

# Understanding Art in Antwerp

## Classicising the Popular, Popularising the Classic (1540 – 1580)

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PEETERS

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## CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgements	ix
Understanding Art in Antwerp. An Introduction <i>Bart Ramakers</i>	xi
Contributors	xxiii
Session I	
Lost in Translation? Thinking about Classical and Vernacular Art in Antwerp, 1540-1580 <i>Joanna Woodall</i>	1
After the Flood. Luxurious Antwerp and Antiquity <i>David Rijser</i>	25
Session II	
Reformulating St Luke. Frans Floris on Art and Diligence <i>Annette de Vries</i>	37
The Annexation of the Antique. The Topic of the Living Picture in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp <i>Caecilie Weissert</i>	53
St Luke's Diligence <i>Elizabeth Honig</i>	69
Session III	
Classical Architecture and the Communion Debate. The Iconography of Suggestion <i>Koenraad Jonckheere</i>	75
Prints as Perfect Means of Communication. Allegorical Prints with Moral and Religious Messages Invented by Willem van Haecht <i>Yvonne Bleyerveld</i>	93

Visual Pamphleteering and the Invention of its Idiom in Rebellious Antwerp <i>Catrien Santing</i>	109
Session IV	
Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Vernacular Cultivation <i>Todd M. Richardson</i>	115
For the Illustration of Rhetoric. Cornelis van Ghistele, Virgil and the Ideology of Learned <i>Rhetorijcke</i> <i>Femke Hemelaar</i>	131
Learned Humanist Drama Classicising the Popular <i>Jan Bloemendal</i>	151
Session V	
Lady Pictura and Lady Rhetorica in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Antwerp. Upgrading Painting and <i>Rhetorijcke</i> by Linking Them to the Liberal Arts <i>Stijn Bussels</i>	157
Mirroring God, Reflecting Man. Shaping Identity Through Knowledge in the Antwerp Plays of 1561 <i>Jeroen Vandommele</i>	173
Rhetoricians as a Bridge Between Learned and Vernacular Culture <i>Hilde de Ridder-Symoens</i>	197
Session VI	
A Pure Marriage Bed. Willem van Haecht's <i>Cephalus and Procris</i> as an Example of Erasmian Marriage <i>Anke van Herk</i>	205
The Work of a Painter. Willem van Haecht's Apostle Plays, 1563-1565 <i>Bart Ramakers</i>	229
Rhetoricians and Their Classical and Foreign Contemporary Sources <i>Samuel Mareel</i>	255

## Session VII

Tielman Susato's <i>Vaderlandsche Musijcke</i> . Music and the Vernacular <i>Louis Peter Grijp</i>	261
Willem van Haechts Metrical Psalter. Characteristics and Use <i>Jan R. Luth</i>	275
Willem van Haecht and Tielman Susato as Innovators of Vernacular Songs <i>Hubert Meeus</i>	293
List of Plates	301
Bibliography	305
Index	337

# THE ANNEXATION OF THE ANTIQUE

## THE TOPIC OF THE LIVING PICTURE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANTWERP

Caecilie Weissert

### *Critical inquiry and thesis*

In his biographical writings on German and Netherlandish artists published in 1604, Karel van Mander mentions the Lucas altar for St Bavo, a work by the Antwerp painter Frans Floris. He writes: 'Next to him [Abbot Lucas] lies a great, beautiful water-hound or spaniel, so well painted that real dogs come sniffing at it, as I have seen myself'.<sup>1</sup> Near the end of his *vita* of Floris, Van Mander makes reference to the artist's numerous pupils and reports that even a trained painter, Frans Francken, had once been deceived by a painted spider, the work of one of his pupils, which he had held to be real.

[Herman van der Mast] moved in with Frans Francken after the death of Floris, where he copied a *Carrying of the Cross* after Floris with Christ's hand on a whitewood cross; and when an animal, a long-legged spider, sat on the original cross he painted it into his own, copying the shadows and everything very well. When the master came upstairs he said: I see that you have not been painting very diligently for spiders are sitting on your work, and he tried to brush it away with his hat, and when it did not go away and he saw that it was painted he was embarrassed and said that he must not erase it but let it remain.<sup>2</sup>

Afterwards, Van der Mast boasted that while Zeuxis had fooled birds with paintings, he himself had deluded his own master. Van Mander takes as his model the famous anecdote recorded by Pliny about the contest between the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius and applies it to two Antwerp artists. But rather than describing a paragon he thematises the culmination of a teacher-pupil relationship, characterising in this way the most distinguished Antwerp studio of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> He makes reference to the ancient Greek topos of 'Zeuxis's grapes' – although it would be more accu-

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<sup>1</sup> Van Mander, *The lives*, vol. 1, p. 225, fol. 241v.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230, fol. 243r.

