

DEFINING DE BACKER NEW EVIDENCE ON THE LAST PHASE OF ANTWERP MANNERISM BEFORE RUBENS

BY

ECKHARD LEUSCHNER

EVEN Carel van Mander, though praising the great talent of the late 16th-century painter Jacob ('Jacques') de Backer, knew little about this Antwerp-based artist and the scope of his activities¹. It is, therefore, not surprising to find De Backer's pictures cited in comparatively few Antwerp art inventories of the 17th and 18th centuries². The provenance of only a handful of the paintings today attributed to Jacob de Backer can be documented. The artist's name, moreover, never features in the membership lists ('liggeren') of Antwerp's guild of painters. The art market, however, does not appear to be impressed by this fact: The name of De Backer is regularly applied to late 16th-century Flemish pictures with marble-like figures reminiscent of the Florentine *Cinquecento* manner. 'Jacob de Backer', it seems,

has become an art-collector's synonym for a certain type of 'elegant' paintings made by the last generation of Antwerp artists before Rubens, just as 'Jan Brueghel' once was a synonym for early 17th-century Antwerp landscapes. Yet, while many efforts have been made in recent years to constitute a corpus of Jan Brueghel's paintings and drawings, the art of Jacob de Backer remains to be explored.

Scholarly approaches to De Backer have so far been limited to efforts at a traditional *œuvre catalogue*³. Müller Hofstede, Huet, Foucart, and everyone else following them (the author of this paper included) tried to create or enlarge a corpus of works of art produced by a distinct personality called Jacob de Backer. It cannot be overlooked, however, that the pictures and drawings assembled



FIG. 1. — The DE BACKER Group. *The Last Judgment*, canvas, 164 × 198 cm. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten. Photo National Artistic Patrimonium of Belgium.

under this name, although related by subject choice and their 'Italianate' manner, exhibit an uneven level of artistic quality⁴. Many so-called De Backer pictures, moreover, are known in several versions or replicas. Only rarely can one of these be declared clearly superior to the others.

Carel van Mander's biography of Jacob de Backer, although informative in a way that will be discussed below, is short and contains no precise date except for the information that the artist died before he was 30 years old. None of the paintings mentioned by Van Mander as De Backer's has been securely identified⁵, while only three known pictures can be traced back by means of provenance to the days of De Backer. Yet, even these three works have to be handled with care if they are to be used for the attribution of other, undocumented paintings⁶. A *Last Judgment* (fig. 1) in the Antwerp Museum of Fine Arts that displays a highly characteristic assembly of *maniera nuda*

carries the inscription 'Jacob de Backer fecit' and an illegible date so far read as '1571'⁷. The date and signature could provide us with an excellent starting point for further attributions — had it not been argued that this picture is a workshop pastiche of a painting in a private collection (Huet)⁸ or that it imitates the composition of the so-called *Plantin epitaph* (fig. 2) in the Antwerp cathedral, a triptych belonging to the burial place of the famous publisher Christoph Plantin, who died in 1589 (Van de Velde)⁹. The Plantin epitaph, cited as a work of Jacob de Backer since the 18th century¹⁰, also represents a *Last Judgment*; it bears the date '1591' on the left wing. Although even this date has been doubted as the actual year of the painting's production¹¹, the *Plantin Epitaph* is generally considered one of the late works of De Backer. An important commission such as this epitaph, Müller Hofstede argued¹², would not have gone to a beginner.

Because many other paintings ascribed to De Backer show nudes, an obvious criterion for the validity of their attribution would seem to be a comparison with the two *Last Judgments* in Antwerp. One could even state it as a rule of thumb: The more closely a 16th century painted nude with Antwerp *flair* resembles a figure on one of these two *Last Judgments* (cautious as we have to be about their doubtful status as originals), the likelier is an attribution to Jacob de Backer¹³. The problem is, of course, to apply this criterion to each of the possible candidates. In the corpus of undocumented paintings attributed to De Backer by Müller Hofstede, there are only two large-scale religious paintings that must have been commissioned for public view in churches¹⁴. Both pictures display a rich repertory of contorted figures and twisted poses in a style more or less related to the two *Last Judgments* mentioned above – but not a single figure's posture or execution bears a striking resemblance that allows a unanimous attribution to the same painter.

Even if we had four or five large religious commissions securely connected with Jacob de Backer, they would be of little use in dealing with the greater number of small figure paintings currently ascribed to the artist. Many of these represent female nudes painted in an adaptation of the manner of Bronzino and Vasari (figs. 3 and 4). Their format and subject identifies them as collector's pieces that were never intended for public exhibition, while their style sorts them out as a group of its own in late 16th-century Flemish painting: This not only applies to the refined 'Florentine' colors, but also to the volumetric definition and weighty monumentality lent to each figure. All of these pictures appear to have been painted at a time when Bartholomeus Spranger's lighter and more fluent manner in depicting the human body had not yet set the standard in Antwerp. Apart from these general characteristics, however, there are considerable diversities in quality and style. It is simply speculative to connect all of these paintings with a single Antwerp artist recorded to have been active in the late 16th century.

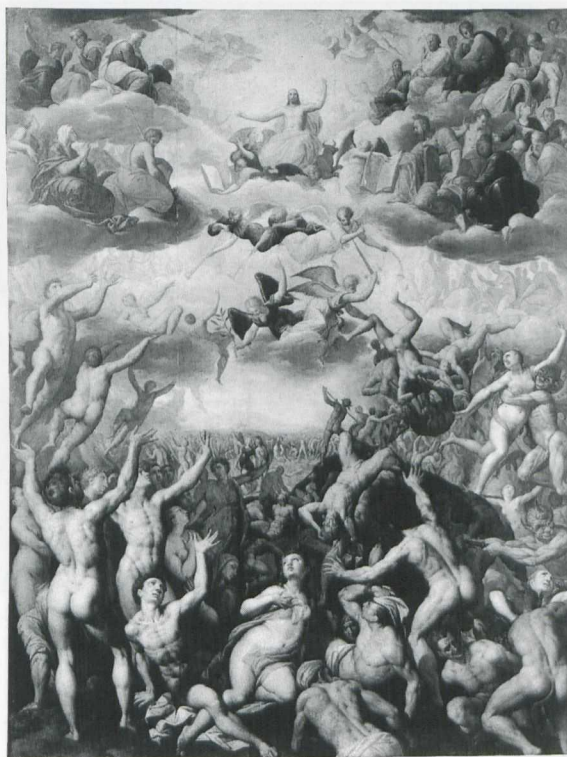


FIG. 2. – Jacob DE BACKER (attributed to). *The Plantin Epitaph*, panel, 136 × 104 cm. Antwerp, Cathedral. Photo National Artistic Patrimonium of Belgium.

There are, of course, several prints that carry a *Jacob de Backer invenit*. Their engravers must have relied on a drawing by De Backer, since none of the prints appears to reproduce a known painting. Theoretically, the prints can be employed to establish or corroborate the attribution of paintings to the artist or his circle. However, it is a difficult task to perceive an individual style or drawing manner in the sometimes rather awkward products of late 16th-century Antwerp printmaking. The evidence of prints does not dispense us from defining artistic quality. It thus comes as no surprise that a painted *Patientia* in Warsaw¹⁵, which has been shown to be related to an engraving that carries a *De Backer invenit*, looks disappointing if



FIG. 3. – The DE BACKER Group. *Venus and Cupid*, panel, 73 × 52 cm. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie. Photo museum.

compared with an 'autograph' picture such as the *Last Judgment* in the Antwerp cathedral. Another *De Backer invenit* print (fig. 5), that is part of a *Five Senses* series, served to name the author of an allegorical painting in the Meiningen museum (fig. 6)¹⁶. The composition of both works is indeed similar; as to painterly quality, the Meiningen picture can undoubtedly rank as a first class piece. Still, one has to be aware of the fact that the *Five Senses* etchings are not a product of De Backer's lifetime. They were published (and probably also made) by Joannes Meyssens, a 17th-century Antwerp etcher who must have relied on original drawings by the artist, one of which (according to Suzanne Boorsch) may be identical with a sheet preserved in the Leiden printroom (fig. 7). A comparison of the Leiden drawing¹⁷ and the print based on it makes clear that Meyssens modernized and simplified the artistic means of his model. The prints, therefore, cannot bear witness to any particular characteristics of the artist's drawing manner – they merely give a general outline of the way a Northern 'mannerist' such as De Backer would have arranged his figures and compositions¹⁸. At a time when pictures in the Florentine style were fashionable with private collectors in Antwerp and elsewhere, De Backer is



FIG. 4. – The DE BACKER Group. *Lying Female Nude*, canvas, 148 × 187 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen. Photo museum.

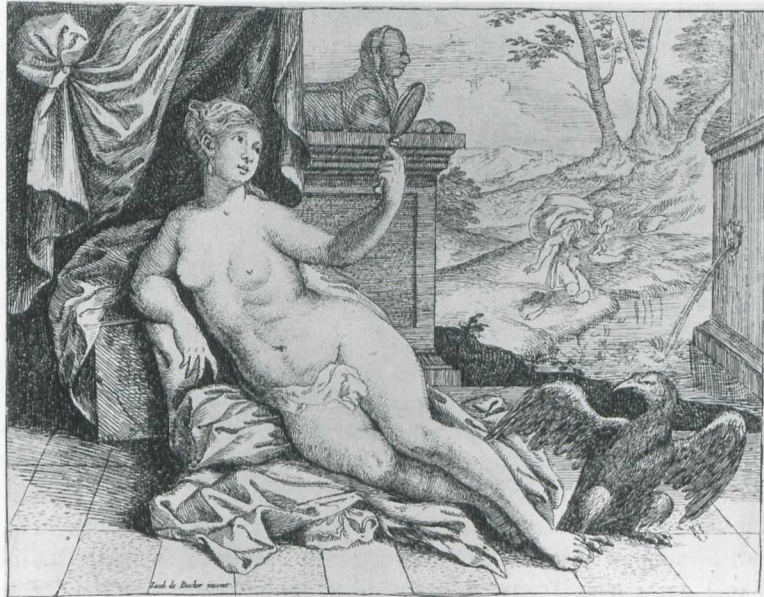


FIG. 5. – *The Sense of Sight*, 'Jacob de Backer inventit', etching. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina. Photo museum

unlikely to have been the only artist who consistently adhered to this manner.

