

## Frans Floris and the Poetics of Mythological Painting in Antwerp

Giancarlo Fiorenza

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

When Frans Floris (1519/20-70) decorated the facade of his Antwerp house around 1562-65, he staged an urban dialogue on the integral relationship between painting and poetry. The pictorial decoration, now destroyed but known through later drawings and engravings, consisted of a central over-door showing an allegory of the arts, including figures representing Painting and Sculpture accompanied by Apollo and Fame.<sup>1</sup> Flanking the overdoor were seven personifications displayed in niches and conceived as simulated bronze sculptures, from left to right: Diligentia, Usus, Poesis (Figure 1), Architectura, Labor, Experientia, and Industria. As a major producer of mythological paintings in Antwerp, Floris envisioned the decoration as a civic gesture that would advertise his inventive poetic powers to a broad public and simultaneously target potential clients. ‘Poesis’ (Poetry), according to Giovanni Boccaccio’s highly popular *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (first published in Venice in 1472, and then in Leuven in 1473), ‘est fervor quidam exquisite inveniendi’ (‘is a sort of fervid and exquisite invention’), one that necessarily employs elegant arrangement and adornment to produce sublime effects.<sup>2</sup> Renaissance treatises on art ranging from Leon Battista Alberti’s *De pictura* (1435) to Paolo Pino’s *Dialogo di pittura* (1548), published just a few years after Floris’s return from an extended sojourn in Italy, concur. They

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<sup>1</sup>Studies of the facade decoration include Carl Van de Velde, ‘The Painted Decoration of Floris’s House’, in *Netherlandish Mannerism: Papers Given at a Symposium in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm*, ed. by Görel Cavalli-Björkman (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1985), pp. 127-34; Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp 1550-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 35-39; and Catherine King, ‘Artes Liberales and the Mural Decoration on the House of Frans Floris, Antwerp, c. 1565’, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 52 (1989), 239-56. See also Edward H. Wouk, *The New Holstein: Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts 1450-1700: Frans Floris*, 2 parts (Ouderkerk aan den IJssel: Sound and Vision, 2011), n, pp. 160-62 nn. 140-47.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*, 2 vols, ed. by Vincenzo Romano (Bari: Giuseppe Laterza e Figli, 1951), I, p. 699; and Boccaccio on Poetry: *Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio’s ‘Genealogia deorum gentilium*, 2nd edn, trans. by Charles G. Osgood (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 39.

further define the exercise of pictorial invention as no ordinary illustration of a text, but as an imaginative process of discovery — the systematic search for and demonstration of a theme or argument often related to nature and the human condition, and originating in ancient fable.<sup>3</sup> Pino explicitly equates painting with the fictive [Insert Figure 1] and organizing power of poetry, both of which he sees as rooted in invention: ‘la pittura è propria poesia, cioè invenzione’ (‘painting is rightly poetry, that is, invention’).<sup>4</sup> It is in such original discovery that painters and poets find their common identity. Accordingly, Floris signed his panel of *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), destined as a gift for the city’s guild hall of Saint Luke, with an abbreviated signature that distinguishes his diligence (or ability to execute the work) from his divinely inspired inventive capacity: ‘FF. IV. ET F. 1556’ (‘Frans Floris invenit et fecit 1556’).<sup>5</sup> At the time Floris decorated his facade, the Venetian painter Titian, in his letters to King Philip II of Spain (who also ruled the Netherlands), labelled his Roman historical and mythical representations as *poesie* (‘poems’), *favole* (‘fables’), and *inventioni* (‘inventions’).<sup>6</sup> The appeal to poetics by both Titian and Floris challenges conventional notions of a narrow iconographic source and instead endorses poetry as a generative and interpretive tool united with pictorial invention.<sup>7</sup>

Floris offered his Antwerp public an enticing visual testimonial to the poetics of artistic

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3 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and Sculpture: The Latin Texts of 'De Pictura' and 'De Statua'*, ed. and trans. by Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), pp. 94-97; and Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di pittura*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, 3 vols, ed. by Paola Barocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1960-62), i, pp. 93-119 (p. 115). See also Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 101; Martin Kemp, ‘From “Mimesis” to “Fantasia”’: *The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts*, *Viator*, 8 (1977), 347-98; Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's 'Primavera' and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 24-30; and Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the 'Studiolo' of Isabella d'Este* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 1-13.

4 Pino, *Dialogo di pittura*. I, p. 115.

5 For studies of this image in its broader artistic context, see Van de Velde, *Frans Floris 1519/20-1570: Leven en Werken*, 2 vols (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1975), I, pp. 237-38; as well as Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp*, pp. 11-39; Annette de Vries, ‘Reformulating St Luke: Frans Floris on Art and Diligence’, in *Understanding Art in Antwerp: Classicizing the Popular, Popularising the Classic*, ed. Bart Ramakers (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), pp. 37-51; and Bram de Klerck, ‘Short-Sighted? Rijckaert Aertsz Portraying the Virgin in a Painting by Frans Floris’, *Oud Holland*, 124 (2011), 65-80. Floris signed numerous paintings, especially his mythological ones, in a similar manner.

6 Titian refers to his *Rape of Europa*, now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, as both a *favola* (letter 22 April 1560) and a *poesia* (letter 26 April 1562). Furthermore, he calls another of his paintings ‘un'altra inventione di pittura’ (letter 26 October 1568), most likely his *Tarquin and Lucretia* in the Fitzwilliam Collection, Cambridge. See Matteo Mancini, *Tiziano e le corti d'Asburgo nei documenti degli archivi spagnoli* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienza, Lettere, ed Arti, 1998), pp. 263, 289, 355.

