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Short-sighted? Rijckaert Aertsz Portraying the Virgin in a Painting by Frans Floris*

Since my eyes will no longer be distracted by the filths of the world, I'll be able to depict all the glories of God from memory, in their purest form.

Orhan Pamuk, *Benim Adım Kırmızı* 1998¹

Most of what we know about the sixteenth-century painter Rijckaert Aertsz, derives from the short biography of the artist published in 1604 by Karel van Mander in his *Schilder-boeck*.² From this text, we learn that Aertsz was born the son of a fisherman in Wijk aan Zee, a village on the Dutch coast some twenty kilometres north of Haarlem. Van Mander's closing remarks that Aertsz 'died about six months after the Spanish Fury, round about May 1577 at 95 years of age,' leave no doubt that the painter died in Antwerp – for it was there that, on November 4, 1576, the brutal sacking and burning of the city by Spanish troops known as the 'Spanish Fury' took place. It also implies that he had been born in 1481 or 1482. Because of an accident in his youth, during which he suffered burns on a leg that eventually had to be amputated and replaced with a wooden one, Rijckaert Aertsz became known as *Rijk metter Stelt*, i.e. 'Dick with the peg.'³ Showing an interest in the arts of drawing and painting, young Rijckaert was placed as a pupil with Jan Mostaert of Haarlem. Later in his career, he settled in Antwerp, where he became a member of the painters' guild in 1520.⁴

Nothing has remained of Rijckaert's painterly production, but some fragments of a stained glass window with the scene of the *Queen of Sheba Visiting King Solomon*, commissioned in 1541 by Maximiliaan van Egmond, Count of Buren, for the choir of the church of St Jacob in The Hague.⁵ Van Mander furthermore mentions the shutters of the altar of the carriers' guild in St Bavo Cathedral in Haarlem, on which Aertsz painted the Old Testament story of Joseph as viceroy of Egypt receiving his brothers, 'and suchlike things'. These works appear to have been known until 1784, after which date they were lost,⁶ a fate they shared with some of Aertsz's paintings that according to Van Mander were destroyed already during the artist's lifetime.⁷ A *Madonna* painted by Aertsz is mentioned among the effects of the Antwerp-born painter Herman Saffleven the Elder, according to an inventory made up shortly after the latter's death in Rotterdam in 1627.⁸ Of Aertsz's production in Antwerp, Van Mander does not have much more to say than that the artist limited himself to paint nude figures in works by colleagues at a fixed rate – 'for the sake of his peace of mind', the biographer adds somewhat enigmatically. More than half a century ago, Beets made an attempt to reconstruct what is left of Rijckaert's *oeuvre* of drawings, on the basis of one signed sheet representing the *Holy Kinship* in the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett.⁹ A glimpse of the reputation Aertsz still enjoyed at the beginning of the seventeenth century can be gathered from Samuel Ampzing's description of Haarlem published in 1628, which includes a small poem characterizing the painter with a pun on his first name as being



¹ Frans Floris, *St Luke Painting the Virgin*, signed and dated: 'FFIV.ET F 1556', oil on panel, 214 x 197 cm (height of original panel ca. 130 cm). Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (© Lukas - Art in Flanders vzw).

'rich [*rijk*] of spirit, and skillful of hand'.¹⁰

However little we know of his works, Rijckaert Aertsz nevertheless is a relatively well-known figure in art-historical literature because, as again Van Mander informs us, his features recur in a work by the most famous of his Antwerp colleagues, Frans Floris de Vriendt. In 1556, Floris signed a panel destined for the painter's chamber of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke, depicting its patron saint in the act of portraying the Virgin (now in Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, fig. 1).¹¹ In the interior of a painter's studio, an elderly artist wearing a red cloak over a green shirt, is seated comfortably in a high chair, placed on some kind of wooden podium. He is working on a panel, the painted side of which is invisible to the viewer. Turning



his gaze in our direction, the painter is applying a brush to the panel with his right hand supported by the maulstick he is holding in his left, the one that also contains a small palette and a bundle of brushes. He is resting his stiffly outstretched left leg on the paws of an ox, the traditional symbol of St Luke the Evangelist. On its head, the ox has a small shield with the coat of arms of the Antwerp Guild. It has been suggested in art-historical literature that the peculiar pose of the painter's leg should be understood as a reference to Aertsz's prosthesis.¹² But then, Frans Floris himself seems to have had included the same motif in his St Luke-altarpiece for St Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, now lost but known to us by way of a copy (fig. 2).¹³ In the right background of the Antwerp painting, a bearded assistant, standing on a somewhat lower level, is grinding pigments – already in the fifteenth century a motif most frequently recurring in depictions of St Luke as a painter.¹⁴