At present, as long as we have only a comparatively small number of pictures with serious claims to be authentic works by Jacob de

Backer, it would be unwise to establish anything but a corpus of what should be called the *De Backer group*. Such a procedure, combined with a scrupulous definition of artistic quality, may eventually lead to a convincing *catalogue raisonné*

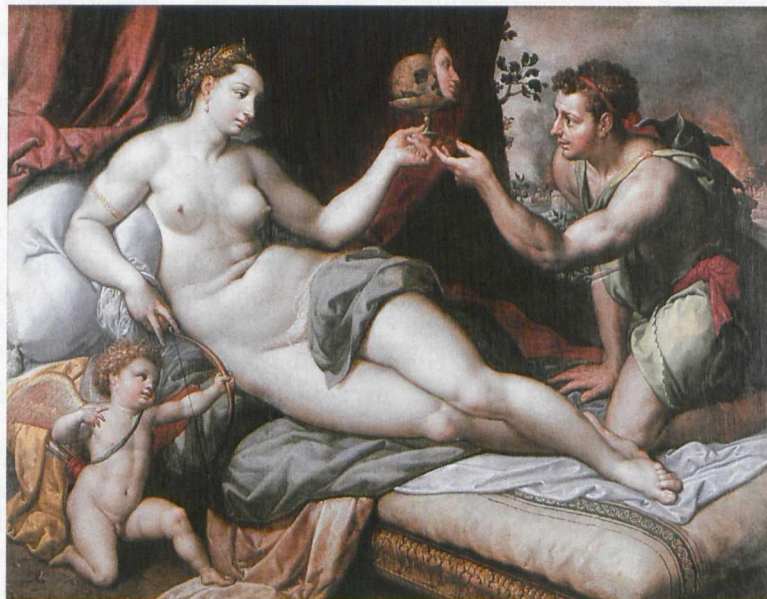


FIG. 6. – The DE BACKER Group. *Venus and Paris*, canvas, 145 × 188 cm. Meiningen, Staatliche Museen, Schloß Elisabethenburg. Photo museum.



FIG. 7. – Jacob DE BACKER (attributed to).
The Sense of Smell, pen drawing. Leiden
 University, Printroom. Photo museum.

of the artist. In the meantime, however, the pictures of the De Backer group should be approached from a different angle: Before trying to reconstruct a particular painter's œuvre, one should face the so-called *De Backer* paintings published by scholars and art dealers as what they are – witnesses to a phenomenon in Flemish art history that requires explanation: We should ask ourselves how the problem of defining this particular artistic personality is related to the cultural and social conditions under which the pictures in question were produced.

In the early modern period, stylistic innovations spread fast in Western Europe. Especially at the end of the 16th century, the art market was extremely internationalized: Not only did new artistic inventions soon become available in prints¹⁹, but artists and artisans alike travelled widely and readily accepted commissions from all over Europe. The history of the cultural exchange between Italy and the North is long and complicated. Yet, without over-simplifying, certain trends in 16th-century art can be discerned. Since the turn of the century, many Netherlandish painters, among them Michiel Coxcie, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Frans Floris, and Carel van Mander, had made their journeys to Italy. They not only copied the canon of ancient and

contemporary art, but also, while in Italy, often worked in teams of painters employed for large decorative projects in churches, palaces and villas such as Palazzo Vecchio, Villa d'Este, or Caprarola. These Netherlanders brought back to their native cities the most recent stylistic trends and developments. In addition, they had learned to organize and operate their artistic activities as a profitable business. While Michiel Coxcie successfully transferred the visual means and workshop structure of Raphael to the North²⁰, Frans Floris became influential in his home town Antwerp by combining Raphael's *modus operandi* with the 'sculptural' plasticity of Michelangelo's frescoes. A few years later, Maerten de Vos also established a huge workshop whose structure superficially resembles the city's medieval studio practice and craftsmanship, although both Floris and De Vos actually created proto-industrial enterprises with a staff of assistants, apprentices and other employees whose specialized responsibilities resulted in an efficient division of labor.

While the medieval guild regulations of Antwerp had been designed for a largely self-contained market, the late 16th century not only witnessed new forms of art production, but also the rise of a different clientele for art: In the

1560's, 1570's and 1580's, painters increasingly had to turn to private collectors in and outside Antwerp to compensate for the declining number of church and state commissions. Both the political instability and two iconoclastic riots (1566 and 1581) prompted Antwerp artists to concentrate on the growing private demand for secular and religious subjects. Many of their pictures appear to have been produced without a commission, i.e. they were made for sale on the free market.

As Leen Huet has pointed out, the absence of De Backer's name from the papers of the Antwerp guild of painters is likely to have been caused by the high costs required for a young artist to receive the status of an independent master (*vrijmeester*)²¹. Edicts repeatedly issued in the late 16th century by the town authorities prohibited a skilled painter to nominally work under the control of another master to save the guild charges. The mere existence of such edicts, however, points to the fact that exactly these conditions were common. Jacob de Backer appears to have been one of a considerable number of Antwerp painters who chose to make their living under these terms. In De Backer's case, the name of the man he worked for is known: According to Van Mander, the artist was in the service of the painter and picture dealer (*een schilder die oock Coopmanschap dede in schilderije*) Antonio da Palermo alias Anthoni van Palarme.

Several archival documents also mention Palermo, who undoubtedly was of Italian origin²². He was admitted to the Antwerp guild of St. Luke as a painter in 1545 and appointed dean of the guild five times between 1555 and 1571. His funeral dues were paid to the guild in 1588/89. Since no extant works by Antonio Palermo are known, we are unable to judge his talent as an artist. It appears, however, that he was successful as an art dealer and impresario who, relying on assistants such as De Backer, built up a large enterprise dedicated to the production of collector's pictures to be sold both locally and internationally. Van Mander, in fact, records that Palermo exported many of De Backer's paintings

to France (*den welcken de dinghen van Jacques veel schickte nae Vrancryck / daer sy veel vercocht werden*)²³. Thus it may not be by chance that relatively few De Backer group paintings can today be found in Flemish collections. The painters in the service of Antonio Palermo worked for an internationalized market.

Antonio Palermo appears also to have been active as a publisher of prints²⁴. Printmaking and print-publishing was a highly profitable business in 16th-century Antwerp²⁵. The efficient organization of the city's publishers, in fact, may have provided a model for art entrepreneurs such as Palermo. It is known that towards the last third of the century Antwerp printmaking was increasingly characterized by a tight control of the design process and the application of industrial production methods: Philips Galle, for example, did not believe in the principles of his predecessor Hieronymus Cock who had given great artistic freedom to the individual engravers in his service. Early in his career, Galle worked as a printmaker himself, but after 1580 he concentrated on the publishing side of his business, always insisting on the indistinguishable character of the images that were to leave his shop. While in Cock's workshop each engraver was allowed to cultivate an individual manner, Galle created a 'house engraving style' that today makes the products of his enterprise easily recognizable but leaves little room for the identification of individual artists²⁶.

There can be no doubt that a huge percentage of the art production in late 16th-century Antwerp, printmaking and painting alike, belonged to this context of a highly developed manufacturing culture. The De Backer group paintings were, except for a few special cases that will be discussed below, industrially created products for a clientele of private collectors. Regarding local buyers, De Backer group paintings must have especially appealed to those who were well acquainted with the recent trends in French and Italian art. In fact, prior to their identification as products of Netherlandish artists, many of these pictures were attributed to the Italian school.



FIG. 8. – The DE BACKER Group. *Lot and His Daughters*, panel, 82.5 × 106 cm. Potsdam, Sanssouci, Bildergalerie. Photo Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg.

Yet, even in the late 16th century Netherlandish artists tended to combine quotations from foreign art with local visual traditions. The great legacy of Northern art from Jan van Eyck to Quinten Massys

and beyond never quite vanished. The success of the De Backer group (as attested by the great number of replicas) may thus be related to the way in which the pictures blend elements of Italian and

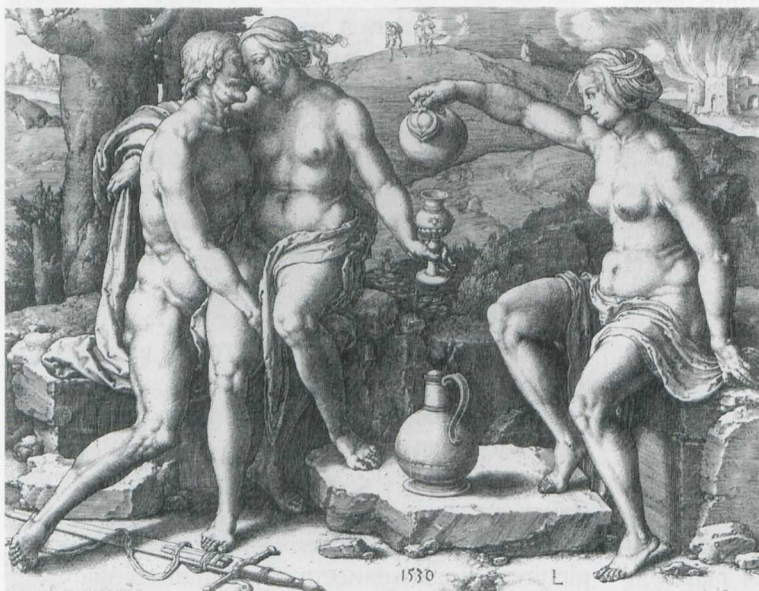


FIG. 9. – Lucas VAN LEYDEN. *Lot and His Daughters*, engraving. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina. Photo museum.

Northern art, leaving it to the connoisseur to separate both visual cultures. For example, *Lot and His Daughters* in Sanssouci (fig. 8), a picture for which models in Italian Cinquecento painting have been proposed in the past²⁷, is in fact based on a Netherlandish print of the early 16th century (fig. 9). Therefore, the female figure on the right is not, as Müller Hofstede suggested, copied after a fresco by Taddeo Zuccari in the Villa Giulia. Instead, her posture follows an engraving by Lucas van Leyden of 1520. Van Leyden's print has influenced the entire composition of the Potsdam picture, although the painter has varied certain elements. Lot and the other daughter, for example, have changed their places. The most interesting aspect of the painting, however, is the way in which the artist has enhanced Van Leyden's composition by introducing a marble-like rendering of flesh and a rich use of draperies that is typical for Florentine paintings of the later Cinquecento. The two female figures convey an impression of both grace and monumentality – a combination rarely achieved by the preceding generation of Netherlandish painters, i.e. those active in the middle of the 16th century.

