

Jan Gossaert: Northern Light

Susan Foister

Jan Gossaert made his name working for the Burgundian court and was among the first northern artists to visit Rome, writes Susan Foister, curator of the only exhibition in more than 45 years of works by this archetypal 'Old Master'.

In the cold Brussels winter of 1511 the 47-year-old Philip of Burgundy, illegitimate son of Duke Philip the Good, both churchman and admiral, built a snowman. No ordinary snow figure, it took the form of Hercules, a classical figure associated in particular with the ruling Burgundian dynasty, and it was admired for its excellent proportions. Philip was a cultivated man and is said to have had some training in both painting and the art of the goldsmith, yet it is likely that he was helped to design the muscular snowman by the artist whose interest in classical antiquity he had taken pains to encourage, Jan Gossaert (c. 1478-1532).

On October 26th, 1508 Gossaert had set out for Italy with Philip, one of a retinue of 60 who arrived in Rome on January 14th, 1509. Philip had been sent by his cousin Margaret of Austria, governor of the Netherlands, on a diplomatic mission to treat with Pope Julius II. She was concerned by the recent tendency of the papacy to make its own appointments to lucrative ecclesiastical positions in the Low Countries; previously the Burgundian rulers had controlled these nominations to their local advantage. While diplomatic discussions took place Gossaert had an artistic mission of his own. He sketched the most famous monuments and sculptures of ancient Rome including the Colosseum and the seated figure of a boy pulling a thorn from his foot and other famous figures representing Hercules and Apollo. From these he probably assembled a book of finished drawings for Philip to peruse and admire. But he also gained a repertoire of sculptural motifs which he was to use over and over again in his paintings – and perhaps, on that one occasion, for a snowman.

Jan Gossaert was probably born in Maubeuge, Hainault in what is now northern France. His brother Nicasius became an architect and the family were evidently prosperous. Gossaert may well be the 'Jan of Hainaut' recorded as achieving the status of master in the Antwerp painters' guild of Saint Luke in 1503, though this is not certain. But wherever he himself trained he had accumulated an immaculate oil painting technique, one which enabled him to evoke the sensuous textures of fur, transparent silk and the gleam of precious jewels and metalwork, to convey the atmosphere of eerie moonlight and to represent arresting and engaging figures. To add to these attributes Gossaert was the first painter working in the Low Countries to deploy a knowledge of classical antiquity drawn not just from the prints used by his fellow artists, but directly from his experience in Rome.

It was not only Philip who was interested in antiquity. Margaret of Austria had a passion for works of art. Her collection included Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), as well as a replica of the classical statue of the boy with a thorn and Gossaert's painting *Salmacis and*

Hermaphrodite (now at the Mauritshuis in The Hague), which Philip evidently gave to her; it was kept in a cabinet of curiosities next to her garden. She also employed artists, including the Italian Jacopo de Barbari, whose engravings of classical subjects proved an inspiration for Gossaert, as well as Conrad Meit, a German sculptor who produced small figures of nudes and parts of Margaret's spectacular tomb at Brou, near Bourg en Bresse. Margaret employed Gossaert to restore some paintings at her palace at Mechelen in 1523; he stayed at Conrad Meit's house. Both Meit and the elderly de Barbari were evidently also employed by Philip of Burgundy and, along with Gossaert, must have spent time considering not only the ideal proportions of the human figure but also how best to shape the erotic subjects favoured by Philip.

Despite being a churchman, Philip was a notoriously loose liver. According to his secretary and chaplain, Gerard Geldenhouwer, he was not only 'rather passionate in the love of young girls', but dismissed any idea of clerical chastity with laughter 'saying it was impossible for men of sound body ... to live chastely'. His appointment as Bishop of Utrecht in 1517 did nothing to curb his interest in erotic art. He commissioned works from Gossaert which probably included the lifesize *Neptune and Amphitrite* (at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) in which Neptune, probably intended to represent an admiral, is shown naked except for a strategically placed conch shell. Other smaller works reflect the explicit content of works inventoried in 1529 at Philip's episcopal castle of Duurstede, such as a marble statue of Priapus. *Hercules and Deaneira* (at Birmingham's Barber Institute) shows the hero and his wife naked in a room panelled with coloured marble, their legs erotically intertwined. A drawing from the British Museum showing women bathing is squared for transfer to a larger surface, possibly a bathroom wall. A small painting of Venus and Cupid (at the Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels) has a frame with an inscription in Latin lamenting, perhaps ironically, the difficulty of controlling love. This frame can be removed, as another plain frame beneath it allows the painting to be enjoyed simply for the pleasures it offers, both aesthetic and voyeuristic.

Psychological realism as well as eroticism permeates Gossaert's highly innovative depictions of Adam and Eve. Traditionally part of religious narratives that opposed the sin committed in the Garden of Eden to the redemption of the Crucifixion, Gossaert tackled this theme with a novelist's interest in the changing relationship of the pair. He endows their naked figures with an intense sexual interest which makes the Fall entirely credible and creates a melancholy sense of sinfulness following the eating of the apple. In a similarly new twist to the traditional subject of the Virgin and Child Gossaert used his knowledge of classical sculpture and Italian art to depict a heroic, muscular Christ child, the future saviour of mankind, as well as conveying a tender relationship between mother and child. The confident and imaginative use of classical architecture as settings for his paintings became increasingly the mark of Gossaert's new Renaissance style, but often in combination with the latest flamboyant Gothic motifs.

In the latter part of his career, after the death of Philip of Burgundy in 1524, Gossaert received commissions from the exiled King Christian of Denmark, whom he portrayed in a magnificent drawing with the coats of arms of his lost territories, to be engraved as a propaganda print (in the Frits Lugt Collection, Paris). A painting from the National Gallery's own collection depicts Christian's young daughter Dorothea, who holds an inverted armillary sphere, her world turned upside down. A particularly engaging portrait of all three Danish children from the Royal Collection shows them in mourning for their mother Isabella of Austria, who died in 1526. Gossaert appears to have produced ideas for her tomb: a drawing represents a spectacularly elaborate classicising departure from traditional Netherlandish tomb design, though this design was never built.

Gossaert also received the patronage of other Netherlandish grandees. He worked for Philip of Burgundy's great-nephew Adolf, later Marquess of Veere, and painted portraits of his wife Anna van Bergen, one in ermine sleeves and a second one as the Virgin Mary holding her son Adolf as the infant Christ, an example of her devotion which appears startling today. His portraits include some of Gossaert's finest work, commissioned by men such as the churchman and administrator Jean Carondelet, the Emperor Charles V's secretary, Francisco de los Cobos y Molina and Henry III, Count of Nassau-Breda, who rebuilt his castle at Breda in the Renaissance style. At the end of his life Gossaert was receiving a pension from Henry and his third wife Mencía de Mendoza, the richest woman in Spain. For Philip, and for all of his powerful patrons, Gossaert's work signalled the arrival of the Renaissance in the Low Countries.

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