

Two more flower paintings by Gillis van Coninxloo III*

A pair of flower paintings, which went through Christie's in London in 1996 with an attribution to Nicolaes Gillis,¹ has recently been restored and cleaned (figs. 1 and 2). During the cleaning process a signature, F, or FVC.Loo (the E/F, V and C combined) was revealed on one of them (fig. 3).

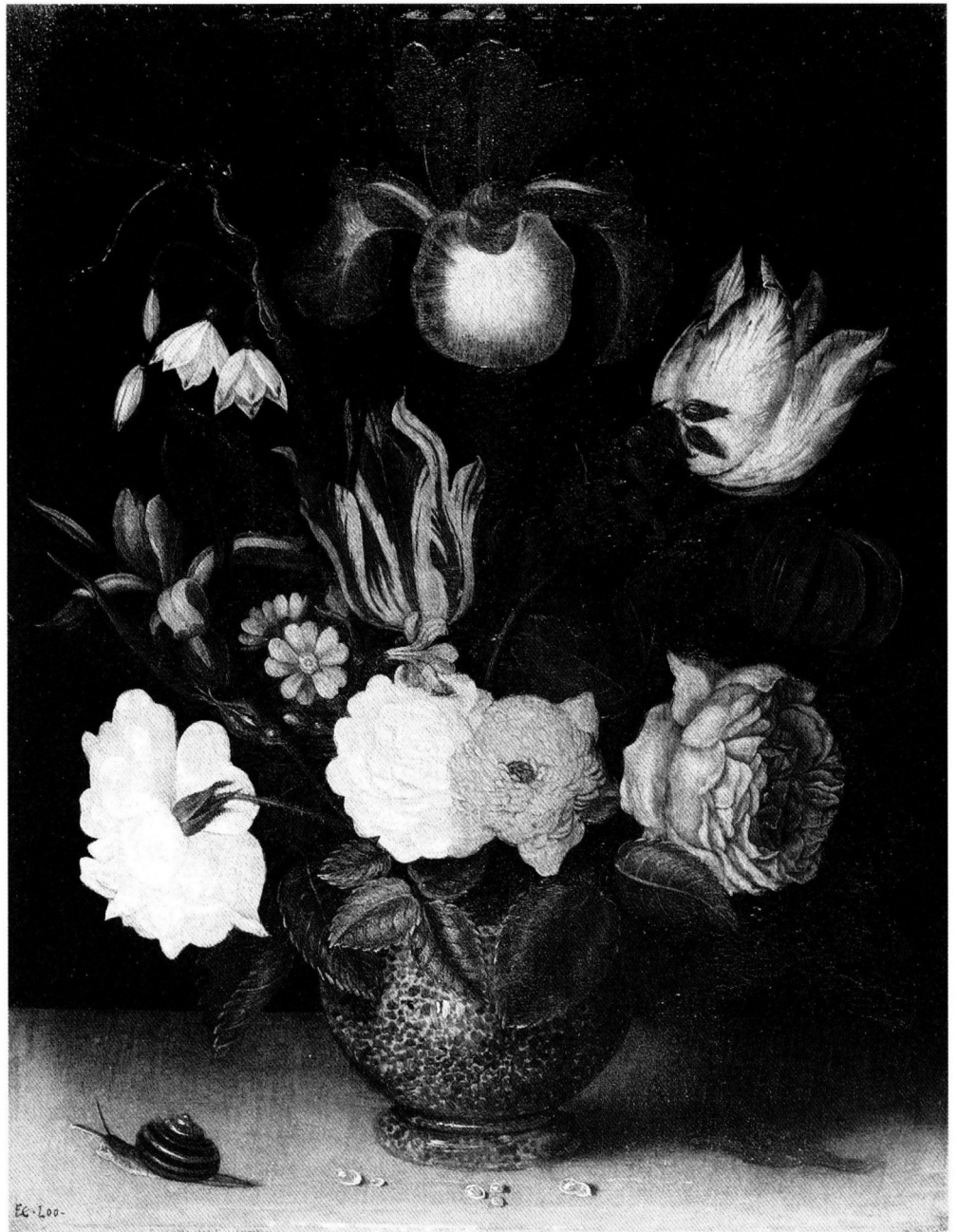
Only one other painting with this signature is currently known. It is the property of the Instituut Collectie Nederland² in Rijswijk/Amsterdam, and has been on loan to the Noordbrabants Museum in 's-Hertogenbosch since 1987 (fig. 4).³ There the signature differs slightly; it reads E/FV. cLOO x (E/FV and cL both combined).