The Potsdam painting was bought as a Raphael by Frederick the Great²⁸. Even a rather inexperienced collector such as the Prussian king would not have accepted a picture of the same subject by Pieter Pourbus or Frans Floris under the same revered name. The *Lot* picture thus conveys a good idea of how some Netherlandish painters of the last third of the 16th century successfully assimilated the Italian manner²⁹. The small format of this example of 16th-century 'international style' in Antwerp art suggests that the picture was a typical collector's piece. A version of the Potsdam painting, in fact, features on the wall of a painted *cabinet d'amateur* by Hieronymus Francken in Helsinki³⁰. Almost a dozen versions of *Lot and His Daughters* are recorded in the De Backer files of the Rubenianum in Antwerp; the composition's erotic innuendo must have ensured many buyers. The Potsdam picture belongs to the group of Antwerp figure paintings most intensely influenced by the Italian *maniera*. As has been

proposed above, this corpus should be called the De Backer group. However, unsigned and undocumented as *Lot and His Daughters* is, the picture cannot be convincingly attributed to Jacob de Backer and should not be used to back other attributions of paintings to the artist³¹.

Carel van Mander does not mention if De Backer ever went to Italy, and, given the short period of his activity as reported in the *Schilderboek*³², such a journey is far from likely. In fact, from a stylistic point of view the bulk of paintings today assembled under De Backer's name may well have been produced without a direct knowledge of the Roman and Florentine canon. Not only could many aspects of the Italian manner be studied in Antwerp collections, but the painters of the De Backer group also benefited from a constant flow of new art imports from Italy. For example, Jan van der Straet alias Giovanni Stradano regularly sent drawings to Antwerp which his publisher Philips Galle turned into immensely popular prints³³. Huet, in fact, has detected quotations from a Stradano print in the *Plantin Epitaph*³⁴.

As will be demonstrated, influences of foreign art can also be observed in several of the small-scale nudes mentioned above (figs. 3, 4, 11, 12, 14). Although none of the pictures can be firmly ascribed to De Backer, a passage in the *Schilderboek* may be read as confirmation that the artist produced this type of secular subject: Carel van Mander, in his life of De Backer, claims to have seen a series of three pictures by the artist in the collection of a 'Sr. Oppenbergh'³⁵. He describes the paintings as half life-size representations of Venus, Juno and Minerva – the goddesses involved in the *Judgment of Paris* – with a number of attributes added to each of them. It is probably not due to a mistake that Van Mander makes no mention of Paris. The shepherd as the traditional judge of female beauty was apparently left out by Jacob de Backer: He seems to have depicted three standing women in three separate pictures, reserving the role of Paris to the beholder. This witty constellation is rare in the art of the period. One of the few other

representations of the three goddesses without Paris can be found in an engraving after Giovanni Stradano published by Philips Galle (fig. 10)³⁶. Venus, Minerva (Pallas) and Juno, whose names are inscribed above their heads, are represented in elegant poses reminiscent of the *Three Graces*³⁷. Venus is accompanied by Cupid whose bow is lying on the ground. The personality of Juno is indicated by her standard attribute, the peacock. Stradano has stressed the importance of Pallas by assigning to her the prominent middle position; she has turned away chastely from the spectator's eyes. Paris figures only in the inscription.



FIG. 10. – Unknown Engraver after Giovanni STRADANO. *Venus, Minerva and Juno*, 'Joannes Stradanus invenit.', 'Phil Galle excu.'. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina. Photo museum.

The print of Galle appears to be cited in the painting of a standing *Venus* in Écouen (fig. 11) that displays the typical colors and the marble likeness of the De Backer group nudes. *Venus* (of which there is at least one replica³⁸) has already been connected with De Backer's Oppenbergh series – the Écouen picture may thus be a version of the painting that Van Mander described. A stylistically related *Juno* (fig. 12) was once in the Pazzagli collection in Florence³⁹. Although the picture is known only from a photograph in the Witt Library, this female nude appears to be close in style to the Écouen *Venus*. Both works combine the depiction of an elegant nude with a moralizing

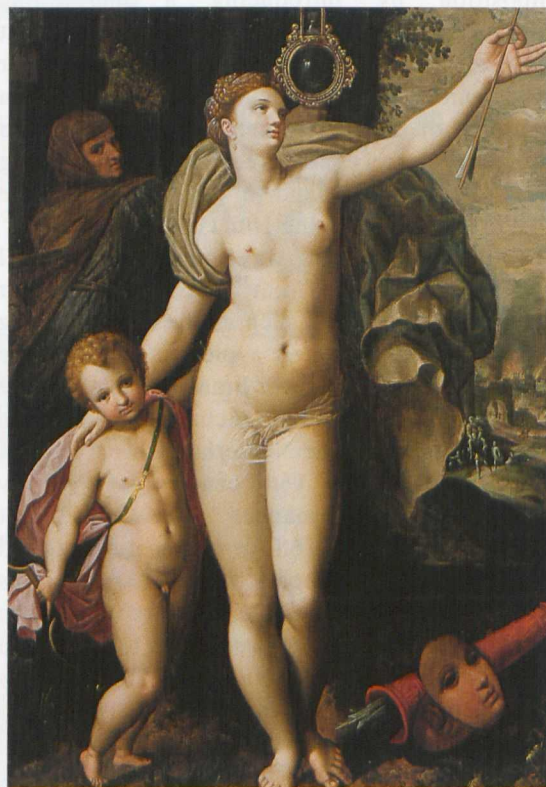


FIG. 11. – The DE BACKER Group. *Venus*, panel, 108 × 76 cm. Écouen, Musée national de la Renaissance. Photo Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

message; next to the Pazzagli *Juno* we perceive a sitting Saturn whose attributes (scythe, straw, hour-glass, mask⁴⁰) indicate the vanity of all things worldly⁴¹. In the background, king Midas is represented as he tries to wash away his ability of turning everything he touches into gold. Juno herself, who is possibly depicted in her ancient function as *Dea Moneta*, appears to offer a moral choice to the beholder: While her left hand points down to a heap of coins and precious objects, her raised right hand holds a golden goblet. This detail is ultimately indebted to Raphael's *Psyche* in the Farnesina whose goblet is meant to symbolize the soul in its bodily vessel ('corpus quasi vas'). In the Pazzagli painter's interpretation of Raphael, Juno's gesture amounts to a warning to esteem the soul (= the content of the goblet) higher than all goods worldly (= the coins).

As already pointed out, Stradano's invention may have served as a model for the Écouen and Pazzagli nudes – compare for example the legs and feet of the *Venus* and (which is even more striking) those of *Juno* with the pose of Stradano's *Venus*. It is unclear if the Écouen and Pazzagli pictures can be identified with those once in the Oppenbergh collection, since Antwerp inventories of the early 17th century record at least two similar series in other local collections⁴². Galle's engraving, however, appears to have inspired both De Backer's Oppenbergh nudes and his omission of Paris. This is not an isolated case: A detail of a painting attributed to De Backer in the Perpignan museum (fig. 13), representing Venus and Cupid in the company of Bacchus and Ceres, appears also to be influenced by Stradano's composition. The pose of the standing Cupid in the Perpignan picture is a direct quotation from Galle's print (fig. 10)⁴³.

If the Oppenbergh series indeed consisted of three separate pictures, we have to look for a painting of a nude *Minerva* as the former centrepiece. A possible candidate, already taken into consideration by Müller Hofstede, is a painting in Copenhagen (fig. 8) that represents a standing *Minerva* seen from the back. Müller Hofstede could have confirmed his attribution of

this nude to De Backer by a stylistic comparison with a similar figure in the *Last Judgment* in the Antwerp museum (fig. 2, extreme left of the picture). The author, however, also observed that the measurements of the Copenhagen picture differ from the *Venus* painting in Écouen. These two pictures are unlikely to have been pendants. Nevertheless, given the fact that many De Backer group paintings are known in two or more versions, it can be argued that the Copenhagen painting is a replica of the missing Oppenbergh *Minerva*.

Again, we will not concentrate on the possible attribution of a work of art (in this case of the Copenhagen picture) to a particular artist called Jacob de Backer. Instead, I will turn to the question of what artistic influences can be identified in the *Minerva* painting. The nude appears to have no model in Antwerp art nor



FIG. 12. – The DE BACKER Group. *Juno*, support and dimensions unknown. Private collection. Photo The Witt Library.



FIG. 13. – The DE BACKER Group. *Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus*, panel, 125 × 96 cm. Perpignan, Musée Rigaud. Photo museum.

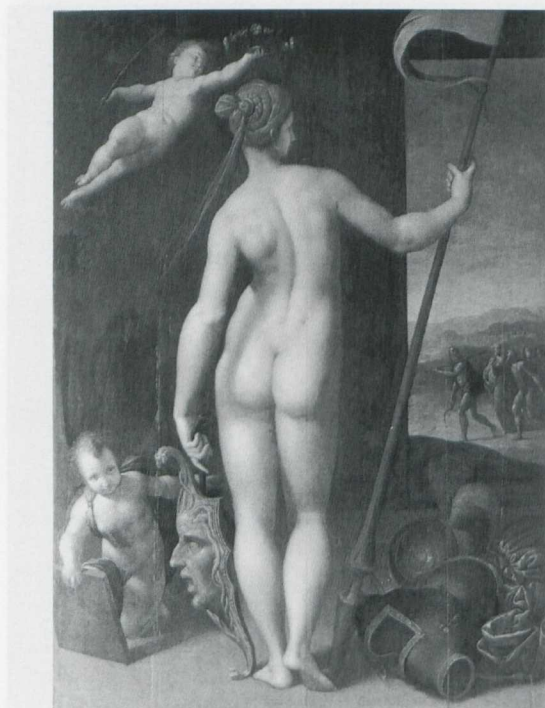


FIG. 14. – The DE BACKER Group. *Minerva*, panel, 141.5 × 100 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst. Photo museum.

among the female deities engraved by Jacopo Caraglio⁴⁴. Instead, the Copenhagen picture is closely related to a little-known print (fig. 15) that Robert Dumesnil⁴⁵ once attributed to René Boyvin (Levron, being more cautious, assigned it to the workshop of this skilled Fontainebleau master⁴⁶). While the *Minerva* engraving is indeed far from outstanding in quality (mark the clumsy rendering of the muscles), its origin in the circle of Boyvin can be established beyond doubt by a stylistic comparison with similar prints catalogued by Levron⁴⁷. Boyvin's *Minerva* exhibits, in reverse, the characteristic posture of the figure in the Copenhagen painting. Only the background scene and the putto on the left are missing, while the genius who crowns the goddess is rendered much more elegantly in the painting. His pose echoes that of several similar flying figures in pictures attributed to Jacob de Backer, for example in the so-called *Sapientia* (fig. 16)⁴⁸.