At the left side of the painting some changes were made in unspecified later times. The strangely curved back-leg of the painter's easel seems to be one of them, although the aforementioned St Luke altarpiece in Ghent Cathedral shows the same peculiar motif. The painting originally seems to have been considerably smaller; as can be seen with the bare eye, three horizontal planks making up the part immediately above the painter's chair have been added, while at the bottom of the work one plank, with the part of the floor right below the paws of the ox, is a later addition as well. Probably, these additions date from the year 1664, when the panel, along with other works from the painter's chamber, was transferred to the new quarters of St Luke's Guild



in the building of the Antwerp *Beurs* (Stock Exchange). It remains unclear exactly why these parts were added to the painting. The possibility that these additions were meant to replace (damaged?) original parts can not be ruled out, but most probably they were intended to meet new aesthetic or practical criteria related to the new setting of the painting in the Stock Exchange building.¹⁵

A drawing attributed to Frans Floris now in the Göttingen University Museum, appears to be loosely related to the panel in Antwerp (fig. 3).¹⁶ The sheet shows the main components of the painting, albeit in an entirely different composition. In this drawing, the depicted artist, whose appearance is rather generic and who in any event is much younger than the one in the painting, has taken a small panel from the easel, holding it in his left hand. He is not working but rather looking pensively at the work. If the drawing must indeed be considered a preliminary sketch, or at least a first thought, for the Antwerp painting, Floris at some point and for whatever reason has apparently replaced this artist with a considerably older man. This choice would at any rate be more in keeping with the traditional iconography of St Luke who, when painting the Virgin (or writing his gospel, for that matter), is typically represented as a middle-aged, if not outright old man.

In quite a few depictions of the scene in early modern art, the figure of St Luke is likely a *portrait historié*. Sometimes one is tempted to imagine the painter depicting himself in the guise of his venerated professional archetype.¹⁷ Frans Floris's *St Luke Painting the Virgin* is a case in point; not so much because it presents a self-portrait in the guise of St Luke, but because of the inclusion of a portrait of at least one other historical painter. Van Mander's claim that Floris portrayed Rijckaert Aertsz in the figure of St Luke has generally been accepted in art-historical literature.¹⁸ The assistant in the right background appears to be a portrait as well, but it is unclear who, then, he would represent. The assumption, apparently first recorded in written form by the late eighteenth-century Antwerp art-historiographer Jacob van der Sanden, that Floris portrayed *himself* in this figure,¹⁹ has been rejected by Van de Velde in his 1975 monograph on the painter. According to this author, if a self-portrait would have been included in the painting at all, Van Mander would certainly have mentioned it.²⁰

It should be noted, however, that the author of the *Schilder-boeck* only wrote his lines some thirty years after Floris's death in 1570. Much closer in time to Floris was Dominicus Lampsonius's *Pictorum aliquot celebrium germaniae inferioris effigies*, published in Antwerp in 1572. Frans Floris is one of the Flemish painters honoured with both a small poem by the author as well as with an engraved image (fig. 4).

Hieronymus Wierix, *Francisco Floro Anverpiano pictori*, signed 'IHW', engraving numbered 22, 26,5 x 16,5 cm. In: Dominicus Lampsonius, *Pictorum aliquot celebrium germaniae inferioris effigies*, Antwerp 1572.