7 Lodovico Guicciardini praises Floris as unsurpassed in invention and design (‘d'inventione e di disegno’) in his *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* (Antwerp: Guglielmo Silvio, 1567), p. 99.

invention, whereas his pupil, the artist and poet Lucas de Heere (1534-84), championed painting over poetry in his *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poesien* ('*The Garden and Orchard of Poetry*'). Published in Ghent in 1565, this pioneering volume of Flemish poetry incorporates Greek, Latin, and French models, and contains over seventy poems (including odes, epigrams, sonnets, elegies, epitaphs, blasons, and epistles), several of which are dedicated to Netherlandish artists and poets. Throughout the volume, De Heere adduces the relative merits of painting and poetry. In his dedication to Admiral Adolf of Burgundy, he invokes Horace's theory of *ut pictura poesis* and further defines invention (*inuencie*) as the hallmark of poetic excellence.<sup>8</sup> Painting's supremacy appears most clearly in the refrain addressed to De Violieren, Antwerp's principal chamber of rhetoric, which had incorporated with the Guild of Saint Luke around 1480. Again borrowing from the Horatian doctrine that successful poetry combines profit with pleasure (that it is *dulce et utile*), De Heere claims that painting is the most *orborelick* ('useful') and *vermakelick* ('delightful') of all the arts. Painting should not be considered mute poetry, but a mirror of nature,

Maer zoo wel sprekende datmen eer yet can mercken  
Deur een rechte schilderye, stående in huus oft kereken,  
Dan dicmaels deur de woorden, d'lesen oft schrijuen.  
Zi hout ons voor ooghen voorle en daden en wercken Zoo  
leuendich als oit wy die zaghen bedrijuen.  
Zi voorbeeldt de passien van mannen en wijuen,  
Alle naturen, zeden, beesten, steden, wonsten.

So eloquent that one frequently observes in a true picture, hanging at home or in

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<sup>8</sup> Lucas de Heere, *Den Hofen Boomgaard der Poesien*, ed. by W. Waterschoot (Zwolle: Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden, 1969), pp. 2-3. See also Ramakers, 'Art and Artistry in Lucas de Heere', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 59 (2009), 164-92.

church, what one does not from words, or from reading or writing. She enlivens past deeds and works, placing them before our eyes as if they were occurring. She expresses the passions of men and women, as well as their natures, customs, animals, cities, habitations.<sup>9</sup>

Painting's sweet eloquence supplants poetry in representing universal experiences. With De Heere's volume appearing at the same time as Floris's decoration on the facade of his house, a learned urban audience in the Low Countries would have been well prepared to perceive and to judge connections between painting and poetry. Just as Antwerp fostered a dynamic cultural attitude towards the arts, given the personal and professional connections of artists and humanists between the city and others — such as Ghent (where De Heere was based) and Haarlem (where Maarten van Heemskerck worked with polymath Dirck Coornhert and humanist Hadrianus Junius) — one can imagine comparable ideas circulating throughout the Low Countries.

The healthy rivalry between painting and poetry invites a reexamination of De Heere's *Inuectiue, an eenen Quidam schilder: de welke beschimpte de Schilders van Hand- werpen* ('*Invective Against a Certain Painter Who Scoffed at the Painters of Antwerp*'), which appears in his *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poësie*.<sup>10</sup> De Heere composed this invective to defend his teacher against severe criticisms by an unnamed artist, who sneeringly dismisses Floris's paintings as *suuckerbeeldekens* ('sugar-images') because they are *verciert becamelic* ('ornamented becomingly') and *rijeke* ('richly'). De Heere counters by explaining that, although Floris does paint in this way, he does so "Niet allomme: maer daert behoort en betaemt" ('Not all over, but where it belongs and is beseeming'). Furthermore, he states that the anonymous critic's own works

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9 De Heere, *Den Hofen Boomgaard*, p. 109. Translation by Walter S. Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's 'Schilder-Boeck'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 137. Melion provides an informative discussion of the artistic context of De Heere's passage (pp. 129-42). See also Ramakers, 'Art and Artistry in Lucas de Heere', p. 178.

10 De Heere, *Den Hofen Boomgaard*, pp. 80-82.1 have used Mark Meadow's translation of this invective in his article 'Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*, *Aemulatio* and the Space of Vernacular Style', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 47 (1996), 180-205 (pp. 181-82).

are entirely *onghemaniert* ('artless') and ornamented like *kaeremespoppen* ('kermis dolls'), explaining that the critic's visit to Rome had no impact on his paintings, 'Die voorwaer noch Roomachtig, noch ooc antijcx en siet' ('That truly look neither Romish, nor antique').<sup>11</sup>

A number of art historians have interpreted De Heere's comments in light of the vernacular, in terms of an argument between Flemish and Italian pictorial modes of expression about everything from style to subject matter.<sup>12</sup> Floris's paintings have been compared to those of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (d. 1569), who is often proposed as the anonymous critical artist and, somewhat surprisingly, is also the artist most studied with regard to De Heere's invective. Recently, Joost Keizer and Todd M. Richardson have contended that the vernacular is not strictly about regional styles and outward appearances, but rather is more about developing a new, assimilative, and enriched form of expression in the verbal and visual arts, based on select models from the ancient and the modern; the familiar and the foreign.<sup>13</sup> Both authors have demonstrated the importance of French literary models for Netherlandish vernacular expression. In contrast, James Bloom considers De Heere's invective in relation to the vernacular aspects of function, space, medium, and display, noting that Floris and Bruegel shared a major patron, the wealthy merchant Nicolaes Jongelinck (1517-70), and that many of their most famous paintings were displayed under one roof at his suburban Antwerp villa Ter Beken.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the larger poetic context of *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poë sien*, De Heere's invective clearly reads as more than either a zealous defence of his teacher or one painter critiquing another. By emphasizing that Floris's paintings should be praised rather than

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11 Meadow, 'Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*', p. 181, translates 'onghemaniert' as 'unmannered'.

12 See, for example, David Freedberg, 'Allusion and Topicality in the Work of Pieter Bruegel: The Implications of a Forgotten Polemic', in *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, ed. by Freedberg (Tokyo: Shimbun, 1989), pp. 53-65; and Meadow, 'Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*', pp. 181-205.

13 See Joost Keizer and Todd M. Richardson, 'Introduction: The Transformation of Vernacular Expression in Early Modern Arts', in *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression in Early Modern Arts*, ed. by Keizer and Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 1-23; Richardson, 'Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Vernacular Cultivation', in *Understanding Art in Antwerp*, pp. 115-30; and Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel The Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 23-61.