A comparison with Boyvin's print not only demonstrates the wide range of models employed by the De Backer group, it also confirms Van Mander's information that De Backer's master Antonio Palermo explicitly urged his student to

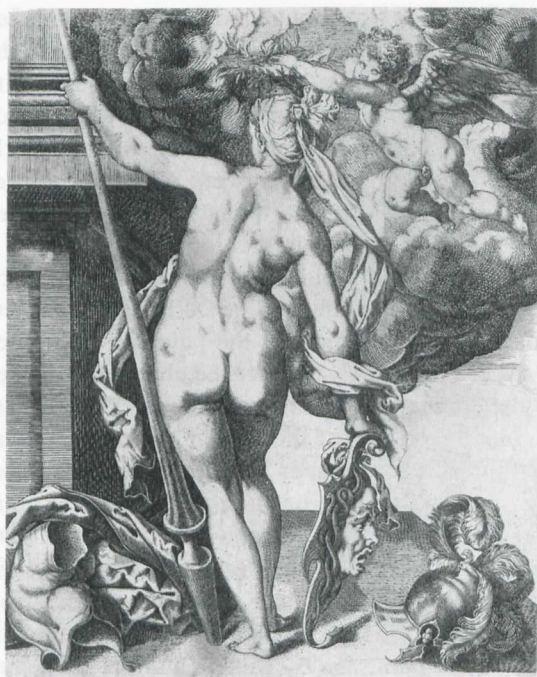


FIG. 15. – René BOYVIN or workshop. *Minerva*, engraving. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo Jörg P. Anders.

produce paintings for the French market⁴⁹. For example, two paintings by De Backer are listed in the Besançon inventory of cardinal Granvelle⁵⁰. An orientation of the Copenhagen picture towards a French clientele is also implied by the – previously unrecognized – depiction of *Hercules Ogmios* or *Gallicus* in the right background. This detail follows Lucian's famous *ekphrasis* in which the French Hercules who personifies the power of speech leads his followers on golden chains issuing from his mouth (fig. 17)⁵¹. Made in Antwerp but intended to fit into the collector's culture of France, the *Minerva* testifies to the international perspective of late 16th-century Antwerp art.

Painting and printmaking in pre-Rubens Antwerp is usually seen in the context of the city's peculiar political and economic situation. No art historian forgets to mention the date 1585, when the Catholic reconquest of Antwerp led by

Alessandro Farnese provoked the exodus of many Protestant painters and the introduction of the artistic regulations defined by the Tridentine council in 1563⁵². Questions regarding the style and decorum of public art, however, had been considered important issues much earlier in the Netherlands: Throughout the 16th century, the commissions of the Hapsburgs and their administrators influenced a considerable part of the local production. Basically, the artists of the Hapsburgs' choice adhered to the formulas of an 'imperial' style that had been patronized by Charles V but continued to flower well into the early 17th century. It is no accident that Michiel Coxie (1497/99-1592), who after the death of Charles V continued to work for Margaret of



FIG. 16. – The DE BACKER Group. *Sapientia*, canvas, 137 × 109 cm. Private collection. Photo Courtesy Christie's.

xcii

LIB. II.

HIC HERCVLES EST GALLICVS:
INTELLEGAT, QVI AVRES HABET.

Symb. XLIII.

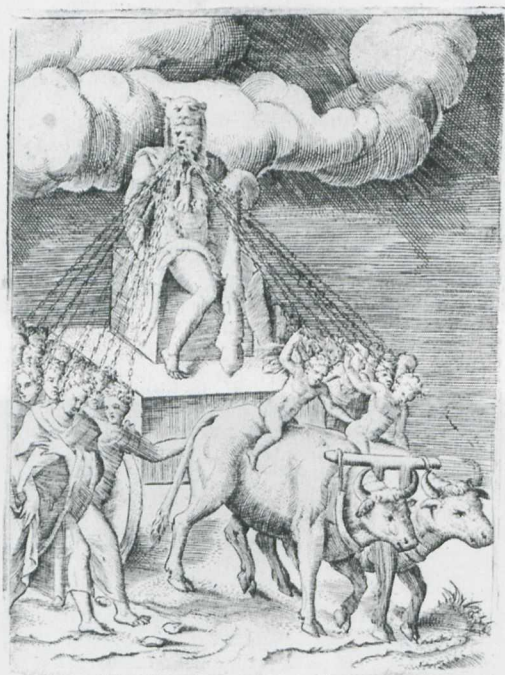


FIG. 17. – Giulio BONASONE. *Hercules Gallicus*, etching. Oldenburg, Landesbibliothek. Photo Bibliothek.

Austria, was also employed as *pictor regis* to Philip II of Spain before and after 1585. In this important function, Coxcie not only painted copies of Jan van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece for the Spanish King, but also produced pictures that were meant to replace altarpieces destroyed in the iconoclastic riots. The choice of Coxcie as the painter of these altarpieces is significant, since he adhered to the standards of the Italian High Renaissance as defined by Raphael and Sebastiano del Piombo. The restorative first phase of the counter-reformation in Antwerp is thus characterised

by an art that was thought to have been codified once and for all in Italy in the first third of the century. Though additionally operating with quotations from the Venetian school, Maerten de Vos, the other preferred painter of the early counter-reformation in Antwerp, also exemplifies the period's growing demand for simplified compositions and 'natural' colors.

Carel van de Velde, tentatively followed by Vlieghe, has dated the end of De Backer's activity around 1585, arguing that the paintings attributed to the artist show no trace of the changes provoked by the counter-reformation, as they never progress beyond the sphere of the Italian *maniera* that was now falling from grace. Van de Velde's argument is difficult to accept, on the one hand because, as has just been pointed out, the 'new' artistic means of (religious) art in the Netherlands after 1585 actually reflected the classics of Italian painting, that in important segments of local production (e.g. in the paintings by Coxcie and his shop) had never ceased to be influential. It can even be said that both the monumentalized figures and the reduced display of emotions in the religious pictures attributed to De Backer emulate the hard-edged clarity of 'High Renaissance' painting. If compared with Pieter Pourbus the Elder and the followers of Floris, the De Backer group indeed shows a carefully limited colour spectrum (mostly grays, blues and greens, with a few reds and oranges for the highlights), while the draperies are also much simpler and more elegant.

The year 1585 as the limit of De Backer's activity is also problematic because the bulk of the De Backer group's production appears to have been made for private collectors, whose taste cannot be expected to have agreed with the new standards defined for 'public' art. Therefore, a private demand for Antwerp art with secular (i.e. humanist and erotic) subjects in the 'Italian' manner must have existed after 1585. It should not be ignored that the addition of a moralizing note, a hint at the vanity of all beauty, or the quotation of a Latin classic, easily excused any such subject⁵³. The counter-reformation, moreover, appears to have considered the control of 'secular' subjects

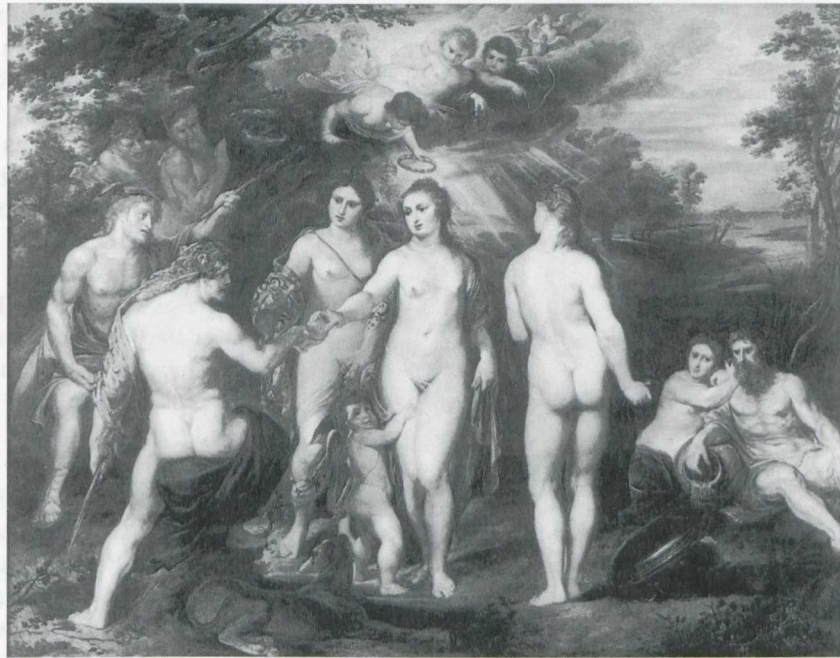


FIG. 18. – Peter Paul RUBENS. *The Judgment of Paris*, panel, 133.9 × 174.5 cm. London, The National Gallery. Photo museum.

for private purposes less important than that of religious and/or 'public' art⁵⁴. However impecunious the city's *dilettanti* may have been, there is no reason to believe that Antwerp painters were excluded from the international market for private collectors. On the contrary, the earliest known pictures by Abraham Janssens and Hendrick van Balen clearly indicate that both painters (who learned their art in the early 1590's) must have witnessed an ongoing local production of secular pictures in the De Backer group style. The female nudes in Rubens's early *Judgment of Paris* (fig. 18), although indebted to Marcantonio Raimondi's print of the same subject, are also unthinkable without the example of the De Backer group nudes. On the basis of a comparison with pictures by Rubens's teacher Otto van Veen, Fiona Healy has recently demonstrated that Rubens painted this picture when still in Antwerp rather than after his arrival in Italy⁵⁵. Both the cool 'Florentine' colors and the sculpture-like rendering of the female nudes and flying putti in the London *Judgment of Paris* are indeed influenced by the artist's knowledge of *maniera*

pictures in his home town Antwerp – however, this applies not only to works by Otto van Veen, but also to many such paintings by the De Backer group. All in all, there is no proof for the opinion that pictures with 'Florentine' postures and colors ceased to be painted and collected after the Catholic reconquest of the city.