Whereas in the case of some images in Lampsonius's book the features are likely to have been invented by the inventor or based on designs that have little or nothing to do with the artists depicted, the engraving showing Frans Floris is indeed very likely a portrait of the well-known painter passed away only a few years before. The engraving presents certain similarities with a medal dated 1552 that shows Floris's face, and with a figure in one of the shutters of Frans Pourbus the Elder's triptych of *Christ Among the Doctors* in Ghent Cathedral traditionally believed to be Floris's portrait.²¹

The assistant to St Luke in Floris's painting shares with the artist portrayed in the engraving in Lampsonius's book a high forehead, a long nose and a somewhat frowning expression. The figure in that print, however, has a fuller face and a smaller beard – but naturally those are features of a man's appearance that can easily change in the course of his life. Whereas the possibility that Floris included his own features in this painting should thus not be ruled out entirely, I believe it would be equally fair to assume that Frans chose one of his own assistants or some other Antwerp artist as a model. Considering the apparent age of the figure, who evidently is beyond the normally youthful stage of the average studio apprentice, and who also seems to be older than Floris himself who, having been born in 1519 or 1520, by then was in his mid-thirties, the possibility that this is a portrait of an as yet unidentified member of the Antwerp Guild seems to be the likeliest.

The question of why Frans Floris included one or perhaps even two portraits in this painting is at least partly answered by Van Mander. According to him, Floris chose

Rijckaert Aertsz as the model for St Luke not only because Aertsz was ‘much loved and cheerful’, but also because of the fact that, as Miedema puts it in his translation of Van Mander’s book, he had ‘a handsome face, just right for being painted’ (*een fraey schilderachtige tronie*).²² Besides, we may add, at the time Floris portrayed him, his amputated leg would not have been Rijckaert’s only physical handicap. Again it is Van Mander who informs us that, ‘when he got to a great age [Aertsz’s] sight began to fail so that he could not see what he was doing’. The author does not specify at what age exactly the artist was struck by this hardship, but it seems fair to assume that by the time Floris portrayed Aertsz, who by then was well into his seventies, the latter had been suffering from failing eyesight for quite some time.

Considering Van Mander’s statement, generally accepted in art-historical literature, that Aertsz had reached the, especially at that time unusually advanced age of 95 years when he died in 1577, the characterization ‘great age’ in his account of the painter’s visual problems, might refer to an age even higher than about 75. However, it is also true that, over ninety years ago, doubts about Van Mander’s remarks regarding the date of the painter’s death were raised, which have been ignored in all subsequent literature. In his article of 1918 on the stained glass windows in St Jacob in The Hague, H.E. van Gelder quotes from the account books of that church, in which it is stated that, on September 12, 1560, the church masters acquired the cartoon for the stained glass window commissioned by the Count of Buren, from ‘Rijk met de Stelt’s *widow* [italics added BdK].’²³ If indeed, unlikely as it may seem, Van Mander erred on this point, and Aertsz had been dead by 1560, it would be all the more probable that, when Frans Floris portrayed him four years before, the artist’s sight had weakened dramatically.²⁴ Whatever the case may be, Van Mander contends that, when Aertsz’s eyesight gave up on him, he applied the paint ‘so thickly to the panels that no one wanted them any more; it often had to be scraped off and it made him angry sometimes that people did not want to buy his works’. One can easily imagine the aged, one-legged painter, on the verge of getting blind, frustrated by his inability to sufficiently perform his craft and perhaps even penniless because he was unable to sell his works, being happy at least to receive a fee by posing before his much younger, yet highly respected colleague.

Moreover, Frans Floris will certainly have been aware of Aertsz’s qualities other than his *schilderachtige tronie*. Rijckaert appears to have been a sympathetic and witty artist,²⁵ but according to Van Mander he was also ‘a quiet, moderate, peace-loving, virtuous and pious man who greatly loved the Holy Scriptures and inner peace’. This should have made him particularly suitable for the role of St Luke in a panel meant for the painter’s chamber of the Guild, of which corporation, as we have seen, he himself had been a member ever since 1520. This much-loved and, in the course of over 35 years, in Antwerp artistic circles undoubtedly very well-known painter, in whose person converged many, if not all virtues of a humble and sincerely devout artisan, would have been pre-eminently suited as an example – in the guise of the legendary forerunner of all Christian painters – to the members of the corporation dedicated to St Luke, in the Scheldt-city.