<sup>3</sup> See Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*.

rate to say ‘Parrhasius’s curtain’, for Parrhasius, not Zeuxis, was the triumphant winner of the paragon. Pliny reports:

The story runs that Parrhasios and Zeuxis entered into competition, Zeuxis exhibiting a picture of some grapes, so true to nature that the birds flew up to the wall of the stage. Parrhasios then displayed a picture of a linen curtain, realistic to such a degree that Zeuxis, elated by the verdict of the birds, cried out that now at last his rival must draw the curtain and show his picture. On discovering his mistake he surrendered the prize to Parrhasios, admitting candidly that he had deceived the birds, while Parrhasios had deluded himself, a painter.<sup>4</sup>

Zeuxis and Francken were forced to admit defeat, for Parrhasius and Van der Mast had proved capable of deceiving not only unreasoning animals but also artists and connoisseurs.

Giorgio Vasari offers a similar anecdote involving the Florentine painter Giotto in 1550. According to Vasari, older sources report that during Giotto’s youth, while he was still being trained by Cimabue, the apprentice had painted a fly on the nose of one of his master’s figures which had such a natural appearance that Cimabue, upon returning to his work later on, attempted to swat it several times as if it were a real fly before recognising his mistake.<sup>5</sup> Van Mander was very familiar with the anecdote for he included it in his greatly abbreviated version of the life of Vasari, which he translated into Dutch.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Vasari characterised the wit and artistry of this important Master of Early Renaissance painting in this way, Van Mander placed the emphasis on how well almost every young painter in Antwerp commanded the art of deception, for Herman van der Mast is one of the lesser known artists of the Floris School.<sup>7</sup> In 1550, artists in Antwerp already had knowledge of Giotto and the legends surrounding him, for in 1549 the Florentines had decorated their triumphal arch with the busts of Giotto and Michelangelo in honour of the joyous entry of Philip II, not neglecting to emphasise that these two artists even surpassed Zeuxis and Apelles in terms of artistry.<sup>8</sup> In 1554, Frans Floris completed his *Fall of the Re-*

<sup>4</sup> Pliny, *The Elder Pliny’s Chapters*, 35.68-69, pp. 109-111.

<sup>5</sup> Vasari, *Le vite*, p. 132, ll. 41-45. For the Italian tradition on the topic, see Jacobs, *The Living Image*. For this and other examples, see Kris and Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, pp. 89-112.

<sup>6</sup> Van Mander, *Het schilder-boeck*, fol. 31v. Also see Miedema, *Karel van Manders ‘Leven’*.

<sup>7</sup> Even Van Mander was only familiar with a few of his paintings; Van Mander, *The lives*, vol. 1, p. 231, fol. 243r. Concerning the works of Van der Mast known today, see *ibidem*, vol. 4, p. 47; Van de Velde, *Frans Floris*, p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> On the arch one could read: ‘Au tribunal supérieur a costé gauche, estoient posez

*bel Angels*, painting a bee above his signature which looked so natural that it initially evoked in the viewer the desire to brush it away as well (Fig. 22).

It is hardly surprising that the ancient Greek anecdote about the competition as told by Pliny the Elder was passed around in artists' circles, being playfully invoked and incorporated into the artists' own biographies as if it were only fitting to do so. It is noteworthy that this particular anecdote told by Pliny was cited during the *Landjuweel* which took place in Antwerp in 1561, when, among other things, the task at hand was to define the status of painting within the arts. In the *spel van sinne* of the chamber of rhetoric De Goudbloem (The Marigold) from Antwerp, we find extensive treatment of the liberal and mechanical arts. The two allegorical characters – Praiseworthy Fame and Reason – engage in a dialogue concerning the free arts, the point of departure for their conversation being the ascertainment that these make human beings 'grand' ('groot') and 'ingenuous' ('vrijmoedich'). Attention is then turned to the status of painting: is it one of the liberal arts (*artes liberales*) or a mechanical art (*artes mechanicae*) after all? Their reasoning is preceded by the claim that painting deserves to be raised to the status of a free art, an art, in other words, which does not merely delight but also helps to shape and edify humankind. Then follows the argument that painting can move human beings, instruct them and place all imaginable objects before their eyes in a vivid and memorable fashion. In this respect it exerts a didactic effect on the viewer and trains the memory. These are all capabilities, however, which painting shares with its sister art, that is, literature. The decisive reason for elevating its status is seen to lie elsewhere. To illustrate this, the author, Cornelis van Ghistele, returns to the anecdote featuring Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Zeuxis is described as a 'skilful artist' ('constenaer cloeck'), but as is pointed out, Parrhasius clearly enjoyed greater fame, for he 'had shown a more laudable deed,/ [Parrhasius], who remarkably deceived through his own art/ An artist himself'.<sup>9</sup> This, it is said, is the very reason why painting is a liberal art which must be praised and esteemed.

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deux incomparables lumières en paincturie, tous deux Florentins, asscavoir, l'ung nomme Iottus, & l'aultres Michiel Angelus Bonarota, tous deux richement & sumptueusement argentez: Soulz lesquels estoit escript: His cedat Zeusis, cedat ter magnus Apelles, c'est: En sciences, yceulx surpassent Zeuxis & Apelles'; Graphheus and Coecke van Aelst, *La tresadmirable (...) entree*, p. 59, fol. H1. Also see Becker, "Greater than Zeuxis and Apelles".