The local and international sale of De Backer group paintings must have been promoted by the period's humanist culture whose allegorical language transcended all borders. Although subjects such as *Peace and Justice Embracing* (fig. 19) expressed Antwerp's longing for civil concord and thus had a special local motivation⁵⁶, they could be understood – and sold – anywhere else. The same principle of 'cultural compatibility' applies to the so-called *Allegory of the Burdens of Life* (figs. 20 and 21): The composition is extant in at least four replicas, one of which may be identical with a painting mentioned as De Backer's in an early Hapsburg inventory⁵⁷. A previously unpublished drawing in the Dresden printroom (fig. 22)⁵⁸ may well be a study for one of these paintings or a thematically related



FIG. 19. – The DE BACKER GROUP. *Peace and Justice Embracing*, canvas, 194 × 152 cm. Private collection. Photo Courtesy Christie's.

picture, although it appears to be by a different hand than the Leiden sheet mentioned above (fig. 7). Another *De Backer invenit* print, the *Allegory of Law and Grace*⁵⁹ (fig. 23), is arranged around a man whose pose is close to that of the hero of the *Allegory of the Burdens of Life*. The print, however, displays such a clumsy conflation of elements and figures that it can, at best, be labeled a pastiche of several independent compositions of the De Backer group. We are thus faced with the workshop practice of keeping a stock of poses and motifs to be used in various contexts.

It is ironic that the intellectual aspirations of many De Backer group compositions apparently did not stand in the way of their repetition, multiplication and sale on the free market. The production of replicas resembles the print-run of

Antwerp's contemporary printmaking industry whose products in many cases also offer the closest iconographic parallels: Both the choice of humanist subjects and several painted tablets reserved for written explications relate De Backer group pictures to the visual conventions of the many emblem books and prints that were published in late 16th-century Antwerp. An *Allegory of Vanity* (fig. 24) recently offered for sale as a Jacob de Backer is a case in point. The undated composition shows a muscular man and a young woman clinging tight to him; both are represented almost naked. A winged old man holds a mirror to the woman, her reflection is visible both to her and to the beholder. On the right, standing behind the couple, we perceive a skeleton pointing an arrow at the woman's head. A putto flies above the scene, holding a tablet with an inscription adapted from Claudian⁶⁰.

An identification of the allegorical figures as 'Saturn/Time' and 'Death' is made easier by comparing the picture with a print by Hieronymus Wierix published by Gode van Haecht (fig. 25)⁶¹. The scene as represented in the print contains the same figures as the New York painting. Moreover, in the margin one reads the same words that the flying putto in the picture presents to the beholder. Apart from the change in format and a number of minor variations (e.g. Saturn's scythe is missing in the painting and Death additionally points at his arrow), the New York picture does in fact appear to have been adapted from the Wierix engraving. If we consider that the verses are quoted from Claudian without a mistake in the engraving but rendered incorrectly in the painting, the derivation of the picture from the print can be confirmed.

The use of a contemporary allegoric print for the New York painting (fig. 24) again demonstrates that the De Backer group largely depended on printed models. But if this picture lacks originality of invention, what can be said about the painterly execution and style, especially if compared with the two Antwerp *Last Judgments*? Considering this question, one turns at once to the nude woman in the foreground of the *Plantin Epitaph* (fig. 2). This figure's



FIG. 20. – The DE BACKER Group. *Allegory of the Burdens of Life*, panel, 107 × 125 cm (including later addition on top). Graz, Landesmuseum Joanneum. Photo museum.

rendering is similar, the weighty marble languor of her pose appears to be echoed here. A comparison with the nudes in the *Plantin Epitaph*,

however, also throws a light on the weak spots of the New York painting. All the draperies are painted rather clumsily; the artist has avoided



FIG. 21. – The DE BACKER Group. *Allegory of the Burdens of Life*, panel, 97.2 × 124.5 cm. Private collection. Photo Courtesy Sotheby's Amsterdam.



FIG. 22. – The DE BACKER Group. *Allegory of the Burdens of Life*, drawing. Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo museum.

showing the woman's feet, he has left Saturn in an uneasy crouching position, and he has placed the man's right leg on a brick of stone that has no motivation whatsoever.

Once more, we encounter divergences of painterly quality in a group of pictures that, at first glance, seem to be closely related in style. Looking at the woman's face in the New York painting (which is by far the best and most interesting part of the work), one perceives a somewhat fat and fleshy rendering of the skin

untypical of the restrained 'Italian' elegance of the De Backer group. This detail looks as if it had been painted by the early Abraham Janssens. I am not proposing any such attribution here; but this observation can help to classify the picture: It must have been painted at a time when the *maniera* style as defined by the De Backer group was still influential although it began to be superseded by a more 'natural' manner. The picture's style thus points to a date in the early 1590's (i.e. the moment in which the young



FIG. 23. – Unknown Artist after Jacob DE BACKER. *A Religious Allegory*, 'J: de backere: in: hans. jacopx. exu:', etching. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August-Bibliothek. Photo Bibliothek.

Rubens began his career). If this is the case, the New York painting is an example of the tradition of secular subjects in Antwerp painting after 1585 – a tradition that, at present, is little-studied but should not be assumed to have died out until Janssens and Rubens returned from Italy.

There are few paintings attributed to De Backer of which no replicas are known. The most important of them is the *The Madonna with Christ and St. John* in Vienna (fig. 26), a picture that may be identical with an item in the collection of Rudolph II of Hapsburg⁶². Additional evidence for the attribution of this work comes from a *De Backer invenit* print: Crispijn de Passe's two *Flying Putti Holding Grapes* are closely related in style to the putti in the Vienna picture⁶³. The painterly quality of the work, the large format, and the absence of replicas not only point to a special commission, it also allows us to understand the full artistic potential of the De Backer group: The rather austere composition is organized parallel to the picture's surface. The figures are given space to display their characteristic features in the 'splendid isolation' of painted sculptures. Originally, the sculptural approach had been introduced to Antwerp painting by Frans Floris, whose weighty manner can be understood as a personal interpretation of Michelangelo's volumetrically defined figures (cf. for example Floris's *Adam and Eve Mourning Abel* in Kassel⁶⁴). The Vienna picture, however, makes direct use of the only marble by Michelangelo that was within reach of an Antwerp-based artist: The poses of both the Madonna and the child are unthinkable without Michelangelo's *Bruges Madonna*. Characteristically, however, the Vienna painting also cites Raphael: The little St. John follows the model of Raphael's *Madonna dell'Impannata*⁶⁵.

Raphael and Michelangelo, the hero and the scape-goat of counter-reformatory art theory, are thus evoked in one picture. Michelangelo, needless to say, had been chosen by the post-Tridentine theoreticians as an object of criticism precisely because his art was so popular: No less than 17 engraved copies of his Last

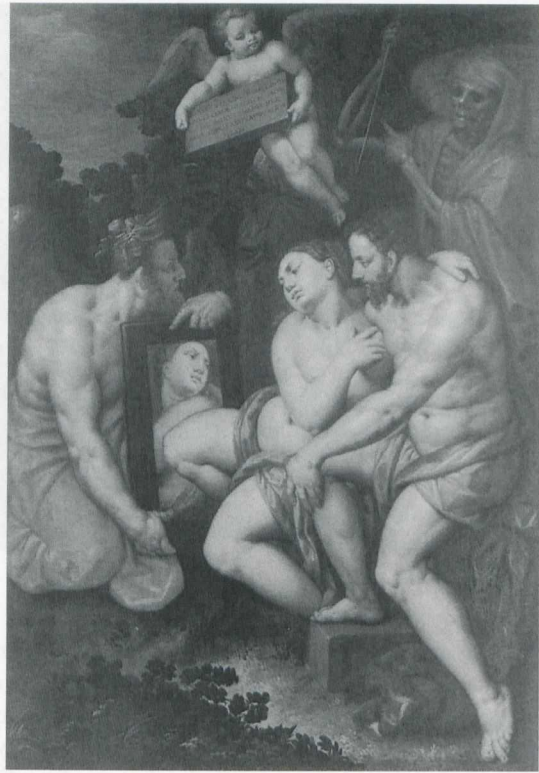


FIG. 24. – The DE BACKER Group. *Allegory of Vanity*, canvas, 160.7 × 111.7 cm. Private collection. Photo Courtesy Jack Kilgore Gallery New York.

Judgment (that contains dozens of nude figures) were published before 1600 and, of course, reached the Netherlands. Again, the question of how the De Backer group fits into the changing cultural climate of Antwerp in the 1580's finds no easy answer. The group cannot be said to have been unimpressed by artistic currents that art-historians tend to connect with the influence of the counter-reformation – on the contrary, if compared to artists such as Frans Floris or Frans Pourbus, the religious subjects by the De Backer group exhibit an economical use of artistic means and clearly structured picture planes that can be compared to Italian exponents of the early counter-reformation such as Santi di Tito. If confronted with the *Last Judgment* by Floris in Brussels⁶⁶, the *Plantin Epitaph* (fig. 2) displays a



FIG. 25. – Hieronymus WIERIX after Unknown Artist. *Allegory of Vanity*, 'Jero. W. fecit. Gode van haecht ex.', engraving. Coburg, Kunstsammlungen der Veste. Photo museum.

better coordination of the figures in space and a simpler choice of color. Floris's claustrophobic narrowness has been avoided, and – precisely as the counter-reformatory treatises by Gilio and Borghini recommended – most figures are shown in their entirety, so as not to be confused⁶⁷. However, this does not imply that the *Plantin Epitaph* is dominated by isolated figures – quite on the contrary: The picture integrates each movement and detail to create a proto-baroque

pictorial unity that foreshadows Rubens's large *Last Judgment* for Neuburg an der Donau (today in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich). Moreover, the purgatory half of the *Plantin Epitaph* shows no indecorous scenes, no atrocities nor any skeletons rising from the ground, although much of this can even be found in 'orthodox' Antwerp prints of the period, e.g. in several *Last Judgments* published by the Catholic Philips Galle (fig. 27)⁶⁸. Given that the visual conventions of 'Last Judgments', to



FIG. 26. – Jacob DE BACKER (attributed to). *The Madonna with the Child and St. John*, canvas, 134 × 194 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo museum.

a certain degree, allowed the depiction of nudes, the painter of the *Plantin Epitaph* has lent his figures a restrained, almost chaste appearance – a comparison with openly erotic pictures such as the Meiningen *Venus* (fig. 6) is quite enough to get the picture. All in all, the artist has decorously combined the most famous Italian version of the subject, Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, with the Northern tradition of *Last Judgment* pictures ranging from Rogier van der Weyden to Crispijn van den Broeck.