Apart from the portrait (or perhaps even two portraits), Frans Floris’s painting contains some other peculiar aspects that have been undiscussed so far. For one, it lacks the subject we know Luke is painting: the Virgin Mary. The theme of St Luke portraying the Virgin was particularly popular in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painting, especially in the Netherlands and Germany, where the terms *Lucasmadonna* (Dutch) and *Lukas-Madonna* (German) were coined for it. According to legends based on a sixth-century Byzantine account, which in Western Europe became known from the twelfth century onwards, St Luke was a painter by profession and as such was believed to have been the first to portray the Virgin.²⁶ Although instances of the

artist without Mary visible in his presence have certainly not been uncommon in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European painting,²⁷ we typically encounter Luke as a painter with his model in front of him.

Whereas there can be no doubt about the identity of the subject Luke is depicting in Frans Floris's painting,²⁸ we not only do not see Mary herself in the picture, but, even more strikingly, we are also unable to see what exactly Luke is transferring onto his panel. This is highly unusual, as in Renaissance depictions of painters at work (often artists' self-portraits), both north and south of the Alps, the spectator is normally given full view of the picture within the picture. Thus, the beholder is permitted, as it were, a glance over the shoulder of the artist who interrupts his work only to look at him or her (henceforth I will use the male form only).²⁹ More exceptional are fifteenth- and sixteenth-century images in which the spectator is looking at the back of the panels or canvases the depicted painters are working on. Examples include a panel by a painter from the circle of the Brussels master, Pieter Coecke van Aelst (Nîmes, Musée des Beaux-Arts), and a painting by the so-called Master of the Holy Blood (Harvard, Fogg Art Museum).³⁰ But not until the seventeenth century do we encounter something similar to Frans Floris's highly striking depiction of an artist working on a painting of which the beholder can see the back only, while at the same time the painter directs his gaze *towards* him.³¹ In the context of the iconography of the *Lucasmadonna*, this variant is extremely rare, if not unique in early modern painting.

Floris's deviation from the traditional iconography has led some scholars, in both the far and not so far past, to believe that his painting should be regarded a 'typical' Renaissance work of art in which religious subject matter allegedly gets gradually infused with meaning of a more profane character.³² From this point of view, the omission of the figure of the Virgin Mary in Floris's painting, should be understood as a symptom of this supposed development. More ingenious than these rather outmoded views is the interpretation recently put forward by Hans Ost which attempts to understand Luke's outward gaze in light of the original context of the painting.³³

Although little is known of the original furnishings of the painter's chamber of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke, Ost proposes that Floris's panel originally should have had a counterpart placed on the opposite wall, depicting the subject so strikingly lacking in the painting. This *pendant*, then, would according to the author have been a depiction of the Madonna and Child, possibly painted by Floris himself. Apparently, this hypothetical painting has been lost. Ost suggests that it might have been destroyed during the 1566 iconoclasm in Antwerp and furthermore that it might have looked like Floris's *Holy Family* (signed by the artist and dated 1552, now in the museum of Kroměříž, Czech Republic).³⁴ Once this possibility has been raised, the iconography of that panel – the Virgin and St Joseph together feeding Christ as a baby in a domestic setting – opens the way to the even more hazardous assumption that Peter Paul Rubens's much later depiction of the *Holy Family* known as *Our Lady with a Parrot* (probably begun 1614), once in the Antwerp painter's chamber and now in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten of that city,³⁵ would have served as a substitute to Floris's lost or destroyed painting of the same theme (fig. 5).

Fascinating though this hypothesis may be, there is no evidence for the presupposed existence of a second painting by Frans Floris himself in the painters' chamber, let alone a work that would have served as some sort of a complementary image to the *St Luke*. Moreover, if Rubens's panel should indeed be considered an 'updated' version of a lost original by Floris, it remains highly improbable that either painting should have had any relationship regarding content with Floris's *St Luke*. After all, to the best of my knowledge, neither written nor visual sources attest to the Evangelist ever having painted St Joseph alongside the Virgin and her son.