The ICN's painting is regularly assigned in the literature to Gillis van Coninxloo, working on the assumption that the 'E/F' is an 'E', and stands for Egidius. It is known that the landscape painter Gillis van Coninxloo signed an invoice 'Ægidius van Coninxloo',⁴ and prints after his work are signed variously 'Egidius Coninxlogensis', 'Egidius Coninxloey' and 'Egidius Coninxloo',⁵ so the latinisation of the Christian name need not strike us as problematic. And while the monogram in the signature might conceivably be read differently (as Egbert, Frans or Elisabet van Coninxloo, or as Evert Claesz Loo perhaps), Egidius van Coninxloo is the only artist's name known to us that fits. In what follows, therefore, I shall assume that this reading is correct.

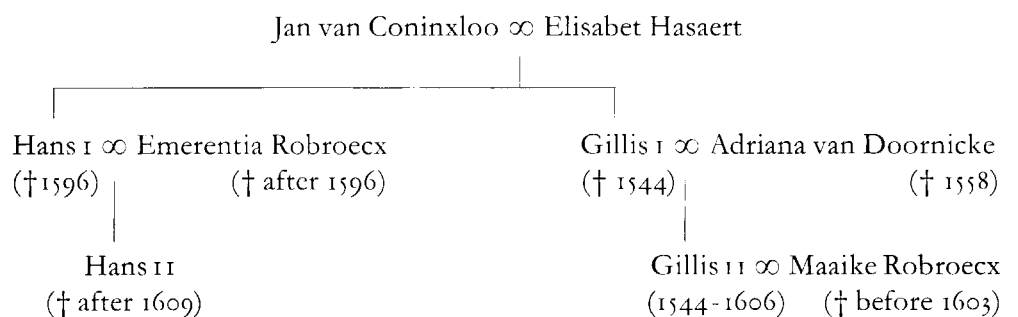
However, there is considerable debate about *which* Gillis van Coninxloo is being referred to;⁶ just as there is considerable debate about how many Gillis van Coninxloos there actually were. The latter debate is an unusually intricate one, stemming from a complicated argument by N. de Roever in the 1885 volume of *Oud-Holland*.⁷ The subject has recently been taken up again by A. Monballieu, who has allowed his preliminary conclusions to be published by Hessel Miedema.⁸ Until Monballieu has published all his arguments the matter must remain open, but his theories as communicated so far deserve comment.