The possibility that some of the nude (or almost nude) figures represented in the *Plantin Epitaph* (fig. 2) appeared offensive to the more radical exponents of the new ideology cannot be ruled out⁶⁹. However, apart from the fact that the painter relied on a local tradition of similar depictions, it should not be forgotten that the *Epitaph* was a commission for a family memorial and thus reflects the private taste of a single patron. It should also be noted that in the *Plantin epitaph*, angels holding the open books mentioned in Chapter 21 of the Apocalypse of St. John, and the figures of St. John the Baptist and Moses are shown flanking Christ Enthroned (while the Madonna sits further on the left), which means that, fittingly for the epitaph of a good Christian and a publisher faithful to the Holy See, there is a stress on religious writing, preaching and the power of the law. Despite these personal notes, there is no element that can be said to openly contradict the artistic ideas of the counter-reformation, whose firm implementation in Antwerp must have taken some time anyway. Therefore, while the majority of the religious subjects of the De Backer group represent the artistic climate of the early 1580's, they must still have appeared acceptable (and continued to be produced) around 1590.

The difficulties in trying to establish the career and œuvre of Jacob de Backer are considerable. However, as soon as we dismiss the concept of artistic 'originality' in the 19th-century sense of the word, the extant works of a stylistically discernible group in late 16th-century Antwerp painting can be successfully analyzed and



FIG. 27. – Unknown Antwerp Artist. *Last Judgment*, 'Philippus Galle Excudit', engraving. Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum. Photo Landesbildstelle Rheinland.

employed to understand the art of a period in transition. The set-up of a large studio production led to a multiplication of De Backer's inventions and formulas, while his personal production probably consisted of a much smaller number of paintings and drawings than so far assumed. Jacob de Backer, if he had lived longer, might have freed himself from the economic necessities of the Antwerp art industry and the city's permanent political crisis. He might have become an independent painter of a certain renown, although he may always have felt the limitations imposed on his art by the fact that he had never studied the great works of the Italian schools. Other, more fortunate painters found the means and the energy to leave Antwerp and, while building on their native education, gradually revised and enlarged their artistic heritage – Peter Paul Rubens turned out to be the most important of them.

NOTES

1. C. VAN MANDER, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1604, repr. Utrecht 1969, fols. 231v-232r. For a commentary on Van Mander's De Backer chapter see H. MIEDEMA, *Karel van Mander. The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, vol. 3, Doornspijk 1996, pp. 235-39.

2. J. DENUCÉ, *De Antwerpsche Konstkamers, Inventarissen van kunstverzamelingen te Antwerpen in de 16de en 17de eeuwen*, Amsterdam 1932, p. 26 (inventory of Philips van Valckenisse, 10 April 1614): "Adam ende Eva na Jacques de Backer"; p. 110 (inventory of Herman de Neyt, 15 October 1642): "Een Cruys op dobbeldoeck naer Jacob de Backer"; pp. 138, 139 and 149 (inventory of Victor Wolfoet, 24 October 1652): "Een stuccken van wit ende swert, van Jacques de Backer, wesende een Caritas, op paneel, in lyste. [...] Een van wit ende swert, van Jacques de Backer, op paneel, in binnenlystken. [...] Een schilderye van Sint Jans Doopinge op paneel, in lyste gestoffeert van Jacques de Backer"; p. 360 (inventory of Jan-Baptista Anthonie, 1691): "Een paradys van Jacques de Backere"; p. 376 (last will of Geeraert Noorman, 14 July 1697): "een stuck schilderye synde een Emblema geschildert door Jacques de Backer". E. DUVERGER, *Antwerpse Kunstinventarissen uit de Zeventiende Eeuw*, vol. 1, Antwerpen 1984, p. 310 (inventory of Godevaart Vogeldoncx, 1614): "Adam ende Eva na Jacques de Backer"; p. 392 (inventory of Francois Francken, 1617): "Den ouden Adam op een 16-stuyversmaet naer Backer ghemaect, [...] Adam ende Eva op paneel naer den voors. Backer ghemaect, [...] Eenen Luyaert op een 28-stuyversmaet ghemaect oick naer Backer"; DUVERGER, vol. 2, Brussels 1985, p. 468 (division of the possessions of the late Lucretia van Palermo, daughter of Antonio Palermo, 1626): "Item de helft van een stuck schildeerye wesende ses witten ende swertten ende zyn de Beloften van Jacques de Backer. Item de helft van een ander schilderye wesende eenen cleynen Adam ende Eva van Jacques de Backer. Item noch de helft van vier stucken schilderye wesende de Vier Tyden des jaers van de voors. Jacques de Backer".

3. The 'classic' of De Backer studies remains J. MÜLLER HOFSTEDE, "Jacques de Backer. Ein Vertreter der florentinisch-römischen Maniera in Antwerpen", *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 35, 1973, pp. 227-60. Another catalogue of pictures attributed to De Backer has been prepared by L. HUET, *Jacob de Backer (1545/50-na 1610) pictor olim famosus: leven en werken*, doctoral thesis Louvain 1989 (typewritten). See also E. LEUSCHNER, "Ein unbekanntes Hauptwerk von Jacob de Backer in Meiningen", *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* 1994, pp. 51-63; J. FOUCART, "Les Sept Péchés Capitaux de l'Anversois Jacques de Backer", in *Hommage à Michel Laclotte*, Paris 1994, pp. 447-55; E. LEUSCHNER, "Antwerpener Akte. Zum Kontext eines Bildes von Jacob de Backer", *Südthüringer Forschungen* 29, 1995, pp. 5-21; L. HUET in N. DACOS ed., *Fiamminghi a Roma 1508-1608. Kunstenaars uit de Nederlanden en het prinsdom*

Luik te Rome tijdens de renaissance, exh. cat., Brussels 1995, pp. 68-69. For reference until 1992 compare H. Vlieghe, *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, vol. 6, Leipzig 1992, pp. 170-71.

4. Compare such doubtful cases as the *Andromeda* attributed to De Backer (Christie's London, 4 July 1997, lot 299 – actually based on a Goltzius print of 1583 [W.L. STRAUSS, *Hendrick Goltzius 1558-1617. The Complete Engravings and Woodcuts*, vol. 1, New York 1971, no. 170], the picture may have been painted by a follower of Wtewael); a *Porcia* (Sotheby's London, 3 July 1997, lot 141; described as "circle of De Backer", this picture has nothing in common with the nudes of the De Backer group); a *Last Judgment* (Christie's New York, 31 January 1997, lot 19; not even faintly related to the Plantin *Last Judgment*); *Diana and Actaeon* (Sotheby's London, 11 December 1996, lot 33: this picture is a curious mixture of elements derived from Floris, Coignet and the De Backer group – a crouching female figure in the left foreground almost looks as if she had been painted by the young Cornelis van Haarlem). A very uncritical attitude towards paintings of this style also pervades the catalogue of the 1998 Brueghel exhibition in Essen and Vienna – see esp. pp. 257-58, where some of the paintings mentioned above have been illustrated.

5. The "dry schoon stucken eerst een Adam en Eva een Charitas en een Crucifix" mentioned in Carel van Mander's life of De Backer as in the possession of Melchior Wijntgist must have consisted of three separate paintings representing Adam and Eve, a personification of Charity, and the Crucifixion respectively. A picture in the Vanderkelen-Mertens Museum of Louvain illustrated by MIEDEMA (as in note 1, fig. 175) represents, on a single panel, precisely these three subjects. While the Louvain picture might be a (partial?) copy after the three pictures described by Van Mander, its painterly quality is so poor that it can only be described as a 17th-century copy (cf. HUET, as in note 3, p. 93).

6. Cf. C. VAN DE VELDE, "Aspekte der Historienmalerei in Antwerpen in der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts", in exh. cat. *Von Brueghel bis Rubens*, Cologne 1992, pp. 75-77.

7. I have inspected the *Last Judgment* at a close distance in the storage depot of the Koninklijk Museum, Antwerp. Regarding the picture's date and 'signature' on the tombstone in the foreground, the picture's surface shows clear evidence of damage and overpainting in this section. The only legible chiffre of the date previously read as '1571' is a '5.'

8. HUET (as in note 3), p. 52.

9. HUET (as in note 3), pp. 87-91. See also D. DE VOS, "Het Laatste Oordeel door Jacob de Backer: Een probleem van oorspronkelijkheid", *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 22, 1973, pp. 59-72. The wings of the Plantin epitaph, especially the donor's portraits, are almost certainly by another artist (the name of Benjamin Sammeling has been suggested; see MIEDEMA, as in note 1, p. 235, note 9).

10. First mentioned as a work by De Backer in G.P. MENSAERT, *Le peintre amateur et curieux* [...], Brussels 1763, p. 235. For a bibliography of the Plantin epitaph until 1989 see HUET (as in note 3), p. 87.

11. See again C. VAN DE VELDE (as in note 6), whose doubts arise from the fact that paintings for epitaphs were usually ordered and prepared while the owner of the burialplace was still alive.

12. MÜLLER HOFSTEDE (as in note 3), p. 238.

13. The third "documented" picture, a triptych in the Ghent museum (MÜLLER HOFSTEDE, as in note 3, fig. 7; HUET, as in note 3, pp. 124-28), is mentioned in a 17th-century source as having been made by De Backer. Representing the rare theme *Isaiah Announcing the Healing of Ezechias*, this painting's artistic means are remarkably conservative in character if compared to the two Antwerp *Last Judgments*. Although it is a work of good quality and a personal artistic approach, the triptych can give little help in our attempt to assess the many undocumented collector's pieces attributed to De Backer.