<sup>9</sup> *Spelen van sinne*, fols. Q3v-Q4r. The anecdote ends as follows: 'Always and forever after, therefore,/ One should hold such artful painters ('constighe schilders')/ To be praiseworthy and deserving of favour,/ Worthily recorded in all chronicles'. Further see Vandommele, *Als in een spiegel*, pp. 254-264. For the translation, see Kavalier, 'Pieter Aertsen's "Meat Stall"', p. 81.

Does this constitute more than a mere topos? I think so, for the competition between the two ancient Greek painters names the two features which Van Ghistele deems attributable to painting alone. Only painting can mislead the viewer in relation to its artistic nature, is capable of creating an illusion which the viewer perceives as real. Also, only painting can unmask this illusion as such in the next moment. It was not its affinity to rhetoric and poetics alone, but rather its capacity for visual deception that was the reason why painting was no longer to be considered one of the simple crafts but was to be raised to the rank of an *ars liberalis*. The ancient Greek topos of the living picture and the *trompe l'oeil* mark a central aspect of the mid-century conception of painting which manifests itself particularly prominently in Antwerp. Thus the above-mentioned *spel van sinne* is dedicated to the painters of Antwerp. One can assume that the author of the play chose an argument which he could anticipate the Antwerp audience would follow. Furthermore, the argument was not presented by an unknown member of Antwerp society, as Van Ghistele, the *factor* of what was arguably the most elite chamber of rhetoric in Antwerp, was one of its most influential members.<sup>10</sup> He shaped the *Landjuweel* through his literary contributions and as a member of the jury.<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to the 1562 edition of the Antwerp plays, Willem van Haecht especially notes the translation of Terence by Van Ghistele, with this distinction possibly being a courtly ‘service in return’ for the work which had been dedicated to the painters.<sup>12</sup>

However, appreciation of the accurate imitation of nature was found widely in sixteenth-century Netherlandish painting. Every artistic kind of deception seems to have been praiseworthy. There were many different ways to create a deceptive effect and all were appreciated. Van Mander reports, for example, that in order to achieve a better effect, Gillis Coignet did not depict fire through use of colour but rather by applying thick layers of gold.<sup>13</sup> This was a real cause for reproach, for in accordance with the demand made by Leon Battista Alberti, a good painter expresses everything through colour. However, as Van Mander reports, others praised Coignet in this regard for they held anything to be good which improved the effect and succeeded in deceiving the eye of the viewer most skilfully.<sup>14</sup> In his investigation of Pieter Aertsen, Matt Kavalier concludes, among other things, that ‘Netherlandish encomia on art consistently use the term “deception” in a

<sup>10</sup> On Cornelis van Ghistele, see Vinck-Van Caekenberghe, *Een onderzoek*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, with further bibliographical information.

<sup>12</sup> *Spelen van sinne*, fol. A3v. On this translation see the contribution by Femke Hemelaar to this volume.

<sup>13</sup> For Alberti, see Bächtmann and Schäublin, *Leon Battista Alberti*, p. 291.

<sup>14</sup> Van Mander, *The lives*, vol. 1, p. 307, fol. 262r. For Alberti, see Bächtmann and Schäublin (eds.), *Leon Battista Alberti*, p. 291.



positive sense, although contemporary opinions on the virtue of mimesis were divided (for example Michelangelo).<sup>15</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the Dutch had no term for an illusionary work of art,<sup>16</sup> instead they described the quality of a painting by its effect on the viewer in terms of praising it as if it were real or alive. This could lead to the paradoxical situation in which paintings of fruit and dead animals could be praised as living pictures. It was not before Van Hoogstraten's generation that the word 'bedriegen' was used to describe paintings that were able to deceive a viewer's eye. Even if such paintings could be described as a *trompe l'oeil* they were not viewed as a distinct genre, as Arthur K. Wheelock has pointed out.<sup>17</sup> For Jean Baudrillard, marking an end to a long-lasting discussion about the artistic status of the *trompe l'oeil* in a narrow sense, claims that the image which pretends to be a reality constitutes an 'ironic simulacrum'. He viewed it as a counter-concept of the Renaissance perspectival construct.<sup>18</sup> On the basis of its formal features and the lack of any narrative element, Baudrillard refers to the *trompe l'oeil* as 'anti-painting', and as such, he argues, it does not belong to the category of the aesthetic. However, the aesthetic experience is precisely what sixteenth-century authors emphasised, with the lifelike quality of painting playing the crucial role here.

Thus, my thesis is that the recourse to the anecdote featuring Zeuxis and Parrhasius, referring not only to the specific genre of the *trompe l'oeil* but rather to the degree of mimesis or imitation of nature that painting could ultimately achieve, does not entail an arbitrary ancient *topos*. The intention was to give value to a specific aesthetic experience only sparked by imitation, which deceives the viewer. This can indeed constitute an end in itself, but it can also become a specific form of insight. I will present my argument in two steps. Firstly, I will provide further examples which illustrate that the cases cited thus far are by no means unique. Secondly, I will show that aesthetic deception was given value because it enabled the viewer to engage in the playful possibility of recognising that appearances are to be understood as such.

