic book, Turrecremata's Meditations, published in Rome in 1467, had woodcuts derived from frescoes in the Roman church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. When in the next century Marcantonio Raimondi devoted himself almost exclusively to engraving after Raphael's designs, the reproductive graphic artist was established in earnest. Marcantonio's shop was dispersed at the Sack of Rome in 1527 and many of the plates passed to Antonio Salamanca, a Milanese, the first of the influential publishers. Though Salamanca reissued the Marcantonios, his major activity was publishing engravings after classical monuments. Eleven years before his death in 1562 he joined forces with Antonio Lafreri, and their prints contributed to the collections assembled after 1575 under the title of Speculum Romanae Magnificieiae.

When Cock returned to Antwerp in 1548 he became the first of the northern print publishers. The name of his shop—Aux Quatre Vents—was well chosen, for his publications reflected the artistic, spiritual, and intellectual forces which had gathered in the Lowlands at that time. He had recognized the critical opportunity. Soon others in the north were to become print publishers: Galle who started as an engraver for Cock; Crispin de Passe of Utrecht; Dominicus Custos of Antwerp; the Sadelers of Antwerp and Brussels. Concurrently with the growth of Cock's shop Christophe Plantin in the same city was rising to become the greatest European book publisher. In 1559 they were to collaborate: Cock recorded the funeral procession of Charles V, Lucas Duetecum engraved it, and Plantin was charged with its printing. Engravers who worked for Cock made illustrations for Plantin, and there was a mutual trade of publications.

In 1550, at the request of Cock, Giorgio Ghisi came to Antwerp from Mantua. Revered as the art of Italy was in the Lowlands, the arrival of an outstanding Italian engraver might be expected to offer a fruitful prospect. That first year Ghisi produced the School of

*Detail from The Prisoners of War, by Ghisi after Giulio Romano*
*Gift of Helen J. Baker, 1937*
Athens after Raphael, which by its grandiose proportions and skill in execution must have created a sensation. In 1551 he rested: his work that year, half as large, was The Last Supper after Lambert Lombard, which the Print shop was in fact fugitive. The nineteenth-century historian Henri Hymans assumed it was capital. Recently J. C. J. Bierens de Haan, more cautiously, thought it probably affected one of them—Cornelis Cort. The Italian engraver’s lasting authority was, however, precluded by that style of mannerism evolved in the Lowlands.

Giorgio Ghisi was born in 1520, and was trained for the most part under Giulio Romano. Early in his career is the Prisoners of War after Giulio’s fifth cartoon for a tapestry series The Triumph of Scipio Africanus. Aside from the faulty drawing—comparison with the cartoon shows that he did as well as could be expected—Ghisi is striving for technical control. He intends a flat gray area of parallel lines of equal depth. The burin slips: the lines converge. He pushes the burin too forcefully: the gray is marred to too dark a line. Means for setting volumes in space present an even greater difficulty. Cutting wide arcs haphazardly across a defined form, he tones the area but abnegates the volume.

Much advanced are the Prophets and Sibyls from the Sistine Chapel after Michelangelo, made in 1540 during the second of two trips to Rome. In these six plates the lines work both to shape the volume and to give it value and therefore spatial position. By 1550 Ghisi had arrived at that system—so well illustrated by the Disputa—of sweeping curves which turn a form, of lines which range from fine to bold, of cross-hatching and intersecting planes: a complex web in which the shadows are rich and the lights brilliant by contrast.

Also working for Cock at this time was Dirck Volckerstz Coornhert, poet and translator of Greek and Roman literature, embroiled in the religious controversy. His Balaam and the Angel after Maarten van Heemskerck, an etching reinforced with engraving, was published in 1554. Its shimmering effect—the very denial of Ghisi’s volumetric forms—comes from replacing the contour line either by flecks or by bounding the lighter form with a darker area. His interest in a multitude of textures

Detail of Joel from the Prophets and Sibyls, by Ghisi after Michelangelo  Dick Fund, 1926
resulted in a further dispersal of light in the History of Charles V, engraved after Heemskerck in 1555. During the following decade Coornhert increased the suavity of his technique. In the Vicissitudes of Human Things, again after Heemskerck, though the whites still flicker, the textures are less obtrusive and rendered more convincingly.

 Cornelis Cort's association with Cock began about 1552. Bierens de Haan attributes to him an unsigned Entry of Bacchus and Venus of 1556—probably after a drawing of Giulio Romano. It is similar to Coornhert in a sparing use of outline; a form is bound with a flecked shadow of another, or frayed at the edge by crosshatching. The over-all flicker is intensified by small forms breaking into light areas. Yet the modeling with short, curved, dense strokes makes the forms more solid than Coornhert's, and to that degree more like those of Ghisi. In Cort's Virtues of 1560 and the Five Senses of 1561, reproducing designs of Frans Floris (as well as in the Three Fates shown on page 16), the same effect is sought, though to re-create Floris's attenuated folds of cloth he turned to long, sustained strokes.