14 James J. Bloom, 'Pictorial Babel: Inventing the Flemish Visual Vernacular', in *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression*, pp. 313-38.

disparaged for being *véreiért*, *becamelic*, and *rijeke* — all the more so because they are well composed for the viewer to enjoy — De Heere borrows critical terms from the theory and practice of French Renaissance poets, to whom his volume is largely indebted. The reception and circulation of French poetry in the Netherlands was profuse and supplied a model of imitation for numerous vernacular works. Jan Cauweel, who published Matthijs de Castelein's *De Const van Rhetoriken* posthumously in Ghent in 1555, championed the embellishment, printing, and distribution of Netherlandish poetic and rhetorical arts based on the example of the Pléiade poets.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, while he modelled much of his poetry after the example of Clement Marot (1496-1544) — who is invoked by name in one poem — De Heere's sonnets and odes, two new genres in Netherlandish poetry, share close affinities with the work of Pierre de Ronsard (1524-85) and other poets of the Pléiade.<sup>16</sup> As Terence Cave and Philip Ford have demonstrated, the poetics of abundance (*copia*) and ornament — especially in descriptions of nature, myth, and art — is fundamental to the literary enterprise of this group of sixteenth-century French poets.<sup>17</sup> Ronsard, in his 1552 ode *À Michel de l'Hospital, Chancelier de France*, has the Muses (metaphors for his own poetry) call upon Jupiter to make their immortal song '[p]asse en douceur le sucre dous' ('surpass sweet sugar in its sweetness'),<sup>18</sup> just those qualities that De Heere admires in Floris's paintings. De Heere even advises Floris's critic to *suykeren* ('sweeten') his own works so that they appear less *bitterder* ('bitter') and more palatable to other artists. Poets like Ronsard

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15 See Ramakers, 'As Many Lands, As Many Customs: Vernacular Self-Awareness among the Netherlandish Rhetoricians', in *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression*, pp. 123-77, esp. pp. 138-51. For the key literary personalities involved in the reception, circulation, and imitation of French poetry in the Netherlands, see also Karel Bostoën, *Dichterschap en koopmanschap in de zestiende eeuw: Omtrent de dichters Guillaume de Poitou en Jan van der Noot* (Deventer: Sub Rosa, 1987); and Marco Prandoni, 'Vive la France, À bas la France! Contradictory Attitude Toward the Appropriation of French Cultural Elements in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century: The Forewords of "Modern" Poetry Collections', in *Wissenstransfer und Auctoritas in der frühneuzeitlichen n i eder län dischsprach i ?en Literatur*, ed. by Bettina Noak (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2014), pp. 179-94.

16 On the importance of French literature for the development of new poetic genres in Dutch poetry, see Waterschoot, 'Marot or Ronsard? New French Poetics among Dutch Rhetoricians in the Second Half of the 16th Century', in *Rhetoric- Rhetoriques-Rederijkers*, ed. by J. Koopmans and others (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1995), pp. 141-56; and Keizer and Richardson, 'Introduction'.

17 See Terence Cave, 'Ronsard's Mythological Universe', in *Ronsard the Poet*, ed. by Cave (London: Methuen and Co., 1973), pp. 159-208; Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 3-34; and Philip Ford, *Ronsard's 'Hymnes': A Literary and Iconographical Study* (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997), pp. 50-53.

18 Pierre de Ronsard, 'À Michel de l'Hospital, Chancelier de France', in *Selected Poems*, trans. by Malcolm Quainton and Elizabeth Vinestock (London: Penguin Books, 2002) pp. 69-77 (p. 69), verse 344.

— who eschews dry, technical skill in favour of *fureur divine* ('divine fury')<sup>19</sup> — nonetheless temper copiousness and variety with proper *dispositio*, the structuring or orderly arrangement of a work of art, which is equivalent to Floris's sense of suitability.<sup>20</sup> *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poësie* offers Floris's paintings as vivid and praiseworthy visual analogues to the ornamental poetry being produced in France and the Netherlands. De Heere, like several of Floris's pupils, was closely connected with artists and poets at the French court, having worked for Catherine de' Medici around 1560 designing tapestries. In Antwerp, he was friends with the poet Jan van der Noot (c. 1539-after 1595), whose lyrical sonnets contained in his volume *Het Bosken* ('*The Small Wood*'), published in 1570/1 while the author was in exile in London, are indebted to Ronsard's love poetry and are composed in a metre novel to Netherlandish literature. Both De Heere and Van der Noot brought elements of the style and subject matter of French literature and classical antiquity to their poetry and further promoted their own endeavours in this area among rhetoricians in Antwerp.<sup>21</sup>

I therefore see De Heere as critically assessing Floris's paintings not solely in pictorial terms, but also in terms of the poetic and rhetorical principles being developed by the Pléiade in their efforts to demonstrate that French could rival ancient Latin and Greek in poetic excellence.<sup>22</sup> Although Italy played an important role in Floris's artistic formation, his paintings welcome comparisons with the inventive aspects of French poetry, especially in their liberal display of ornament, surface textures, and beauty — not just the beauty of the human body and of nature, but also of exquisite artifice. His mythological paintings promote such themes as love, desire, and

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19 Ronsard, 'À Michel', p. 73, verse 435.

20 See Ford, *Ronsard's 'Hymnes'*, pp. 31-45.

21 See Waterschoot, 'Marot or Ronsard?'; Keizer and Richardson, 'Introduction'; Ramakers, 'As Many Lands, As Many Customs', pp. 151-58; and Bostoën, *Dichterschap en koopmanschap*.

22 Central to the French literary project was Joachim Du Bellay's 1549 *La Deffence, et illustration de la langue françoise*. Notably, in his chapter 'Du long poëme francoys', which expresses the desire for an epic composed in French, Du Bellay's models are, of course, Homer and Virgil, but he also cites the Ferrarese poet Ludovico Ariosto, whose vernacular romance epic *Orlando furioso* (final edition 1532; French translation 1543) served as an Italian example of what could be achieved in France.

sensuality; at the same time, he imitates and refashions ancient Greek and Latin authors, cultivating the wit and irony of Lucian and amplifying the more sensual and pictorial aspects of the expressive diction of Lucretius and Virgil.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, my essay complements the broader language project of Keizer and Richardson by focusing on the poetic foundation of Floris's pictorial inventions.