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<sup>15</sup> Kavalier, 'Pieter Aertsen's "Meat Stall"', p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Wheelock recently highlighted that this was still the case for the seventeenth century; Wheelock, 'Illusionism in Dutch and Flemish Art', p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*. Wheelock pointed out: 'Thus, one must understand that the term "*trompe l'oeil*" is an anachronism for seventeenth century art, and, while handy in describing images portraying a feigned reality, can be misleading'.

<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, 'The *trompe-l'oeil*', p. 57.

*Trompe l'oeil and the living picture*

First of all an example from what might be called the popular realm. The quality of ephemeral architecture constructed for the joyous entries was measured by the degree of success with which it imitated materials. In particular, illusionistic painting enhanced the triumphal arches and stages fashioned out of papier-mâché and wood. Thus, several columns appeared as if they were made out of white Parian marble, others out of multi-coloured jasper. Imitation reliefs competed with imitation bronze sculptures and life-like painted fruit and flowers.<sup>19</sup> The ephemeral architecture of the Antwerp entry of 1549 was perceived by contemporaries as so unusual that the decision was made to publicise it in word and image. In the dedication to Philip II, the editor and author Cornelius Grapheus emphasised the splendour of such architecture, which consisted, as he observed, not only of richness in form and material, pointing out that the actual materials available were supplemented by some painted materials which looked so deceptively authentic that they were thought to be real.<sup>20</sup>

Decorative painting found in the city residences of the affluent bourgeoisie showed a liking for an illusionistic penetration of walls. These were populated with allegorical figures and embellished with architectural details using trompe l'oeil techniques. Parts of a mural painting belonging to a middle-class Antwerp house from around 1564 have been preserved (Fig. 23). Despite the bad condition of the mural, the intended effect using deceptive elements and materials is still identifiable. Here, the architectural elements also show a preference for the imitation of valuable materials.<sup>21</sup> Hans Vredeman de Vries, an artist active in Antwerp, friend of Willem Key and Pieter Bruegel the Elder and involved in the preparation of the festivities for

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<sup>19</sup> Grapheus praises the Spanish arch in terms of the deceptive illusion of marble and bronze it creates: 'Suyuant ces deux Coulomnes (non guieres distans) avoient basty en forme quarrée deux gros boleuers, asscauoir de chascun costé de la rue vng, droict vis a vis l'ung de l'autre, tellement aornez de paincturie, qu'il sembloit proprement a les veoir estre entailliet de vifue pierre marbrine'; Grapheus and Coecke van Aelst, *La tresadmirable (...) entree*, p. 36, fol. E1. Further on he discusses two sculptures: 'A chascune face de lentrée du millieu auoit deux grandes collosses ou statues, entaillez de gros blocqz ou troncqes, haultes sans les Piedestalles, enuiron de xvj. piedz, sy artificieusement depainctes (sans y avoir usez de cuyure ou matiere semblables) quil sembloit proprement qu'elles fussent toutes de cuyure'; *ibidem*, p. 40, fol. E2.

<sup>20</sup> '(...) & autre telle matiere, ont estez amenez tous a accomplissement & perfection, combien que au parauant toutesfois ne avoit apparence quelconque de matiere ou estoffe'; *ibidem*, p. 9, fol. A4.

<sup>21</sup> See Fabri, 'Bürgertum und Innenausstattung'; Van der Stock, *Stadtbilder in Flandern*, p. 420, cat. no. 156.

Philip II in 1549, is praised by Van Mander for his perspectival vistas and explicitly compared with Parrhasius. As was reported, in the Antwerp residence of Gillis Hofman he had deceived the viewers with his art to such a degree that they felt the impulse to enter the merely painted garden through a merely painted archway.<sup>22</sup>

The next example derives from another field. In 1565 Lucas de Heere – for a short time a pupil of Frans Floris, and an exceedingly successful painter and poet – published a volume of poetry entitled *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poesien*.<sup>23</sup> Here, for the first time, traditional poetic forms used by the *rederijkers* and modern forms such as the paradox, the ode, the epigram and the sonnet were collected.<sup>24</sup> He also published several poems on pictures in the volume, among them a poem dedicated to the work of the Van Eyck brothers. The poem entitled ‘Ode’ focuses on the Ghent Altar.<sup>25</sup> The first stanzas are devoted to the description of the work, with the lively impression and deceptively genuine rendition of the painting being the prominent topic. As is conveyed by the poem, Adam stands there as if alive. One could almost hear the multivocal singing of the angels’ choir, he proclaims, while the jewels on the Lord’s crown appeared as if mirrored in the panel rather than painted on it.<sup>26</sup> Here De Heere attributes the depiction of the objects and figures rendered as if alive, as if actually present – this being a constitutive aspect of Antwerp art in the mid-sixteenth century – to the early generation of Netherlandish Masters, thus unintentionally declaring them to be ancestors of modern art.<sup>27</sup>

Lucas de Heere also wrote a poem about a painting by his friend Willem Key who served as dean of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke in 1552 and 1558, and was one of the most famous Netherlandish portraitists of his time. He and Floris were two of the most successful artists in Antwerp. In this poem he goes a step further, for now attention is paid not only to the issue of deceiving the viewer but also to the response to such deception on the

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<sup>22</sup> ‘After arriving in Antwerp he made a perspective for Willem Key showing a wooden porch in his garden. After that, for Gillis Hofman, on a site opposite a gateway, he made a large perspective looking like a vista in a garden. Later some German noblemen as well as the Prince of Orange were deceived by this, thinking it to be a real building with a view’; Van Mander, *The lives*, vol. 1, p. 322, fol. 266r.