5
Peter Paul Rubens, *Holy Family*
(‘*Our Lady with a Parrot*’), oil
on panel, 163 x 189 cm. Antwerp,
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone
Kunsten (© KMSKA / Adri
Verburg).



Could it, then, be helpful to consider the possibility that the painting implies Mary’s ‘virtual’ presence in the realm of the beholder? After all, by hiding the painted side of the panel from the spectator’s view and simultaneously presenting Luke as looking in his direction, the painting seems to imply that the Virgin is standing in the same room as the beholder, indeed very close to him. Or even, to draw the utmost – be it almost inconceivable because of evidently blasphemous connotations – consequence of visual and spatial relationships suggested by the painting, actually *fusing* with him.

This would turn the painting into a fascinating example of those fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works of art that seem to bridge the gap between painted and real space and figures. We find them in Italian painting of the decades around 1500, particularly in the northern regions of Veneto and Lombardy.³⁶ The images in question seem to invite the spectator to take up the role of a bystander in the scene depicted, or even to identify with biblical figures. This psychological involvement of the beholder corresponds to devotional ideas that had originated in the late Middle Ages, and gathered momentum again in private devotion of the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Catholic Reform in Italy.³⁷ Texts like the passion tract entitled *Meditationes vitae Christi* by an anonymous thirteenth-century, probably Franciscan, author known as ‘pseudo-Bonaventure’, which became immensely popular and had its influence on devotional tracts of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, stress how the devout have to imagine themselves actually to be present when meditating biblical scenes.³⁸

Indeed, in Frans Floris’s painting, Luke’s gaze at the spectator is such that the latter might get the feeling of becoming part of the sacred episode, and be invited to imagine himself in the company of the Virgin almost physically present.³⁹ However, on closer inspection, Floris’s St Luke is certainly not as directly involved with the beholder’s reality as he seems at first sight. Nor is he looking at us as vividly as his energetic assistant to the right does. Luke’s gaze, benign as it appears, seems to be



introverted, almost dreamy, and directed towards a vision in his own mind, rather than to reality (fig. 6).⁴⁰ I believe that there is no need for a second painting, nor for some other object or even a living person, to justify the painting's iconography.

Of crucial importance to the interpretation of the iconography of Frans Floris's *Luke painting the Virgin I* present here, is not only the impression of introspection in the depicted artist, but also the biographical data of the painter who sat as a model for that figure. As we have seen, Van Mander identified St Luke as a portrait of the Dutch, Antwerp-based painter Rijckaert Aertsz. We have also seen that, at the time Floris portrayed him in 1556, Aertsz was 74 or 75 years old. According to the usually well-informed biographer, it appears that in his old age the painter was visually challenged to such a degree that, while painting or at least trying to do so, 'he could not see what he was doing' and was not able anymore to produce work that satisfied his customers.

Indeed, St Luke in Floris's painting seems to be looking without seeing much. His face is turned towards the beholder, but the eyes are lacklustre and seem to be slightly drifting away. Frans Floris undoubtedly chose Rijckaert Aertsz as a model for his St Luke for reasons mentioned earlier, viz. Aertsz's popularity with the public amongst members of the Antwerp painter's guild, and his exemplarity as a devout artist. But could it be that he did so as well for specific reasons having to do with Aertsz's visual handicap as well? After all, Floris depicted someone who is having much trouble seeing, and may even be blind. At the same time, however, this person is evidently working on a painting. Perhaps it is telling that he seems to be moving his brush along the panel, without even looking at it – just, we may surmise, as his *alter ego* Rijk metter Stelt, he is actually not seeing what he is doing.