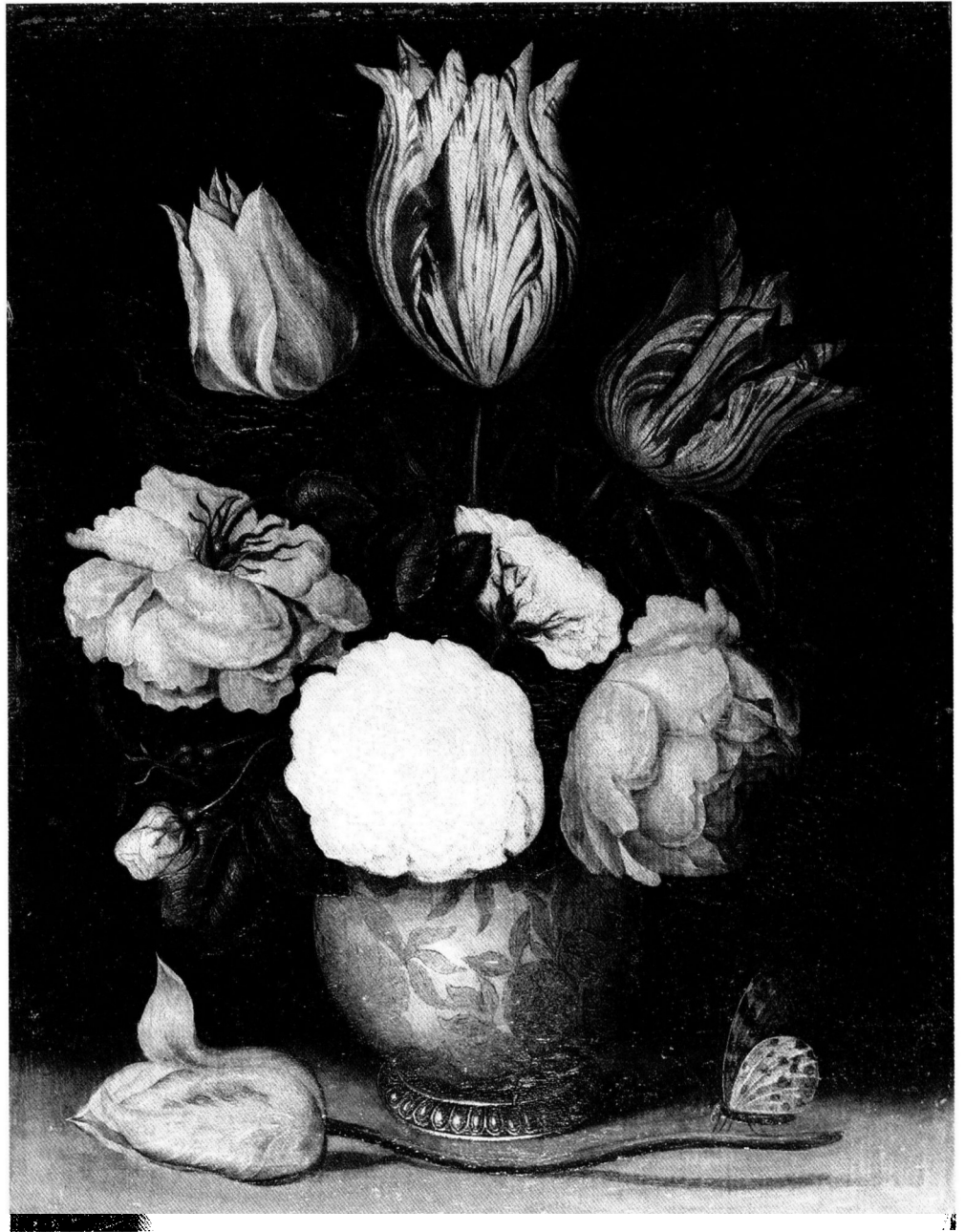
In his *Schilder-Boeck*,⁹ Van Mander elucidates the family relations of Gillis van Coninxloo the landscape painter by telling us *inter alia* that Gillis's mother was the sister of Pieter Coecke van Aelst's wife, and that Gillis's parents came from Brussels. De Roever believed that Van Mander must have made a mistake here. Pieter Coecke van Aelst's wife's sister was called Adriana van Doornicke; but in a deed of 1609 Hans van Coninxloo, who had said in 1599 that he was Gillis's nephew, claimed that his grandparents came from Brussels and were called Jan van Coninxloo and Elisebet Hasaert.¹⁰ At this point the story becomes more confused, because scholars from De Roever onwards have erroneously supposed that Van Mander claims Gillis the landscape painter's father was also called Gillis. On this theory, it seems as if Hans and Van Mander are completely contradicting one another.