Indeed, the poetic character of Floris's paintings, in both their making and their reception, should come as no surprise, especially given the intimate ties between artists and rhetoricians in sixteenth-century Antwerp.<sup>24</sup> Tianna Uchacz's essay in this volume, 'Mars, Venus, and Vulcan: Equivocal Erotics and Art in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp' highlights the rich cross-fertilization among the dramatic and visual arts in Antwerp with regard to mythological and historical narratives. Floris, moreover, was closely engaged with the Antwerp publishing house of Hieronymus Cock, which was recognized for its humanist foundation and its working relationship with such intellectuals and artistic patrons as the statesman and bishop (later cardinal) Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (1517-86).<sup>25</sup> Among the numerous mythological subjects he painted and invented for prints, Floris's *Apollo and the Muses*, engraved by Frans Huys and published by Cock in 1565, contains an abbreviated passage from one of the most important Renaissance mythographic texts based on poetic sources: Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's *De deis gentium* (Basel, 1548).<sup>26</sup> It is also worth considering the poem by Domenicus Lampsonius, written

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23 *Imitatio* ('imitation') was a powerful creative principle in all realms of Renaissance culture. Studies on the theory and practice of imitation in the Renaissance demonstrate that *imitatio* determined the dialectical relationship between Renaissance humanists and artists and the cultural achievements of the past, be it through continuity and réanimation or rupture and transformation. See, among other studies, Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); G. W. Pigman, 'Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance,' *Renaissance Quarterly*, 33 (1980), 1-32; Ramakers, 'Art and Artistry in Lucas de Heere,' pp. 170-78; and Cave, *The Comucopian exU* pp. 35-77.1 offer a case study of pictorial imitation — or, more precisely, emulation (*aemulatio*) involving Dosso Dossi's

*Jupiter Painting Butterflies* (National Art Collection, Wawel Royal Castle, Kraków), in Giancarlo Fiorenza, *Paintings of Myth, Magic, and the Antique* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), pp. 21-

24 See, for example, Walter S. Gibson, 'Artists and *Rederijkers* in the Age of Bruegel,' *The Art Bulletin*, 63 (1981), 426-46.

25 On Floris's prints and his connection with humanists, see the excellent 'Introduction' by Wouk in *The New Hollstein*, I, pp. xxxiii-civ, esp. pp. xxxv-xxxvi. For example, Floris's *The Raising of the Brazen Serpent*, engraved by Pieter van der Heyden in 1555, carries a dedication to Granvelle (Wouk, *The New Hollstein*, i, p. 59 n. 25). See also *Hieronymus Cock: The Renaissance in Print*, ed. by Joris Van Grieken, Ger Luijten, and Jan Van der Stock (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013). As is well known, Floris studied from 1538 to 1539 in the artistic academy in Liège founded by Lambert Lombard, which boasted a curriculum that encompassed myth and antiquity and was thus aligned with humanist interests. See Godelieve Denhaene, *Lambert Lombard: Renaissance et Humanisme à Liège* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1990).

26 Wouk, *The New Hollstein*, II, pp. 5-6 n. 63. This engraving is based on a lost canvas Floris painted for the Arch of the Genoese, which was erected in celebration of Philip II's

in praise of Jongelincq, that forms the dedication to a series of engravings of the Labours of Hercules, which was executed by Cornelius Cort after Floris in 1563. Lampsonius celebrates Jongelincq for cultivating leisure while savouring paintings by the divine hand of Floris (*Diuina Flori dextera*). He admires how Floris's pictorial cycle not only adorned the patron's house, but also enhanced the prestige of Antwerp, serving as a stepping stone for a broader discourse on the arts:

Suos alumnos mittat aedes uisere,  
Quas tu minorum ciuium  
Natus bono, potens opum, sed omnium  
Ardens amator atrium,  
Tenacitatis idem et osor sordidae,  
Hostisque iuratissimus,  
Non usitatis prope superbam Anuerpnam Ad astra  
structas sumptibus.

Let Italy send her pupils to visit the house which you, born of good stock from the lesser citizens, possessed of wealth but an ardent lover of all the arts, also a hater of sordid avarice and its sworn enemy, raised to the stars near proud Antwerp at unusual expense.<sup>27</sup>

[Insert Figure 2]

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entry to Antwerp in 1549.

<sup>27</sup> Wouk, *The New Hollstein*, II, p. 15; translation by Iain Buchanan, 'The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelincq: II. The "Months" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder', *The Burlington Magazine*, 132 (1990), 541-50 (p. 547). See also Van de Velde, 'The Labours of Hercules, a Lost Series of Paintings by Frans Floris', *The Burlington Magazine*, 107 (1965), 114-23.

Floris's paintings constitute an assimilative genre in their richness of invention; by refashioning mythological subjects through the filter of ancient and modern poetry, they invite inquiry on the very theme of artistic creation.

An important example is Floris's *Feast of the Gods* (now in the Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie, Graz), an oil painting on panel signed 'FF. IV. ET FA.', which dates to the late 1550s (Figure 2).<sup>28</sup> Its original patron is unknown, but this lacuna need not stand in the way of interpreting how the work may have been experienced. Saturn, seen from behind, presides over a sumptuous banquet of the gods set within a lush, covered grove and laid out on a marvellous gold tablecloth, indicating its era as the Golden Age. All the gods are nude or scarcely clad, seated in pairs (e.g., Mars and Venus; Bacchus and Ceres), and embracing, kissing, or encouraging one another to eat and drink. Oysters and wine are the primary fare. (From antiquity through the Renaissance, oysters were considered a popular aphrodisiac and the food of Venus, goddess of love and fertility.)<sup>29</sup> Infant Cupids (*erotes*) swarm about the composition while Apollo plays the lyre and Mercury the flute, enhancing the lyrical and sensuous atmosphere. It is a rich composition, one that encompasses such themes as fecundity, eroticism, and natural abundance, bounties that are highly alluring to the harpies who try to despoil the festivities. The garden setting has strong erotic associations in both French and Italian Neo-Latin and vernacular poetry, and Floris's image of a lush bower, set with golden textiles and dinnerware, populated by gods eating, drinking, and making love, yields a sensory experience that resists allegorical or moralizing interpretations.<sup>30</sup> Disregarding their own attributes —

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28 See Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*, I, pp. 258-59.

29 See Liana De Girolami Cheney, 'The Oyster in Dutch Genre Paintings: Moral or Erotic Symbolism', *Artibus et Historiá*, 8 (1987), 135-58.

30 For an alternative, allegorical reading of Floris's mythological imagery, including the paintings discussed in this essay, see Fiona Healy, 'Bedrooms and Banquets: Mythology in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting', in *Concept, Design, and Execution in Flemish Painting (1550-1700)*, ed. by Hans Vlieghe, Arnout Balis, and Van de Velde (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 73-96, esp. pp. 83-90. Healy tends to see Floris's banquet imagery in terms of the dangers and consequences of complacency and carnal desire in the midst of the potential threat of war. While Floris's work may have carried a moral or political charge for viewers, my aim is to provide a different possibility for the reception of his mythological vocabulary.

though, in Saturn's case, a little *eros* tries to steal his scythe — the deities appear earthy and elegiac rather than transcendent and divine. They succumb to sensual desire as the feast celebrates peace and prosperity, allowing the various arts to flourish.