Depictions of St Luke in the act of painting the Virgin often show a more or less realistic scene of a young lady and her infant son, who apparently have entered into the artist's studio to effectively sit before him. In the first decades of the sixteenth century however, a new type of depiction developed, in which the Virgin is not physically present in the artist's studio, but appears to him as in a heavenly vision, floating in clouds. This way of visualizing, which seems to have been based on the iconography



of the theme in fifteenth-century German woodcuts, made its appearance in painting around 1520, both south and, as it seems independently, north of the Alps. An example in Italy is a painting executed as an altarpiece for the church of Santi Luca e Martina in Rome (now in the Accademia di San Luca in that city). Traditionally, it has been attributed to an artist from Raphael's school, like Gianfrancesco Penni, and perhaps it indeed goes back to a composition designed by him or the Urbinate himself.⁴¹ The depiction of Luke as a visionary does not seem to have enjoyed great fortune, although in sixteenth-century Italy it was taken up by amongst others, Giorgio Vasari in the fresco he painted after 1567 for the Chapel of the Painters in the church of Santissima Annunziata in Florence. In the Netherlands it was introduced about 1520 by Jan Gossaert called Mabuse, in a small painting now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna (fig. 8).

The composition of Gossaert's work is divided into two parts against the background of two arches of a classicist architecture. At the right hand side the painter is depicted, not standing or sitting and working in a way any real artist would do, but kneeling reverently on a *prie-dieu*, while working on a drawing. To the left the Virgin and Child appear as in a vision. In a hovering sitting pose, Mary, who is emanating heavenly light, is surrounded by clouds and by five *putti*, of whom two, floating above her head, hold a crown. Apparently to stress the fact that the painter's studio, by the visionary presence of the Virgin, has transformed into holy ground, Luke has taken off his shoes which can be seen on the floor in the middle foreground.

Of special importance in this panel is the fact that it is not really Luke who is making the drawing of the Virgin. In fact, an angel standing at his side comes to his aid, putting his left hand in a comforting gesture around Luke's shoulder and at the same time conducting the Saint's drawing hand with the other. An angel infusing a writer or artist with divine inspiration by guiding his hand is not an altogether



exceptional motif in the visual arts.⁴² However, in the iconography of St Luke it is.⁴³ In Gossaert's painting it has been significantly combined with another element. In the background appears a statue of the prophet Moses, in his role as God's legislator. He is depicted as a bearded old man, with on his head the two horns he sometimes is depicted with in the visual arts. In his right hand, he is holding the two Tablets with the Ten Commandments he had received on Mount Horeb. With his left index finger he is pointing towards a spot just below the top of the left tablet, right where we can surmise the commandment crucial in this context: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' (Exodus 20: 4).

This prescription has often been interpreted as a prohibition to depict the god-head, the saints, or the Virgin Mary in any way, let alone worship those images. In protestant circles this concept was to be taken more seriously than in the Western Catholic world, where it usually has not been taken all too literally, apart perhaps

Bartholomeus Spranger, *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin*, signed and dated: 'Bartollomeus Spranger den / 24. September Fecitt. / 1582', oil on copper, 18,3 x 12 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen Alte Pinakothek.



from a certain reluctance to depict God the Father in an anthropomorphic form. As for Mary and Christ, it was precisely the legend of Luke painting her that brought a solution to those who did not want to see in the Ten Commandments a prohibition to make depictions of these biblical figures. After all, a large icon known as *Salus populi romani*, which within living memory is kept in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, was thought of as the archetypal portrait of Mary painted by St Luke.⁴⁴ It came to be seen as the prototype of, as well as the justification for, all subsequent depictions of the Mother of God. Because Luke was believed to be the first and only one to ever have portrayed Mary from life, he needed the angelic inspiration Jan Gossaert provided him with. Moreover, in Gossaert's painting Luke is indeed dependent on the angel's help, for he is depicting something he – with eyes downcast – does not really perceive. He even is not *able* to physically perceive something that essentially can neither be seen by human eyes, nor be depicted by human hands.

It seems to me that it is exactly this aspect that Frans Floris might have aimed at, by choosing no one other than Rijckaert Aertsz as a model for his St Luke. To be sure, I am not suggesting that Frans Floris was directly influenced by Gossaert's work, which is a relatively small panel that is unlikely to have had a public function such as that of an altarpiece, but probably was kept in a private collection.⁴⁵ However, some compositions dating from the decades around 1600 show that an awareness of the type of Saint Luke painting a *vision* of the Madonna certainly existed among Flemish artists. One of these is a small copper painting signed and dated 1582 by Bartholomeus Spranger (Munich, Alte Pinakothek, fig. 9), who had been born in Antwerp and by that time was active in Prague. Two prints published in Antwerp around that same

time period after designs by Stradanus and Raphael Sadeler the Elder, respectively, depict the same theme.⁴⁶