1
 Gillis van Coninxloo III, *Vase of Flowers*, panel, 32.6 × 25.2 cm.
 England, Private Collection.
 Photo: Warburg Institute.



Monballieu has discovered that Gillis the landscape painter married the sister of Hans van Coninxloo's mother. Thus he was Hans's uncle by marriage. However, Monballieu believes that, as a blood relation, Hans was Gillis's cousin. The following table shows a summary of Monballieu's reconstruction of the family tree:





In this tree, Gillis the landscape painter is Gillis II, and the Hans who was both his cousin and his nephew is of course Hans II.

Monballicu's solution to the problem faces two objections. First, it seems unlikely that Gillis I's brother would have outlived him by 52 years, especially when Hans I's wife also outlived Gillis I's wife by over 38 years.¹¹ It would be more natural to imagine that Hans I was of a later generation. Secondly, it does not seem plausible that Hans II would call his cousin his uncle, when his cousin had married his mother's sister. To call one's cousin an uncle would imply a loss of familial rank, and I doubt if a man living in the hierarchical society of 1599 would have wanted to do that; and besides, Gillis II was his cousin by blood, and his uncle only by marriage.

For these reasons I find Monballicu's solution troublesome, and I would like to suggest that the hypothetical family tree I first posited in my *Dutch Flower Painting 1600-1720* deserves consideration.¹² I summarise it in tabular form here, incorporating further information from De Roever's article.

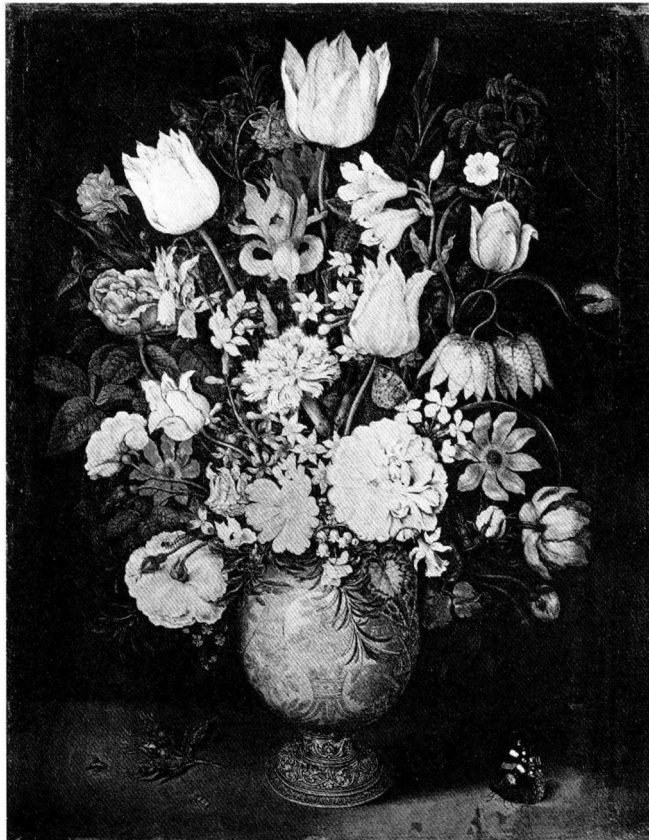


a later date, and, especially in the light of the Christie's pictures, I think it was probably painted some time after 1610.

The Christie's paintings were sold as a pair. They are of exactly the same dimensions, and are painted with very similar colouring, in broadly the same style. Both paintings are composed in a very similar way, with rose leaves filling in gaps, a clear view through to the flowers at the back of the bouquet, and a tight fit into the frame. These resemblances, and the fact that they came up for sale together at auction, make it reasonable to suppose that both pictures are by the same painter.

There also seems little reason to doubt that they were made by the artist who painted the flower piece in the ICN's collection. They are, to be sure, more unified in tone, and the compositions are more compact, but this seems to me explicable as the increasing professionalism of an artist assimilating the style of Bosschaert. Between the three pictures there are similarities, in for example the penchant for turned-away roses, or the relationship of (Chinese) vase to table. And the dissimilarities in the signatures, which are painted in very different styles, also seem to me intelligible as a shift in manner; the way the E combines with the V is very distinctive in both cases.