The way in which the gods play out the narrative of music making and seduction around the glimmering tablecloth — which also serves as a lustrous net to catch the seafood — finds an analogy with what Ronsard called the *fabuleux manteau* ('fabulous mantle'). This poetic device, which Ronsard states he learned from Jean Dorat, is not solely a decorative surface or veil — a cloak of fable — that disguises *vérité* ('truth').<sup>31</sup> Instead, Ronsard frequently uses textiles and other decorative motifs — highly ornamental vestments, jewellery, musical instruments, and baskets either fashioned by the gods or adorning their person — in his mythological verse to display his literary artifice. In imitation of ancient Greek and Latin *ekphrases*, he vividly describes these objects' various textures, shifting patterns, and dazzling surface effects, many with pictorial motifs and complex narratives concerning the gods' amorous activities and their supernatural births.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most famous of these *ekphrases* are Neptune's cloak in *Le Ravissement de Cephale* (verses 133-47) and Leda's basket in *La Defloration de Lede* (verses 70-116), two odes first published in 1550. The poet relishes the imagery of the latter object, lingering over vignettes with Aurora, Apollo, and playful satyrs, as well as one depicting a shepherd who is so enthralled by a snail climbing to the top of a lily in a meadow that he fails to notice the wolf about to terrorize his flock. Ronsard's expressive energies and pictorial diction capture the reader's attention and compete with the profuse artistic decorations that embellished the court palace of Fontainebleau.<sup>33</sup> Cave defines this manner of writing as a "mythological

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31 See Ronsard's *Hymne de l'Autonne* (*À Claude de l'Aubespine*), first published in 1563, in Ronsard, *Selected Poems*, pp. 165-75 (p. 168), verses 77-82.

32 See Cave, 'Ronsard's Mythological Universe' pp. 160-61.

33 For the connection between Ronsard's poetry and the visual arts, see Cave, 'Ronsard's Mythological Universe', pp. 161 — 65; Philip Ford, 'Ronsard's Erotic Diptych: *Le Ravissement de Cephale* and *La Defloration de Lede*', *French Studies*, 47 (1993), 385-403; Ford, *Ronsard's 'Hymnes'*, pp. 31-45; and, most recently, Margaret M. McGowan, 'Ronsard and the Visual Arts: A Study in Poetic Creativity', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 78 (2015), 173-205.

style” which appears to be wholly ornamental, sensuous or picturesque, even gratuitous, perhaps.<sup>34</sup> By emphasizing natural beauty, material richness, and exquisite facture, Ronsard bypasses allegory and celebrates the nature of poetic creation and artistic production — its colours, abundance, energy, and generative aspects.<sup>35</sup>

Floris’s brush and Ronsard’s pen share fundamental trajectories in their respective use of mythology: both artist and poet convert ancient fable into a wealth of diversity and artifice, and both employ the power of art as an instrument of seduction. As in Floris’s painting, the gods in Ronsard’s poetry eschew divine decorum as they coerce their objects of desire. *La Defloration de Lede* describes Jupiter as filled with an ‘amoureuse rage’ (‘passionate rage’) and as ‘porté de son desir’ (‘driven by his desire’): adorned with a chain wrought of gleaming gold bands and iridescent enamel, the god swoops down from heaven in the form of a swan to ravish Leda.<sup>36</sup> Correspondingly, certain gods in Floris’s Graz painting forcibly encourage their female companions to imbibe while other couples seem to share mutual sexual pleasure. Music complements the natural setting and the delicious fare to stimulate the deities’ amorous behaviour. The same holds true for *La Lyre*, a later poem from 1569 that Ronsard devoted to this instrument. The poet describes a lyre’s decorative inlay in which Apollo appears at the feast of the gods, harmonizing the age-old discord between Pallas and Neptune with music and absorbing tensions while singing about his own love for the mortal king Admetus (verses 273-81). Art — painting, poetry, and music — prevails as love dominates even in its more transgressive forms.

Viewers of Floris’s painting would readily have drawn an analogy between his emphasis

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34 Cave, ‘Ronsard’s Mythological Universe’, p. 161.

35 Cave, ‘Ronsard’s Mythological Universe’, pp. 184-85, argues that Ronsard’s mythological poetry communicates largely beyond the moral and allegorical. For various interpretive models regarding myth in French poetry, see also Guy Demerson, *La Mythologie classique dans l’oeuvre lyrique de la Pléiade* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1972); and Ford, *Ronsard’s Hymnes*. Tianna Uchacz’s ‘Mars, Venus, and Vulcan: Equivocal Erotics and Art in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp’ in this volume discusses how the visual arts in Antwerp of the mid-sixteenth century often promoted sensuality and desire, drawing parallels between classical descriptions of divine workmanship and Renaissance artifice, and complicating defensive, moralizing interpretations of Venus and Mars’s sexual exploits.

36 Ronsard, ‘La Defloration de Lede’, *Selected Poems*, pp. 83-93 (pp. 84-86), verses 25-64.

on kissing among the gods and the contemporary kiss poems composed by Neo-Latin and vernacular poets. The Dutch-born Neo-Latin poet Janus Secundus (1511-36) was a central figure in the revival of the kiss poem during the Renaissance. His *Basia* (1539; 1541) consists of nineteen poems in various metres, in which the poet explores sensual and emotional themes surrounding the kiss. Modelled after Catullus, the *Basia* steer readers away from moral or allegorical messages and instead flaunt the power of poetry in their erotic and often physically aggressive descriptions of kissing. In essence, Secundus promotes transgressive and lascivious verse as a legitimate form of poetic invention.<sup>37</sup> His poems, which feature metaphors of nature and food and drink, as well as numerous invocations of the gods, became the model for kiss poems by Marot, Ronsard, and many other French poets. Notably, a poem from Ronsard's *Les Amours de Cassandre*, first published in 1552, describes the poet's dream of a passionate kiss with his lover, one that relates to the conduct of the gods in Floris's painting:

Panchant sous moy son bel ivoyre blanc,  
Et m'y tirant sa langue fretillarde,  
Me baizottoit d'une lévre mignarde,  
Bouche sur bouche, et le flanc sus le flanc.  
Que de coral, que de liz, que de roses,  
Ce me sembloit à pleines mains discloses  
Tastay-je lors entre deux maniments?