14. MÜLLER HOFSTEDE (as in note 3), figs. 8 and 10.

15. HUET (as in note 3), pp. 105-07. Compare J. MICHALKOVA, "Patience. À propos d'un tableau de Jacob de Backer", *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 25, 1984, pp. 83-93. See also K.G. BOON, "Patientia dans les gravures de la Réforme aux Pays-Bas", *Revue de l'art* 56, 1982, pp. 7-24.

16. Cf. LEUSCHNER, 1994 and 1995 (as in note 3), *passim*. The latest discussion of the Meiningen picture can be found in Fiona HEALY, "Bedrooms and Banquets: Mythology in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting", in: *Concept, Design & Execution in Flemish Painting (1550-1700)*, edited by Hans Vlieghe, Arnout Balis and Carl van de Velde, Turnhout 2000, pp. 73-96 (on De Backer: pp. 76-77). Healy interprets the female nude as representing both Venus and Helen.

17. The Leiden sheet is the only drawing that can be taken into serious consideration as an autograph work of De Backer (cf. S. BOORSCH, "Jacob de Backer's Drawing for the Sense of Smell", *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 1, 1982, pp. 367-72). I am less confident about a *Judgment of Paris* in the Louvre (illustrated in F. K. *Rubens and the Judgment of Paris. A Question of Choice*, Louvain 1997, p. 264, fig. 59), a *Last Judgment* in the British Museum (A.E. POPHAM, *Dutch and Flemish Drawings of the XVth and XVIth Centuries*, London 1932, p. 90) and a similar one in the Albertina (O. BENESCH, *Beschreibender Katalog der Handzeichnungen in der Graphischen Sammlung Albertina, Bd. 2: Die Zeichnungen der niederländischen Schulen des XVth und XVIth Jahrhunderts*, Vienna 1928, no. 216) which C. VAN DE VELDE (as in note 6), p. 78, note 69, accepts without reservation. An even more questionable attribution to De Backer of a pen drawing in the Berlin print-room was advanced by H. MIELKE, "Eine Zeichnung von Jacob de Backer in Berlin", *Kunst in Hessen und am Mittelrhein* 31, 1991, pp. 39-42.

18. Another *De Backer* invenit print, the *Allegory of Law and Grace* (HUET, as in note 3, p. 141; M. MAUQUOY-HENDRICKX, *Les estampes des Wierix*, vol. 2,

Brussels 1979, p. 266, no. 1471) is also known in a version published by Hans Jacobsz (here illustrated as fig. 23; cf. W. HARMS, *Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 3, Tübingen 1989, pp. 180-81).

19. For a study of the influences of 16th-century Northern prints on Venetian artists and Northern printmakers active in Venice see Gert Jan VAN DER SMAN, "Incisori e incisioni d'Oltralpe a Venezia nella seconda metà del Cinquecento", in exh. cat. *Il Rinascimento a Venezia e la pittura del Nord ai tempi di Bellini, Dürer, Tiziano*, edited by B. AIKEMA and B.L. BROWN, Venice 1999, pp. 151-59.

20. On Michiel Coxcie see E. LEUSCHNER in *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, vol. 22, Leipzig 1999, pp. 89-92.

21. HUET (as in note 3), pp. 11-12.

22. Cf. MIEDEMA (as in note 1), p. 237. Interestingly, Antonio Palermo's religious denomination is listed as Lutheran in an archival document of 1585 (cited in J. Van Roey, "De Antwerpse schilders in 1584-1585. Poging tot sociaal-religieuze onderzoek", *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, 1966, p. 126 – my thanks to Filip Vermeylen for this reference).

23. VAN MANDER (as in note 1), fol. 231v.

24. See L. VAN DEN BRANDEN, "Drukocstrooien toegekend door de Raad van Brabant tot 1600", *De Gulden Passer* 68, 1990, p. 61, no. 340: "Geg. 26 december 1575. Ing. 17 maart 1576: Van een ottroy om zeker effigien te mogen drucken voor Anthonio de palermo. Get. Broecke" (Rekening 1574-75, f. 23r.).

25. See J. VAN DER STOCK, *Printing Images in Antwerp. The Introduction of Printmaking in a City: Fifteenth Century to 1585*, Rotterdam 1998, esp. pp. 143-72.

26. Cf. N. ORENSTEIN, H. LEEFLANG, G. LUITEN, C. SCHUCKMAN, "Print Publishers in the Netherlands", in exh. cat. *Dawn of the Golden Age. Northern Netherlandish Art 1580-1620*, Amsterdam 1993/94, p. 177 and T.A. RIGGS, *Hieronymus Cock. Printmaker and Publisher*, PhD thesis Yale University 1971 (Garland Publishing 1977), pp. 72-124.

27. MÜLLER HOFSTEDE (as in note 3), p. 242; HUET (as in note 3), p. 41. The Potsdam picture and its "Italian" style should thus not be used to prove an Italian journey of Jacob de Backer.

28. Bought in Rome 1756/57. The enthusiastic reactions of Frederick and his contemporaries to the Potsdam painting are echoed in M. OESTERREICH, *Beschreibung der Königlichen Bildergalleri (sic) und des Kabinets im Sans-Souci*, Potsdam, Christian Friedrich Voss, 1764, p. 10: "Wenn schon der erste Anblick dieses Bildes den Seher in entzückender Bewunderung zu setzen fähig ist, wie es denn wahrhaftig dies vermag, wie gross, wie lebhaft und rührend muss denn der Eindruck davon seyn, wenn der Kenner oder Künstler die hohen Vollkommenheiten dieses Meisterstücks, das nur das einzige in seiner Art ist, mit einem geübten und scharfsichtigen Auge betrachtet! So sahe es einst der Herr Direktor von der Mahlerakademie in Berlin, Herr B.R. Le Sueur, und dieser grösste Zeichner unserer Zeiten empfand den mächtigen

Eindruck in seinem ganzen Umfange, den es fühlen zu lassen fähig ist. [...]".

29. One has to admit, however, that the elegant postures *all'antica* in Lucas van Leyden's engraving already exhibit Italian influences. Basically, the painter of *Lot and His Daughters* did nothing but modernize some of the print's details and add his "Florentine" colors to the engraved composition.

30. Cf. fig. 6 in LEUSCHNER 1994 (as in note 3).

31. It was thus definitely not due to the comparison with the *Lot* painting that Foucart's attribution of a series of seven paintings in Naples to De Backer could convince (FOUCART, as in note 3).

32. VAN MANDER (as in note 1), fols. 231v–232r.

33. See E. LEUSCHNER's review of A. Baroni Vannucci, *Jan van der Straet detto Giovanni Stradano. Flandrus pictor et inventor*, Milan 1997, in *Journal für Kunstgeschichte* 2, 1999, pp. 74–79.

34. HUET (as in note 3), p. 7.

35. VAN MANDER (as in note 1), fol. 232r: "Tot eenen Sr. Oppenbergh, heb ick ghesien van hem dry stucken van staende beelden, half als't leven, te weten, Venus, Juno, Pallas, aerdighe standen, met eenighe dinghen achter, en in den gront van hun reetschap, cleedinghe, oft ghedierten".

36. A related drawing by Giovanni Stradano is preserved in the Graphic Collection of the National Gallery, Washington (inv. no. B-26, 583. Ailsa Bruce Mellon Fund).

37. Compare e.g. Giovanni Naldini's *Three Graces* in the Budapest museum (inv. no. 173).

38. Cf. HUET (as in note 3), pp. 59–61.

39. As Dr. Boskovits kindly informed me, the Pazzagli collection was dispersed after the Second World War. A simplified workshop version of the Pazzagli *Juno* surfaced at a Finarte auction (Milan, 27 March 1990, lot 139), where it was attributed to Jan Massys. This attribution was rightly challenged by L. BUIJNSTERS-SMETS, *Jan Massys. Een Antwerps schilder uit de zestiende eeuw*, Zwolle 1995, p. 230.

40. For the mask in this painting as a typical element of 16th-century Netherlandish allegories of vanity compare E. LEUSCHNER, *Persona, Larva, Maske. Ikonologische Studien zum 16. bis frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt/M. 1997, pp. 234–38.

41. The figure of Saturn appears to have been inspired by Michelangelo's *Giorno* in San Lorenzo, cf. C. DE TOLNAY, *Michelangelo. The Medici Chapel*, Princeton 1948, fig. 31.

42. Cf. DUVERGER (as in note 2), vol. 1, p. 169 (inventory of Hendrick Janssen de Wilde 1607): "Drye stucken schilderije van Pallas, Venus ende Juno op panneel in herte lysten"; vol. 3, p. 187 (inv. of Hans I Claessen, 1630): "Drije stucxkens op paneel wesende Venus, Juno ende Pallas".

43. A slightly superior version of this composition exists: Sotheby's London, 2 April 1990, lot 122. The importance of Stradano's inventions as a source for De Backer is further stressed by the observation of HUET 1989 (as in note 3), p. 48, that at least one female figure in his *Last Judgment* for Plantin

was copied after Stradano's *The Welcome of the Blessed in Heaven* (engraved by Hendrick Goltzius in 1577, cf. STRAUSS, as in note 4, no. 8). In 1594 Theodoor de Bry also made use of Stradano's figure – see H. KEAZOR, "Theodore de Bry's Images for America", *Print Quarterly* 15, 1998, p. 142, fig. 59. The woman with children in the right foreground of 'Christ Blessing the Children' (MÜLLER HOFSTEDE, as in note 3, fig. 8) also appears to follow a model by Galle after Stradano: A. DOLDERS ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 56, 1987, no. 169.

44. HUET (as in note 3), p. 59, mentions Jacopo Caraglio's *Juno* as a probable source for De Backer's Copenhagen picture, but I can find no specific connection between these two images. It is possible, however, that a well-known statuette, the so-called *Black Venus*, had an additional influence on the posture of the Copenhagen *Minerva* (as proposed by V. KRAHN in exh. cat. *Von allen Seiten schön. Bronzen der Renaissance und des Barock*, Berlin 1995, p. 326).