The Christie's pictures, although they have little of the compositional variety, grace of arrangement or technical smoothness of works by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, nevertheless pick up on a number of his stylistic traits. The butterfly resting on a flower on the table is a motif Bosschaert used often,¹⁷ and he returns to the Chinese vase repeatedly.¹⁸ The axial composition, the even lighting and the way the flowers fill the framed area are also all characteristics of Bosschaert's man-



ner. It could of course be that the Master FVCLoo was the originator of these stylistic traits, and that Bosschaert followed in his wake. But it seems a general rule in the history of style that originality and talent go hand in hand, and that second-rank artists are less likely to think up new pictorial modes than their more gifted colleagues; and the uneasy draughtsmanship, awkward composition and dull paintwork of the three works here assigned to Gillis van Coninxloo III make it clear that he was not a highly talented artist. For this reason it seems to me probable that the painter of these pieces was a follower of Bosschaert, rather than the other way round.

Given that Bosschaert's first dated painting was made in 1605 and that Gillis van Coninxloo II died in 1606, then, if the stylistic argument advanced here holds up, Gillis II cannot have been the author of the works under consideration. Indeed, the Christie's pictures seem likely to have been made towards the end of the 1610s. Bosschaert's bouquets before 1610 have a crowded fussiness to them, with small flowers used to fill all the intervals between the larger blooms. It was only towards the end of his career that he began to make vases with a sparse counterpoint of large flowers. A comparison of dated works from 1609 (fig. 5)¹⁹ and 1619 (fig. 6)²⁰ makes this point plain. The Christie's Van Coninxloos would seem to be picking up on Bosschaert's later austerity.²¹ So if we believe that FVCLoo stands for 'Egidius van Coninxloo', then Gillis III is the only person known to us who can have made these paintings; and they are likely to have been painted not too long before his death in 1619/20.

In my book on Dutch flower painting I resisted Sam Segal's theory that Gillis III was the author of the ICN's painting,²² because from what we know of Gillis' life we cannot be entirely sure that he was mentally fit to function as a competent artist. De Roever discovered that, after a period in the army, Gillis III spent the rest of his life being watched over by legal guardians, who took care of his financial affairs.



De Roever suggested that his mental abilities may have been more or less impaired, or that he may have been a spendthrift. Whatever the true situation, it cannot be denied that he made pictures, since we know that his guardian Peter Isaacksz provided him with brushes and pigments, and also sold some of his paintings on his behalf. There was, therefore, no good reason to have doubted Segal's hypothesis, which now seems to me probably correct.

NOTES

* I would like to thank Nick Spencer, the owner of the two paintings discussed here, for letting me borrow them while writing this article; and I would like to thank Fred Meijer and Bernhard Sandler for their comments and suggestions.

¹ London (Christie's), 05-07-1996, lot 328.

² Formerly Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague.

³ Reproduced in colour in S. Segal, exh. cat. *Flowers and Nature*, Osaka (Nabio Museum of Art), Tokyo (Tokyo Station Gallery) and Sydney (Art Gallery of New South Wales) 1990, p. 78.

⁴ N. de Roever, 'De Coninxloo's', *Oud-Holland* 3 (1885), p. 37.

⁵ F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450-1700*, Amsterdam 1949-, vol. 4, p. 221.