<sup>23</sup> D’Heere, *Den Hof en Boomgaard*.

<sup>24</sup> Ramakers, ‘Art and artistry’, pp. 170-174.

<sup>25</sup> Becker points out that this constitutes the first important literary testimony to the works of the Van Eyck brothers written in Dutch; Becker, ‘Zur niederländischen Kunstliteratur’, p. 118.

<sup>26</sup> D’Heere, *Den Hof en Boomgaard*, pp. 29-32, no. XI.

<sup>27</sup> For an extended discussion on this and related topics, see Weissert, ‘*Die kunstreichste Kunst der Künste*’.

part of the viewer. In the sonnet, two companions converse with each other, with the first, 'A', pointing out to his friend with astonishment that he sees a very beautiful naked woman lying before him. The companions then engage in a dialogue about her: Is she asleep? Hardly, for her lovely eyes are open. Is it permitted to approach her and take a closer look at her beautiful face? Should she not, as would befit her, be frightened by the approach of a stranger? Then 'A' notices that what he sees is not a living woman but only a picture of one. He is vexed at having caught himself being deceived by a picture. 'B' appeases him and points out the double pleasure of having recognised, in a second step, what had initially been an illusion, this being a recognition which had understandably but unnecessarily led to disillusionment. No, we were not cheated, he says, on the contrary, we have regarded a picture as a living woman because it was painted so admirably.<sup>28</sup> It is contended that this is what makes the artistry of the painter completely apparent in the first place, for if there is such a large degree of correspondence with the imitated object that the human eye can be deceived for a short moment, then what one beholds is a truly excellent painting indeed.

A further prominent example is Hadrianus Junius's comments on works by Pieter Aertsen (Fig. 24), who initially worked in Antwerp:

We cannot pass over Pieter, nicknamed 'the Tall,' in silence. (...) He apparently set himself to paint humble things and he has, in everyone's view, reached the heights of fame with these humble objects. (...) the bodies and dress of peasant girls, food, vegetables, slaughtered chickens, ducks, cod and other fish

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<sup>28</sup> 'A: Av gheselleken wat is hier, daer voor v siet?/ Ic sie ghinder een naecte vrouwe seer bequame / B: Maer mi dinct si en verroert haer weinich oft niet/ Slaept si? Neens, want ic zie open d'oogskens eersame./ A: Van haer bi te commen niemant van ons en schame./ Want wie sou verschric sij van dat ghesicht claer/ B: Maer my dinct van onse comste (naer den betame)/ En verschielt si niet, haer houdende still' eenpaer/ A: Is dat niet een goet stic, als ict werde ghewaer/ Tis schilderye, tast wilt u hant gheloof gheuen./ Zijn wie niet wel bedodt, ende uutghestreken daer?/ B: Neen, neen, wi en sijn niet bedroghen teenegaer./ Hebbende voor een leuende vrouwe beseuen/ De beelde die soo wel is geschildert naer d'leuen'. ('A: Hey, friend, what is this? Look before you, there./ I see yonder a naked woman so beautiful./ B: But I believe that she is stirring slightly, is she not?/ Is she sleeping? No, for I see her exquisite eyes open./ A: No one should be ashamed to approach her./ For who would be afraid of that marvellous sight?/ B: But I believe that upon our arrival/ She does not blanch (as she ought), remaining immobile./ A: Is that not a wonderful presentation, as I see it?/ It is painted; feel it, give credence to your hand./ Are we not completely fooled and misled?/ B: No, no, we are not entirely deceived./ For having for a living woman taken/ The picture that is painted so precisely from life'), *D'Heere, Den Hof en Boomgaard*, p. 54, no. XLVII; Ramakers, 'Art and artistry', pp. 181-182.

sorts, and all manner of kitchen utensils besides the perfect daylight, the endless variety of his paintings never tires the eyes [of the viewer].<sup>29</sup>

Van Mander puts this more succinctly, stating that in Aertsen's paintings the dumb seem to speak, the dead to live. Dirk Volckertsz. Coornhert made a similar observation. In writing to Ortelius to thank him for a gift, a reproductive print after a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Coornhert observes:

Het zuchten, het wenen, het jammerlyc gescal.  
 My docht ic hoorde huylen, steenen en screyen  
 En 't gorglen der tranen in dit deerlyc scheyen  
 Daer hen nyemant can bedwingen  
 Van droeve handen te wringen  
 Van clagen, van kermen, en van sterven verhal  
 Dye camer sceen doodlyc, noch docht my leefdet al.<sup>30</sup>

The sobbing, the weeping and the sounds of woe.  
 Methinks I heard moaning, groaning and screaming  
 And the splashing of tears in this portrayal of sorrow  
 There no one can restrain himself  
 From sadly wringing his hands  
 From grieving and mourning, from lamenting and from the tale of woe  
 The chamber appears deathlike, yet all seems to me alive.<sup>31</sup>