45. ROBERT-DUMESNIL, *Le peintre-graveur français*, vol. 8, p. 32, no. 29 ("d'après maître Rous").

46. J. LEVRON, *René Boyvin, graveur angevin du XVI^e siècle*, Angers 1941, p. 75, no. 178.

47. It could be argued that the print here illustrated as a work of Boyvin does in fact reproduce a composition by De Backer that is close to the picture in Copenhagen or even a preliminary study for the Copenhagen *Minerva* (this opinion was expressed by Nicole Dacos who has kindly discussed the matter with me). However, stylistic peculiarities and details such as the woman's headwear make it quite improbable that the print could have been engraved in Antwerp. Konrad Oberhuber also prefers to attribute the print to a French engraver (written comment to the author).

48. Several versions or replicas of the *Sapientia* are known – see HUET (as in note 3), pp. 53–55. The version illustrated here (fig. 16) was offered at auction in Paris in 1987 (Cornette de Saint Cyr, 14 December 1987, lot 15, unsold) and re-appeared at Christie's New York, 9 October 1991, lot 194 (I am indebted to Peter Fuhring for tracing the provenance).

49. C. VAN MANDER (as in note 1), fol. 231v: "[De Backer] most stadigh seer wercken, soo dat hy door zijn grote neersticheydt wonderlijck toenaem in de Const: waer door Palermo goedt voordeel hadde, den welcken de dinghen van Jacques veel schickte naer Vranckrijck, daer sy seer wel verkocht werden". Filip Vermeylen (Rubenianum, Antwerp), who is currently preparing a dissertation on the Antwerp art-market in the 16th century, kindly provided me with an archival document that testifies to the close ties of another local art-dealer with France. The text in question (Antwerp, Stadsarchief, Cb 36, f. 510r; dated 1 December 1576) is a protocol of an interrogation of Antonio Palermo and two of his colleagues. All three confirm that the dealer Peter Goetkint used to travel to Paris twice a year to sell pictures and colours, while his wife and children stayed at home in Antwerp.

50. A. CASTAN, *Monographie du Palais Granvelle à Besançon*, Besançon 1867, p. 45. See HUET (as in note 3), p. 16, note 2. On the influence of Flemish art on France in the

late 16th century see B. JESTAZ, "L'influence flamande en France à la fin du XVI^e siècle", in *Actes du colloque international sur l'art de Fontainebleau*, Fontainebleau/Paris 1972, pp. 75-84, and S. BÉGUIN, "Quelques remarques à propos des échanges entre la Flandre, Rome, Fontainebleau et Paris", in N. DACOS ed., *Fiamminghi a Roma 1508-1608. Atti del convegno internazionale*, Bruxelles 24-25 febbraio 1995 (*Bollettino d'arte* 100, 1997, supplement), pp. 231-46.

51. For the *Hercules Ogmios* or *Gallicus* theme compare E. WIND, "Ogmios", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 2, 1938/39, pp. 206-18. I have found only one other representation of *Ogmios* in Netherlandish art – in Otto van Veen's *Horatii Emblemata*, Antwerp 1608, p. 191. The print by Bonasone illustrated here (fig. 17) is from Achille Bocchi's *Symbolicae Quaestiones*, Bologna, 1555.

52. For a survey of artists who left the Southern Netherlands to work in the North see J. BRIELS, *Vlaamse schilders in de noordelijke Nederlanden in het begin van de Gouden Eeuw 1585-1630*, Haarlem, 1987. For the 'Gran Capitano' Alessandro Farnese compare E. LEUSCHNER, "Francesco Villamena's Apotheosis of Alessandro Farnese and Engraved Reproductions of Contemporary Sculpture around 1600", *Simiolus. Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 27, 1999, pp. 144-67.

53. In this context, a comparison with the period's standards for the censoring of printed matter as defined by the Church is revealing. For example, in the *Index* of Pope Clement VIII of 1596 (*Index librorum prohibitorum cum regulis confectis Per Patres a Tridentina Synodo delectos Auctoritate Pii IV. primum editus, Postea vero a Sixto V. auctus, et nunc demum S. D. N. Clementis Papae VIII. iussu recognitus, & publicatus*, Rome, Apud Impressores Camerales, 1596, p. 14), the method to cope with lascivious and erotic texts is described as follows: "Libri qui res lascivas, seu obscenas, ex professo tractant, narrant, aut docent, cum non solum fidei, sed & morum, qui huiusmodi librorum lectione facile corrumpi solent, ratio habenda sit, omnino prohibentur: & qui eos habuerint, severe ab Episcopis puniantur. Antiqui vero, ab ethnicis conscripti, propter sermonis elegantiam, & proprietatem permittuntur: nulla tamen ratione pueris praelegendi erunt". The products of ancient poetry and erudition were thus more or less exempted from sanctions.

54. See M.B. HALL, *After Raphael. Painting in Central Italy in the Sixteenth Century*, New Haven/London 1999, pp. 190ff.

55. Cf. F. HEALY, *Rubens and the Judgment of Paris. A Question of Choice*, Louvain 1997, pp. 55-60.

56. Christie's New York, 22 May 1998, lot 119; compare another version of *Justice and Peace* sold at Drouot-Richelieu Paris, 26 June 1989, lot 47. For the iconography of *Justice and Peace* see R. WOHLFEIL, "Pax antwerpensis. Eine Fallstudie zu Verbildlungen der Friedensidee im 16. Jahrhundert am Beispiel der Allegorie 'Kuß von Gerechtigkeit und Friede'", in *Historische Bildkunde. Probleme - Wege - Beispiele*, ed. B.

Tolkemitt and R. Wohlfeil, Berlin 1991 (*Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, Beiheft* 12), pp. 211-58.

57. For the painting in the Hermitage St. Petersburg see MÜLLER-HOFSTEDE (as in note 3), p. 253, and HUET (as in note 3), pp. 74-76. The picture illustrated here as fig. 20 is owned by the Landesmuseum Joanneum Graz (cf. G. BIEDERMANN et alii, *Bildwerke. Gemälde und Skulpturen aus der Alten Galerie des Steiermärkischen Landesmuseums Joanneum in Graz*, Graz 1996, pp. 44-45). The other version illustrated here as fig. 21 was auctioned at Sotheby's Amsterdam, 3 May 1999, lot 40.

58. *Allegory of the Burdens of Life*: 191 × 261 mm, pen, brown washing, white lead (oxydized), Kupferstichkabinett Dresden, inv. no. 1967-158 (classified as 'Italian school, 16th century').

59. See HUET (as in note 3), note 19, p. 141; M. MAUQUOY-HENDRICKX, *Les estampes des Wierix*, vol. 2, Brussels 1979, p. 266, no. 1471; W. HARMS, *Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 3, Tübingen 1989, pp. 180-81.

60. CLAUDIAN, *De consulatu Stilichonis*, 2, 132-38.

61. M. MAUQUOY-HENDRICKX (as in note 59), p. 268, no. 1482. The same print appears to have been the source for an *Allegory of Vanity* by Cornelis van Haarlem, of which three slightly different versions survive in Ottawa, Copenhagen and Stockholm (P.J.J. VAN THIEL, *Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem 1562-1638. A Monograph and Catalogue Raisonné*, Ghent 1999, cat. no. 207, fig. 330). Cornelis van Haarlem was a pupil of Gillis Coignet, whose close association with Jacob de Backer can be deduced from a passage in Carel van Mander's *Schilderboeck*, cf. E. LEUSCHNER, "Gillis Coignet", *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, vol. 20, Leipzig 1998, pp. 179-80 and A. MESKENS, *Familia universalis: Coignet. Een familie tussen wetenschap en kunst*, Antwerp 1998, pp. 31-50.

62. HUET (as in note 3), pp. 104-05.

63. Illustrated in *Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Engravers*, vol. XV, p. 209, no. 617.

64. C. VAN DE VELDE, *Frans Floris (1519/20-1570), leven en werken*, Brussels 1975, p. 140.

65. Cf. exh. cat. *Raphael invenit*, Rome 1985, p. 731, under *Madonne*, no. XXXI.

66. VAN DE VELDE (as in note 64), p. 178.

67. HALL (as in note 54), p. 248.

68. Cf. also the skeletons and nudes in the *Last Judgment* engraved by Adriaen Collaert after Giovanni Stradano (*Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Engravings*, vol. 3, no. 180). In spite of these details, the composition and format of Collaert's print are so close to the *Plantin Epitaph* that it can be said to have served as the picture's model.

69. It should not be overlooked that even Vasari's and Zuccari's *Last Judgment* in the cupola of the Florentine cathedral (1571-79), that is generally considered a showpiece of post-tridentine art, retains a considerable number of nude or semi-nude figures in the sphere of the recently resurrected and the tormented sinners.

RÉSUMÉ. – *Définir De Backer. Nouveaux éléments sur la dernière phase du Maniérisme anversois avant Rubens.*

Malgré la rareté des documents biographiques sur Jacob ('Jacques') de Backer, peintre à Anvers de la fin du XVI^e siècle, le marché de l'art attache régulièrement son nom à un certain type de tableaux maniéristes du nord peints dans le style italien. On a tenté à plusieurs reprises d'établir le catalogue de ses œuvres, mais celles qu'on lui attribue sont d'une qualité artistique très inégale. Aussi convient-il de définir très précisément les critères de son œuvre autographe qui, de ce fait, va se trouver considérablement réduite et, parallèlement, relier toutes les autres œuvres que nous mettons ici sous le chapeau du « Groupe de Backer » au contexte culturel dans lequel elles sont nées. Cette perspective nouvelle prend en compte l'importante circulation du style maniériste italien grâce aux gravures et aux artistes voyageurs. Les peintures que nous disons relever du « groupe de Backer », de petit format, traitent de sujets liés à la culture humaniste ; l'existence de répliques innombrables est due à l'internationalisation du marché de l'art et à une culture anversoise déjà pré-industrielle. De Backer et ses collègues anonymes travaillaient, semble-t-il, sous le contrôle de vrais entrepreneurs tels que le marchand de tableaux et éditeur d'estampes Antonio da Palermo qui faisait ses profits auprès d'une clientèle de collectionneurs à Anvers et ailleurs, par exemple en France selon Van Mander. Rubens, en partant pour l'Italie en 1600, confirme cette orientation internationale de l'art anversois ; et en cherchant à se dégager lui-même des restrictions imposées par cette production locale massive, il développa un style très personnel. Mais voilà que l'on constate que ce style personnel de Rubens va être à son tour diffusé lors de son retour à Anvers en 1608 pour devenir le nouveau standard de l'« industrie » artistique anversoise !