Through the last of Cort's work in Antwerp, the Earth Deities, from 1565, when he departed for Italy, his technique did not change essentially: a system of widely spaced lines, hatched at right angles; the line itself arid and monotonous; the form glittering and agitated. (Only in Venice, at the challenge of Titian, did he go beyond the mechanical character of his Antwerp style. His translation of Titian's Saint Jerome Reading in the Desert, of 1565, preserves the spatial organization while expressing the sensuous quality of objects in light and shade.)

When Cornelis Cort went to Italy Philip Galle left Cock's shop to become an independent publisher. Having been associated with Cort, his early prints have that characteristic line which neither swells nor diminishes in breadth. But a difference from the outset is significant.
Lot and His Daughters after Floris, and Saint Peter and Saint John after Heemskerck, both from 1558, show him disposed to organize darks compositionally, to relate objects tonally without losing their distinction. In the Saint Peter and Saint John he does not confine himself to the wide-spaced hatching of Cort, but by variously spacing more finely cut lines obtains a broader palette. More delicate and dense is the linear scheme of Saint Jerome, engraved after an unknown designer in 1561. Lights are gently qualified so that the major form may not be lost. Within the darks are many tonal gradations.

Despite these superficial similarities to Ghisi, Cort’s style is strong enough to sway Galle. In his Four Evangelists of 1562 after Heemskerck the bold linear system of Lot and His Daughters comes back to his work. Yet these are more supple, better articulated figures, drawn to convey their volume. Nonetheless, in the next few years, in the History of Job, in the Life of Saint John the Baptist, and in the Jonah illustrated here, all after Heemskerck, Galle abandons the plastic figures, the tonal organization, the restraint of texture, and reflects Coornhert and the Antwerp style of Cort.

Aside from the multitude of prints after the Italianized Flemings, Cock published the ornament prints of Cornelis and Jacob Floris and Vredeman de Vries—a major force in the stylistic evolution of the decorative arts. Land-
scapes and city views constituted a large part of his publications. Cock himself etched a set of Roman ruins in 1551, and seven years later, after his brother's drawings, landscapes with Biblical and mythological episodes. But the most celebrated landscapes to come from his shop are the thirteen Alpine scenes after the drawings of Peter Bruegel.

Cock and Bruegel first became associated in 1550 after the death of Bruegel's master Peter Coeck van Aelst. For the last months of his apprenticeship Bruegel became a pupil of Cock. The next year he went to Italy, and his journey home gave him material for the Alpine drawings. Later, on the subject of the struggle and folly of mankind, he meticulously prepared many designs to be engraved by Philip Galle and Peter van der Heyden. So slavishly were these copied that the work of one is all but indistinguishable from the other's. For this reason, and because Bruegel's development was in terms of an indigenous tradition, he is a case apart, not to be considered when searching for correlations between Ghisi and the Antwerp engravers.

Ever underlying the work of these Netherlandish painters and printmakers is one of the currents in mannerism—the Gothic. Gothic are the figures' angular movements, their slenderness, the linearity and loose distribution of forms. Dürer only toward the end of his career stressed volume at the expense of linear quantities. Besides, much of his previous work was laden with picturesqueness and surface refinements.

The Three Fates, by Cornelis Cort (1533-1578) after Giulio Romano
Gift of Georgiana W. Sargent, 1924

Clotho, Coium baiulat, Lachesis, net Atropos occat.
It was from Florentine mannerism—more ornamental and less plastic than the Roman—that the Netherlanders profited most. In the Florentine style light was used to disintegrate the three-dimensionality of the figure by being concentrated on arbitrary parts.

Marcantonio himself had learned from Dürer’s technique. But more strengthened by his study of the antique, he had utmost concern for the plastic reality of his forms. Raphael’s school, in which Giulio Romano was a major figure, was one source of the disintegration of the High Renaissance synthesis. Giulio’s work, though without the classic structural equilibrium of that synthesis, retained its quality of emphatic plasticity. And this quality was the sine qua non of Giorgio Ghisi’s work.

The two Three Fates, Ghisi’s in 1558 after Giulio Romano, Cort in 1561 probably copying Ghisi, are expressive of the two approaches. Ghisi’s structural, volumetric figures contrast sharply with Cort’s un-plastic forms, agitated by an arbitrary light without reference to their spatial position.

Dirck Coornhert once reproached Floris for his frequent insobriety—at the behest, as he said, of Dürer, who had come to him in a dream. With so ubiquitous a presence Ghisi could not compete. But if the Antwerp engravers learned little from him, perhaps Ghisi while living in the Lowlands perceived and absorbed qualities which he later imparted to Italian graphic art. That possibility remains to be investigated.