The notion of the speaking picture also became the main theme behind the motif, developed in Antwerp, of the suicidal Lucretia (Fig. 25). Within the framework of his larger work *Latinae Linguae Exercitatio* – which was used as a standard textbook in many schools well beyond the sixteenth century – in 1538 Juan Luis Vives published a short dialogue entitled *Domus*.<sup>32</sup> Here Vitruvius leads his visitors Leo and Iocundus through his house. First of all they enter an atrium in the basement, in which, as we are told, several different paintings are to be found, among them a depiction of Lucretia portrayed just as she is about to kill herself. Iocundus is amazed by the liveliness of the rendition, for Lucretia seems to speak as she dies.<sup>33</sup> In citing the

<sup>29</sup> Junius, *Batavia*, pp. 239-240. For the translation, see Falkenburg, 'Pieter Aertsen, Rhyparographer', p. 202.

<sup>30</sup> Hessels, *Abrahami Ortelii*, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup> Translation by Popham, 'Pieter Bruegel and Abraham Ortelius', p. 187.

<sup>32</sup> The short text was published in his *De Institutione foeminae Christianae*; Vives, *De Institutione*. Also see Vives, 'La Maison/Domus'.

<sup>33</sup> Vives, 'La Maison/Domus', pp. 59-63.

motif of the dying Lucretia, the artists engage in a contest with painters of Antiquity. This time it is not Zeuxis, but the Greek painter most revered in the sixteenth century, Apelles. Pliny only mentions in passing that Apelles also painted human figures dying.<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note but no longer surprising that Van Ghistele refers to Apelles's artistry after citing the anecdote about Zeuxis and Parrhasius:

Apelles heeft oock sulcke practijcken  
 Seer constich bewesen in sijn leven  
 Die van Alexandro groot wert verheven  
 Maer steruende eylaes gheconterfeyt liet  
 Venus imperfect / en in gheen landen siet  
 En cost men yemant vinden binnen / oft buyten  
 Die dat volbrighen dorst.<sup>35</sup>

Apelles also has demonstrated such skills  
 Very artfully during his life,  
 Who was highly praised by Alexander.  
 But, having died, unfortunately left Venus  
 Painted incompletely, and in no country one saw  
 Or could find someone, neither at home nor abroad,  
 Who dared to finish it [the painting].

These examples make two things clear. Firstly, they reveal that the artists attempted to render their paintings, or rather, individual motifs, as mimetically as possible so that they would be mistaken for the real object. Secondly, they reveal how viewers were highly willing to engage in such acts of deception and take pleasure in them.

### *Deception and insight*

Aesthetic deception can thus be defined as a condition which is objectively determined by a work of art and subjectively determined by the needs of the viewer. It must now be asked whether an aesthetic illusion or deception fulfils a 'higher' purpose, above and beyond that of delight. Such an additional

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<sup>34</sup> Pliny, *Naturkunde*, 35.90. Later (1591) Gregorio Comanini repeats such praise: 'How would you describe Apelles's images of the dying, if you saw them? The exhalation of the soul was so naturally imitated that it seems the last sight could be heard issuing from the lips'; Comanini, *The Figino*, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Spelen van sinne*, fol. Q4r.

purpose alone would justify endowing the art of painting with the status of a free art, an *ars liberalis*.

The anecdote about Zeuxis and Parrhasius declares deception of the eye to be a desirable artistic goal. According to this, the status of the painter is determined by the measure of similitude perceived on the part of the viewer: the higher the degree of resemblance which the viewer found between painted curtains, spiders, human figures and fruit and those existing in real life, the higher his or her power of discrimination proved to be, the higher the value of the work and the artist who produced it. The yardstick was oriented towards the disposition of the viewer, for familiarity with the object was the foundation for measuring the value of a work. In other words, it was necessary for the viewer to be acquainted with such elements as grapes and curtains in order to be able to judge the degree of similitude attained.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, the capacity and willingness of the viewer to recognise things played a decisive role. If similarity to the highest degree appeared to be identity, that is, if the viewer mistook the painted curtain for one which might possibly exist, then the deception was perfect for it even robbed the human being of the unique rational capacity for exposing illusions.

Here lies the significant difference between Parrhasius and Zeuxis, the former having succeeded in deceiving human reason. Ernst Gombrich sees a trick hardly worthy of praise for, as he points out, Zeuxis could not have expected a painted curtain nor – one might add – could Francken have reckoned with a painted spider.<sup>37</sup> Also one did not ordinarily find clusters of painted fruit and vegetables either, as depicted by Beuckelaer (Fig. 26). Yet viewing the representation produced supreme delight in the painter's contemporaries.<sup>38</sup> Erasmus describes delight of this kind in a short conversation in the *Godly Feast (Convivium Religiosum)*. At the same time, pleasure in illusions also provided him with the opportunity to warn his guests against passing judgement too quickly. A guest asks: 'Those evenly spaced pillars that support the building, so fascinating by their marvellous variety of col-

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<sup>36</sup> For a philosophical reading of the anecdote see Peres, 'Nachahmung der Natur', pp. 1-39.