Leaning toward me with her lovely white ivory, and offering me her flickering tongue, she kissed me repeatedly with her dainty lips, mouth upon mouth, and body upon body. How much coral, how many lilies, how many roses, did I seem to fondle then with two caresses

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<sup>37</sup> See David Price, 'The Poetics of License in Janus Secundus's *Basia*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23 (1992), 289-301.

of my fully opened hands!<sup>38</sup>

[Insert Figure 3]

While paralleling the ornamental and seductive nature of French verse, Floris's painting also combines pictorial sensuality with irony. For example, the mischievous *eros* wearing Mars's armour and holding his sword in the right-hand corner recalls Lucian's spirited description of Aëtion's *Marriage of Alexander and Roxana*. In describing the ancient painting in detail, Lucian praised certain ornaments of invention — smaller episodes nested in the main composition — for instance the *erotes* playing among the weapons of Alexander. Lucian argues that such details are not needless triviality and a waste of artistic labour, but that instead they signal how Alexander was equally renowned for his military and sexual prowess.<sup>39</sup> Lucian's writings fuelled the rich vein of satire in Renaissance humanism throughout Europe, and Floris's patrons, who included such sophisticated individuals as Jongelincq, Granvelle, and Jean Noiroot, master of the Antwerp mint, would have recognized and appreciated this elevated classical reference. As the gods demonstrate their sexual proficiency, the *erotes* fly teasingly above the scene in the garden canopy, having pinched their abandoned attributes. In this latter detail, Floris imitated Sodoma's grand fresco, the *Marriage of Alexander and Roxana* (c. 1517), in the Villa Farnesina, Rome (Figure 3), which is based on a much-copied drawing by Raphael and follows Lucian's text in showing some *erotes* playing with Alexander's armour while others flutter above the couple's elegant bedchamber, holding up the canopy and shooting arrows of love.<sup>40</sup>

[Insert Figure 4]

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38 Ronsard, 'Les Amours de Cassandre', *Selected Poems*, p. 23, poem 192, verses 5-11.

39 Lucian, *Herodotus or Aëtion*, trans. by K. Kilburn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), Chapter 6. For the motif of *erotes* playing with armour, see Jan L. De Jong, 'Ovidian Fantasies: Pictorial Variations on the Story of Mars, Venus, and Vulcan', in *Die Rezeption der 'Metamorphosen des Ovid in der Neuzeit: Der Antike Mythos in Text und Bild*, ed. by Hermann Walter and Hans-Jürgen Horn (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1995), pp. 161-71; and Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 107-46.

40 Raphael's drawing is now in the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

The *Graz Feast of the Gods* reveals how Floris tends to de-heroicize and humanize the Olympian gods. In an earlier version of the subject, an oil painting on panel now in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, signed and dated ‘FF. IV. ET F. 1550’, Floris depicts an extravagant banquet with Mars at its centre, the god seated on his breastplate and amusingly seen from behind (Figure 4).<sup>41</sup> Mars is completely stripped of his armour: mighty in war — *armipotens*, as Lucretius labels him in his *De rerum natura* — he is rendered impotent ‘vulnere amoris’ (‘by the wound of love’).<sup>42</sup> Once again, Mercury pipes from two flutes and love is the generative force behind the celebratory imagery. It is well known that Floris popularized feast imagery loosely based on ancient descriptions of mythological banquets in the city of Antwerp.<sup>43</sup> Who commissioned the Antwerp painting is uncertain, but the work may relate to the *Banquet of the Gods* Floris painted for Antwerp’s Town Hall, perhaps an unprecedented use of the subject in a civic context. The Town Hall painting, first mentioned in 1571, [Insert Figure 5] is now lost, although it seems to have inspired other versions.<sup>44</sup> Floris’s oil painting on panel of the *Feast of the Sea Gods* (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), signed and dated ‘FF. IV. ET FA. 1561’, can be identified as the one in Jongelinck’s collection (Figure 5).<sup>45</sup> By March 1551, Jongelinck was appointed the toll-collector for Zeeland: the toll for which he was responsible was imposed on goods brought into the Netherlands by boat — in 1560 it yielded a lucrative annual rent of 9000 guilders.<sup>46</sup> Here the sea gods not only enjoy but also personify the bounties of the sea, which can be read as an allegory of the wealth and pleasure Zeeland and Antwerp offered Jongelinck. But

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41 On this painting, see Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*, I, pp. 185-86.

42 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. by W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), I, verses 33-34.

43 For example, the feast to Bacchus described in Ovid’s *Fasti*, i, verses 393-440; the wedding banquets for Peleus and Thetis in Catullus’s *Carmen* 64; and Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, vi, Chapter 24. See David Rijser, *After the Flood: Luxurious Antwerp and Antiquity*, in *Understanding Art in Antwerp*, pp. 25-35, on the assimilation of ancient and Renaissance literary and artistic references in Floris’s painting. On the popularity of the banquet theme in Netherlandish art, see Eric J. Sluijter, ‘Depiction of Mythological Themes’, in *Gods, Saints, and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt* (Washington, DC: Trustees of the National Gallery of Art, 1980), pp. 55-64 (p. 60); Cheney, ‘The Oyster in Dutch Genre Paintings’, pp. 135-41; and Healy, ‘Bedrooms and Banquets’, pp. 87-90.

44 See Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*, I, p. 469, docs. 72, 73; and Healy, ‘Bedrooms and Banquets’, pp. 88, 95 n. 69.

45 As suggested by Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*, I, pp. 277-79; and Healy, ‘Bedrooms and Banquets’, p. 95 n. 69.

46 See Iain Buchanan, ‘The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I. “Bacchus and the Planets” by Jacques Jongelinck’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 132 (1990), 102-13 (p. 103).

this interpretation is perhaps too simplistic for such profuse imagery of lustful deities. The painting more readily makes manifest the notion of natural abundance and reproduction, with the sea gods appearing as propagative and sustaining sources in life, literature, and art.<sup>47</sup>

In Floris's different versions of the Feast of the Gods, Venus's role is Lucretian: she appears as *Venus genetrix* and *alma* — the generative and nourishing goddess invoked in the opening lines of the *De rerum naturalis*.<sup>48</sup> Venus is also the sensual force that appeases Mars and fills the gods with desire. Ronsard, along with many other French and Italian Renaissance poets, frequently imitated Lucretius's invocation to Venus to subdue Mars and echoed the Roman poet's illustrations of the madness of desire. In these literary and artistic Lucretian representations, love and fertility dispose of external threats and lead to lyric and pictorial profusion.