⁶ J.G. van Gelder, 'Van blompot en blomglas', *Elseviers Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 46 (1936), p. 160; I. Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, London 1956, pp. 52-53; J. Briels, *Peintres flamands au berceau du Siècle d'Or hollandais*, Antwerp 1997, p. 248; and H. Miedema, in: K. van Mander, *Lives...*, H. Miedema (ed.), vol. 5, *Doornspijk* 1998, p. 81, all attribute the picture to the celebrated landscape painter, Gillis van Coninxloo 11; M.-L. Hairs,

Les Peintres Flamands de Fleurs au XVIIe Siècle, 4th edn., Tournai 1998, pp. 26-27 ascribes it tentatively to a further Gillis van Coninxloo hypothesised by De Roever 1885 (note 4), p. 35 (De Roever's hypothesis is, I think, unnecessary, since it seems to me that De Roever's Gillis is identical to Gillis II, see: F. Jos. van den Branden, *Geschiedenis der Antwerpsche Schilderschool*, Antwerp 1883, vol. 1, p. 307); Segal 1990 (note 3), p. 175, gives it to Gillis van Coninxloo III.

⁷ De Roever 1885 (note 4).

⁸ Miedema 1998 (note 6), pp. 74-75.

⁹ Alkmaar 1604, fols. 215r, 218v, 268r.

¹⁰ De Roever 1885 (note 4), p. 34.

¹¹ And, according to the dates given by Miedema 1998 (note 6), pp. 74–75, Emerentia Robroecx outlived Adriana van Doornicke's sister by around 69 years.

¹² P. Taylor, *Dutch Flower Painting 1600–1720*, New Haven and London 1995, chapter 4, note 16.

¹³ A note on some of the dates given here: the date of Elisabeth Hasaerts' death is purely hypothetical, based on the assumption that Jan van Coninxloo was remarried, to the mother of Gillis II. Adriana van Doornicke's deathdate varies in the secondary literature. Van den Branden 1883 (note 6), p. 307, believes she died in 1562; Monballieu, as reported by Miedema, says she died in 1558. If Jan II did indeed marry Adriana van Doornicke then he was presumably dead by 1555, since in that year she is recorded as being married to one Peter van Else (Van den Branden 1883 (note 6), p. 307).

¹⁴ The main objection to my theory is that it does not account as neatly as Monballieu's for the statement made by Hans II in 1609 that the descen-

dants of Gillis II were only entitled to one quarter of a legacy from 'onsen grootvader Jan van Coninxloo en Elisebet Hasaert, synce huys-frouw' (De Roever 1885 (note 4), p. 34). I am forced to believe, with De Roever, that Jan had four children. We know that Gillis had a sister called Cateelijne, and there are enough stray Van Coninxloos in the archives to provide ample possibilities for a fourth sibling (De Roever 1885 (note 4), p. 35). Quite what the word 'onsen' is doing in Hans's statement is unclear. It could be functioning in the first person singular; if it is in the first person plural it is hard to tell, from the context as quoted by De Roever, who Hans is thinking of as 'we'. Gillis II? Gillis III? Hans's brother Isaac? Unfortunately I have not found an opportunity to consult the original document.

¹⁵ Sam Segal has already argued that Gillis van Coninxloo III must have been the author of the ICN's painting. Segal 1990 (note 3), p. 175.

¹⁶ Taylor 1995 (note 12), chapter 4, note 16.

¹⁷ L. J. Bol, *The Bosschaert Dynasty*, Leigh-on-Sea 1960, cat. nos. 6, 9, 21, 33, 41.

¹⁸ Bol 1960 (note 17), cat. nos. 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 30, 47.

¹⁹ Bol 1960 (note 17), cat. no. 10. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, no. 916.

²⁰ Bol 1960 (note 17), cat. no. 47. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, A 1522.

²¹ Fred Meijer has pointed out to me that the Christie's paintings bear a close resemblance to a work, signed with Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder's monogram, which passed through Sotheby's New York on the 30th January 1998 (lot 32A). Meijer, who has seen the painting, believes it to be genuine, and dates it to c. 1617. From the colour photograph in the catalogue I can certainly see the resemblance, but, not having seen the original, would prefer to remain agnostic about the attribution.

²² Segal 1990 (note 3), p. 175; Taylor 1995 (note 12), chapter 4, note 16.