<sup>37</sup> See Gombrich, *Kunst und Illusion*, pp. 228-230. For artistic thought, reality and non-reality, in the sense of existence, are insignificant. All that counts is that the represented objects be probable.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the anecdote regarding Beuckelaer by Van Mander: 'Among other works – he applied himself mostly to painting kitchen pieces – he made for the mint master of Antwerp a very excellent piece which was commissioned from him for a low price; but daily the mint master added so many things that also had to be in it, for he always brought something novel to be portrayed (...) so completely full was the piece with fowl, fish, meat, fruit and vegetables'; Van Mander, *The lives*, vol. 1, p. 210, fols. 238r-v.

ours – are they marble?’ Erasmus has Eusebius answer: ‘The same marble this channel is made of (it is imitation marble made of cement)’. Thimotheus answered: ‘An artistic deception indeed. I’d have sworn they were marble’. Erasmus: ‘Let that be a warning to you not to believe or swear to anything rashly: appearances often deceive’.<sup>39</sup> Here, the viewer delights in the painted illusion as well, for a successful imitation can produce enjoyment of the production of similarity on the part of the viewer. Recognition in and of itself produces pleasure, as does the comparison with the actually existing object. Erasmus illustrates this later on once more using the example of painted and real flowers.<sup>40</sup> The precondition for this experience is the recognition that what is painted constitutes an illusion, for only then can correct conclusions be drawn and premature, misleading judgements be avoided.

In *Zedekunst*, the art of ethics, written by Dirk Volkertsz. Coornhert, aesthetic illusion also plays an important role in the process of forming judgements. In this treatise Coornhert describes the prerequisites and conditions necessary to lead a good, that is, a virtuous life. One important instrument for leading such a life is the education of humanity, the foundation of which is the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge primarily requires proper judgements and in this context the anecdote about the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius reappears. Coornhert describes misperception as a cognitive illusion and an epistemological category: Zeuxis’s assumption that a painting was to be found behind the curtain proved to be false. This assumption did not derive from the matter itself, however, but rather from certain premises. One can presume to find a painting behind a curtain, for curtains protect paintings from dust and light.<sup>41</sup> Thus, as is contended, the art of painting allows for two kinds of insight: recognition of the illusion – the reclining nude is not alive, but only painted as if it were – and recognition of false assumptions – I had assumed that this painted spider was real. This shows that misperceptions, particularly illusions of the senses, are

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<sup>39</sup> Erasmus, *Convivium Religiosum* 1997, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*: ‘One garden wasn’t enough to hold all kinds of plants. Moreover, we are twice pleased when we see a painted flower competing with a real one. In one we admire the cleverness of nature, in the other the inventiveness of the painter, in each the goodness of God, who gives all these things for our use and is equally wonderful and kind in everything’.

<sup>41</sup> With respect to Coornhert this example shows how eloquent people can depict a lie artfully with such probable words that most human beings tend to take it for the truth. Coornhert enumerates eight possibilities for acquiring knowledge: through the senses, through experience, through reason (‘*verstandicheyd*’), through faith, through presupposition (‘*toestemming*’), through misperceptions (‘*doling*’) and through science; Coornhert, *Zedekunst*, pp. 122-133, esp. p. 124.



based on consent to a previously passed judgement. In these paintings the deception exploits a cognitive mechanism with respect to both the creation and the destruction of the illusion. The work of art allows us to experience our constructivist cognitive processes, dependent as they are upon preconceptions and susceptible to deception.

The reference to the Zeuxis-Parrhasius anecdote by Van Ghistele also draws on a pictorial concept which equates the imitation of nature with copying reality. With respect to the value of this concept, they adopt positions familiar from Stoic epistemology. In defining what he means by the *artes liberales*, Van Ghistele also makes explicit reference to Seneca, an author very frequently quoted by Coornhert.<sup>42</sup> Thus it is of assistance to cast a glance at the Stoic conception of knowledge. The Stoics operated on the assumption that we receive all insight from empirically experienceable nature, and of all the five senses they attribute prime importance to the sense of sight, recognising it to be the most reliable sense perception.<sup>43</sup> They were convinced that the senses of perception were reliable and trustworthy. As they theorised, before a perception is incorporated into our understanding as a complete insight, it must pass through the transitional phase of sensory 'fantasy' ('phantasía aisthétiké'), this being the mediating connection between perception and understanding.

There are two types of sensory fantasies: those which reproduce the external world realistically ('cataleptic phantasies') and those which do not. Fantasies are cataleptic if they constitute a completely adequate reflection of an actually existing object.<sup>44</sup> Sextus Empiricus, in his *Adversus Mathematicos*, compares this with the work of a sculptor who copies the original in all its parts in a lifelike manner. The cataleptic fantasy should do the same, depicting all nuances of the exterior object clearly and accurately.<sup>45</sup> The un-

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<sup>42</sup> Seneca is cited in the margin as the source of the following stanza: 'Want conste soo den Philosoph [Seneca] spreeckt vroedich/ Den mensche groot maeckt/ia en vrijmoedich/ En daerom wordtse dickwils vry conste ghenaeft/ En diverse gaven/(aloot elcken bestaemt)/ Den mensche verleent door v verstandich gheest' ('For art, so the philosopher [Seneca] speaks wisely/ Makes man great and open-hearted/ And therefore she is often called liberal art/ And diverse gifts (as it befits everyone)/ you [art] bestow on man by your wise spirit'); *Spelen van sinne*, fol. P1.