[Insert Figure 6]

Venus appears as a creative power in Floris's *Forge of Vulcan* (Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), an oil painting on panel that dates from the early 1560s (Figure 6).<sup>49</sup> Although speculation continues as to the original patron of this work, the painting nevertheless offers a kind of manifesto of Floris's artifice and pictorial technique. Its imagery goes to the heart of Virgil's narrative in the eighth book of the *Aeneid*, in which Venus induces Vulcan to forge arms for her mortal son Aeneas. Vulcan interrupts the work of his smiths, who had been busily fashioning Jupiter's thunderbolts and Mars's chariot, and aegidaeque horrifera, turbatae Palladis arma, | certatim squamis serpentum auroque polibant | conexosque anguis ipsamque in

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<sup>47</sup> For related themes in French art, see Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, I, verses 1-2. For the importance of Lucretius to Renaissance visual arts, see, among other studies, Campbell, 'Giorgione's *Tempest*, *Studiolo Culture, and the Renaissance Lucretius*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 56 (2003), 299-332; Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love*, pp. 9, 24, 30, 32-33, 36-37, 40-42, 46-47, 50-52; Alison Brown, 'Lucretius and the Epicureans in the Social and Political Context of Renaissance Florence', *I Tatti Studies*, 9 (2001), 11-62; and Fiorenza, *Dosso Dossi*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>49</sup> Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*, I, pp. 275-76. Maarten van Heemskerck's canvas of *Venus and Cupid in Vulcan's Forge*, painted in Italy in 1536 and engraved by Cornelis Bos in 1546, undoubtedly served as a model for Floris. See Ilja M. Veldman, *Maarten van Heemskerck and Dutch Humanism in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. by Michael Hoyle (Maarssen: Gary Schwartz, 1977), pp. 21-42. Healy, 'Bedrooms and Banquets', p. 86, states that Floris's picture carries an 'unmistakable marital tone.'

pectore divae | Gorgona desecto vertentem lumina collo' ('eagerly with golden scales of serpents were burnishing the awful aegis, armour of wrathful Pallas, the interwoven snakes, and on the breast of the goddess the Gorgon herself, with neck severed and eyes revolving').<sup>50</sup> Floris represents visually the highly descriptive nature of Virgil's poetic language in the details surrounding Vulcan and his helpers. We see the products of the smiths' industry, weaponry that also serves to display Floris's own powers of mimesis, his ability to contrast various materials, and to render reflections and highlights on highly polished armour. The painting thus displays the transformative powers of the visual arts and competes with Virgil's artful diction.

Floris's Berlin painting draws further on the personifications decorating the façade of his house in its emphasis on the qualities of *diligentia*, *usus*, *labor*, *experientia*, and *industria* at the forge — qualities that can be equated to the artist's own bravura technique and to his speed in execution. Floris captures, for instance, the roaring flashes of fire described in Virgil's text as the smiths beat metal with their hammers. Karel van Mander, a pupil of De Heere, admired such painterly virtuosity and noted in his *Schilder-boeck* (1604) Floris's fame for *veerdicheyt* (rapidity) and *so groote veerdicheyt* (great speed of working).<sup>51</sup> As Koenraad Jonckheere has pointed out, Floris, in contrast to his Antwerp colleague Willem Key (1516-68), preferred to demonstrate his artifice with fervid brushwork, rather than to conceal it, especially in his secular subjects.<sup>52</sup>

To conclude, while Floris's invention resonates with ancient poetic description, it also interacts with the art and literature of his contemporaries. It is important to reconsider the issues of both style and the vernacular. In the Berlin painting, Venus appears as a Fontainebleau beauty: her creamy white skin and slender, slightly elongated features correspond closely to the figures

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50 Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), VIII, verses 435-38.

51 Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, from the first edition of the *Schilder-boeck* (1603-04), 6 vols, trans. by Hessel Miedema (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1994), I, pp. 213-33 (pp. 224-25).

52 Koenraad Jonckheere, *Willem Key (1516-1568): Portrait of a Humanist Painter* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), p. 29.

decorating the royal residence. Beginning in the 1530s, Italian artists Rosso Fiorentino and Francesco Primaticcio produced a highly refined style at the French court, seeking a new ideal of feminine beauty based on a mix of French and Italian vernacular models.<sup>53</sup> Floris can be seen as responding to such ideals and associating the goddess's allure with his own sensual artifice. It was most likely these characteristics of Floris's eloquence that compelled De Heere to refer to his pictorial style in terms of the richness and sweetness of French lyric poetry.<sup>54</sup> With an urban public becoming increasingly aware of the rising status of French art and poetry, De Heere responded with his own poetic theory and exemplary refined verse in *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poesien*, in which he presented Floris's art as a compelling example of an emerging, highly expressive, and ornamental visual aesthetic that was bound to excite the viewer's imagination.

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<sup>53</sup> See Fiorenza, 'Penelope's Web: Francesco Primaticcio's Epic Revision at Fontainebleau', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 59 (2006), 795-827.

<sup>54</sup> Stylistic affinities between Floris's art and the School of Fontainebleau have long been observed (most recently by Wouk, *The New Hollstein*) but the connection between Floris's art and French poetry merits further study, especially in light of De Heere's text.



Figure 1: Monogrammist TG (?), Poesis, after Frans Floris, engraving, 1576. Staatliche Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna. Photo: museum.



Figure 2: Frans Floris, *Feast of the Gods*, oil on panel, late 1550s. Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie, Graz. Photo: museum.