<sup>43</sup> Stein, *Die Erkenntnistheorie*, p. 136. Concerning Stoic epistemology, see Pohlenz, *Die Stoa* as well. Concerning Stoic aesthetics, see Büttner, *Antike Ästhetik*, pp. 108-120. For Coornhert's interest in stoic philosophy, see Bongers, *Leven en werk*.

<sup>44</sup> Stein, *Erkenntnistheorie*, p. 168.

<sup>45</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Opera*, book VII, ll. 250; Stein, *Erkenntnistheorie*, p. 173. The thoughts of Sextus Empiricus were known from the mid-fifteenth century. In 1562 Henri Étienne published a Latin translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and in 1569, Gentian Hervet published the complete works of Sextus in Latin. For Étienne and Hervet, the use of classical scepticism became a way of undermining

derstanding then decides whether it consents to the fantasies which have presented themselves, categorising them as recognised truth, or whether these sensory fantasies constitute phantasms which should not be recognised as truths. The criterion used for ascertaining the reliability of such fantasies, in other words, which allows one to recognise sensory perceptions as true or false, lies in the degree of clarity which these images possess. Thus the guarantee of truth lies solely in the completely accurate reflection of external objects.<sup>46</sup> Various perceptions are brought together and compared time and again so that over the course of time a system of proven and tested perceptions evolves.

In the Stoics' view, the senses are not responsible for delusions, rather they are the result of judgements made when human beings prematurely accept images delivered by the senses as true, giving consent to them (*synkathesis*).<sup>47</sup> Thus Parrhasius's curtain would have constituted a case of cataleptic fantasy attributable to the experience of curtains. In such cases, experience with the deceptively painted picture shows that false fantasies such as misperceptions can indeed appear quite evident. These lead to false judgements and this in turn makes it clear that great care must be taken in giving consent to any putatively true fantasy. Since the question raised by Stoic epistemology concerning the criteria which should be applied in deciding whether to consent to a fantasy or not is not clearly answered, the sceptics attack them on this point and hold the view that one must refrain completely from making any dogmatic judgements about what presents itself to the subject.<sup>48</sup> However, neither Van Ghistele nor Coornhert are interested in refraining from making judgements. On the contrary, for Coornhert, deception is a path to self-knowledge, to the insight that one must be careful not to pass judgement too quickly, but employ scrutiny instead. Although we do not know if Coornhert made use of the writings of Sextus Empiricus, the comparison of the two arguments might be helpful. Whereas Sextus Empiricus used the sculptor to illustrate his point, Coornhert turned to the painter, refining the argument by doing so, for the sculptor creates a tangible figure while the painter only feigns the illusion of one.

Thus, Coornhert takes account of the changes in the appreciation of sculpture and painting in Antiquity and modern times while raising the issue of the human power of judgement and he refers to the fact that paintings are especially able to use illusion to deceive the viewer. Unlike sculpture, he

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the claims of having a certain and adequate criterion of religious knowledge. See Popkin, *Columbia History*, p. 329-330; Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*.

<sup>46</sup> Stein, *Erkenntnistheorie*, p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 144-146, with extensive information on sources.

<sup>48</sup> Büttner, *Antike Ästhetik*, pp. 142-143.

posits that painting can lead to insight into deception and demand more cautious, prudential judgements if its goal is the convincing imitation of nature. The lifelike depiction of people, the palpable appearance of objects, the deceptive imitation of materials and the creating of architectural depth through perspective remind viewers time and again that they cannot assume images of human beings or objects to be clearly given no matter how clear and distinct they might appear and that deception is a part of the human condition:

As is argued, it is terrible to let oneself be deceived, but I [Erasmus] contend that it is most terrible to not let oneself be deceived. For truly foolhardy are those who believe that human happiness lies in the things themselves; on the contrary, it depends on our opinions of things. (...) After all, human beings were made to be pleased by illusion much more than truth.<sup>49</sup>

Thus the very artificiality of Aertsen's and Beuckelaer's paintings – their constructed 'reality' – are what please the viewer, enabling them to adopt a new view of old, familiar things such as fruits and vegetables.<sup>50</sup> For Coornhert, like Erasmus before him, aesthetic judgements teach us to abstain from making hasty judgements about reality. In expressing his thanks to Ortelius, Coornhert showed himself to be quite familiar with the ideas current among artists and connoisseurs in Antwerp circles. In making reference to the anecdote about Zeuxis and Parrhasius he appears to be supplying a belated theoretical justification of the enthusiasm, highly pronounced in Antwerp, for deceptively lifelike pictures and this would seem to befit the modern intellectual attitude of sceptical reservation, quite distinctive of sixteenth-century Antwerp.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Erasmus, *Das Lob der Torheit*, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> On Pieter Aertsen's paintings and their art theoretical implications, see Falkenburg, 'Pieter Aertsen, Rhyparographer'.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance*.