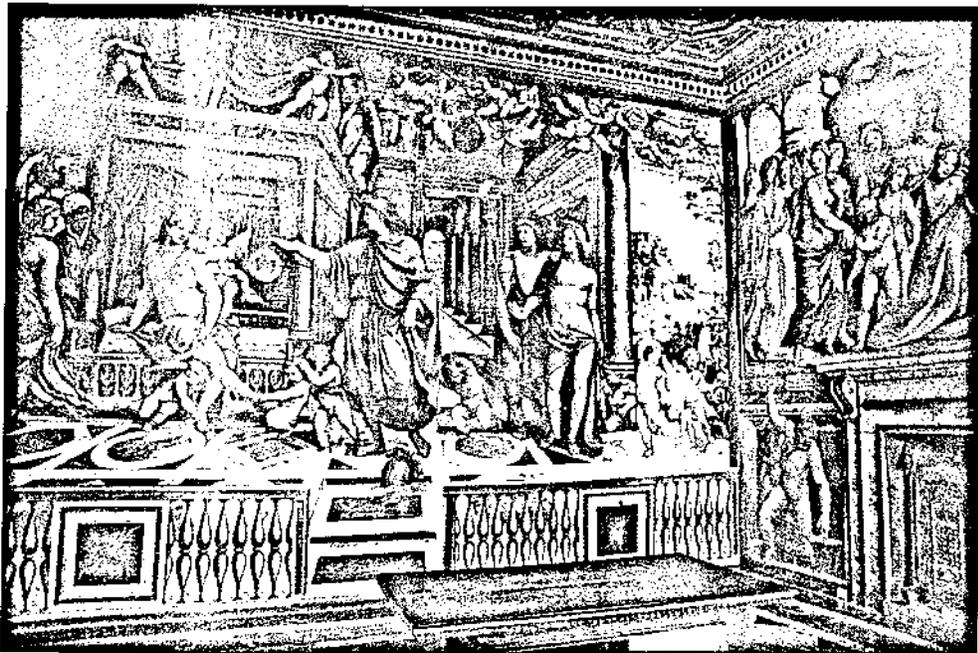


Figure 3: Sodoma, *Marriage of Alexander and Roxana*, fresco, c. 1517. Villa Farnesina, Rome.

Photo: © Kathleen Cohen. WordImages.

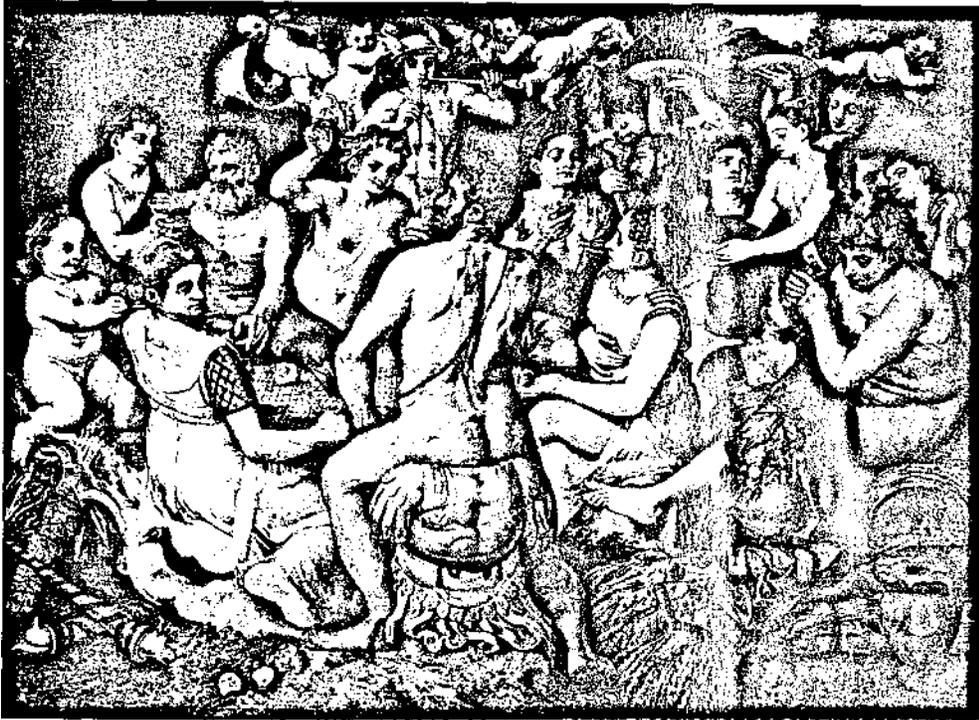


Figure 4: Frans Floris, *Feast of the Gods*, oil on panel, 1550. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp. Photo: © Kathleen Cohen. WorldImages.



Figure 5: Frans Floris, *Feast of the Sea Gods*, oil on panel, 1561. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Photo: Ethan Matt Kavalier.

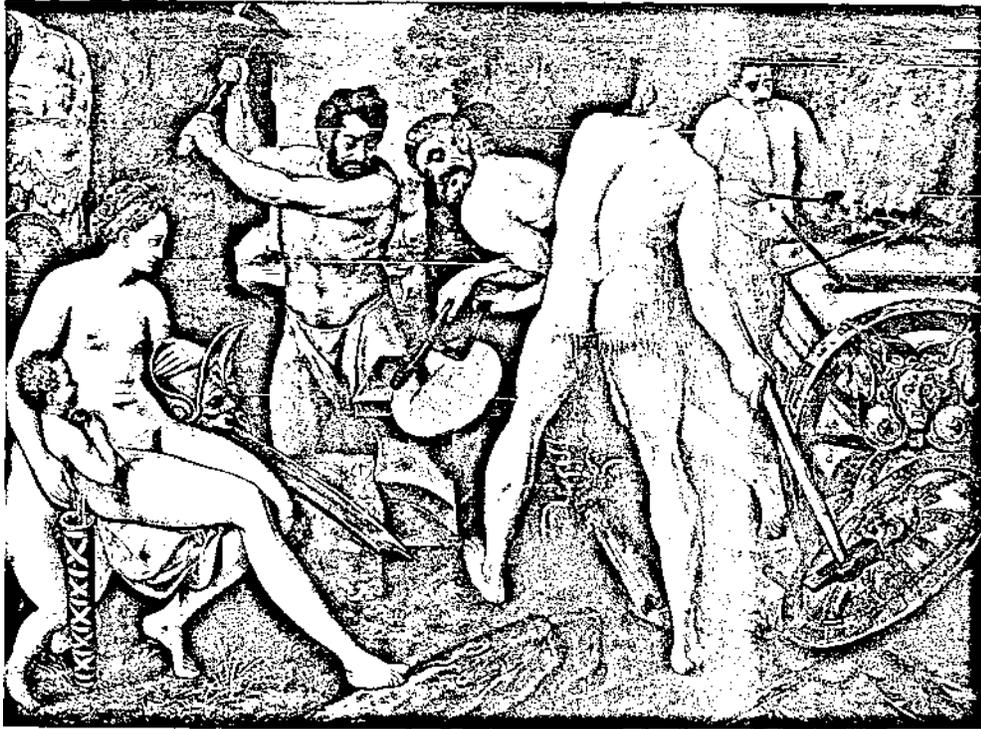


Figure 6: Frans Floris, *Forge of Vulcan*, oil on panel, early 1560s. Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. Photo: © Kathleen Cohen. WorldImages.