Certain parallels can indeed be drawn between these compositions and Floris's depiction, as far as the conception of a divinely inspired painter working on a painting that can not be made by human hands alone is concerned. Precisely this is the reason why the subject Luke is depicting is not included in Floris's panel. Although here no angel is present, it must be divine inspiration that is leading Luke's hand, which is, after all, the member of his body that in the painting seems to be moving independently from the artist's intentions. And who could have been a better exemplification of a painter representing what can not be seen, than a blind, or nearly blind one? His fellow members of the Antwerp St Luke's Guild, to whom after all the painting was directed, must have been aware of the visual restrictions of their, 'much loved', aged colleague Rijckaert Aertsz.

Could it be that Frans Floris wanted to make his intentions even more explicit by including a second figure in the composition? The assistant, who in the background of Luke's studio is grinding pigments, is a by-figure who shows up in a great many of depictions of the theme. In this work, as we have seen, he might be interpretable as a portrait – of Frans Floris himself, of one of his own assistants or of some other Antwerp painter. This figure is looking out of the painting with eyes considerably livelier than those of his master – really addressing the beholder. Whoever he may have been a reference to, *this* is a man who, with sleeves tucked up, is not only vigorously handling material, but also looking into the beholder's real, material world. Thus, this down-to-earth and to his Antwerp contemporaries and colleagues possibly also recognizable person, contrasts sharply with the legendary painter engaged in an immaterial, spiritualized world. Whereas the younger figure seems to live by Thomas the incredulous Apostle's concept of what can be seen as a prerequisite for what to believe, the old, blind man in the centre of the composition represents the stage of meditation where one does not any more need the faculty of seeing to believe.⁴⁷

Rijckaert Aertsz was one of the artists who at some point in their careers became blind, like Garofalo and Lomazzo, De Lairese and Daumier. Losing the light in his eyes must be a particularly sad twist of fate for a painter. But, as regards reception, physical blindness leading to or even encouraging mental clarity has also been a *topos* at least since Homer, who according to legend became blind. The blind man as a seer, who neither can nor will be distracted by worldly things and vanity, can concentrate on what really matters.⁴⁸ Peg-legged Dick may have been short of sight by the middle of the sixteenth century. However, in a spiritual sense, the painter who in Frans Floris's *St Luke Painting the Virgin* must have served as an example to his Antwerp colleagues was far from short-sighted.

NOTES

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¹ Quoted from the English translation entitled *My Name is Red* (London 2001, p. 77), slightly adjusted by substituting the word 'Allah' – as has been done in the Dutch translation *Ik heet Karmozijn* (Amsterdam, Antwerp 2001) – with 'God'. For the context of this citation, see note 48.

² Karel van Mander, *Het Schilderboeck*, Haarlem 1604, fol. 247v-247r. In the following, I will quote from the English translation: Hessel Miedema (ed.), *Karel van Mander The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, 6 vols., Doornspijk 1994-1999, vol. 4, pp. 247-249.

³ In this nickname, it seems fair to translate 'Rijk' as 'Dick', the Dutch name 'Rijk' being a diminutive of 'Rijckaert' or 'Richard'. See the database of Dutch first names compiled by the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam: <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/nvb>.

⁴ *Allgemeines Künstler Lexikon; die bildenden Künstler aller Zeiten und Völker*, Munich 1992ff, vol. 1, p. 454. Aertsz is documented in Antwerp in the 1530s (see Henri Hymans, *Le livre des peintres de Carel van Mander*, Paris 1884-1885 [reprint Amsterdam 1979], p. 375), and there is no reason to assume that he did not stay there until his death.

⁵ See H.E. van Gelder 'De zeventiende-eeuwsche glasschilderingen in de Haagsche Sint-Jacobskerk', *Oud Holland* 36 (1918), pp. 1-41, especially pp. 10-13 and plates III-VII. The fragments, then in the Haags Gemeentemuseum, are now being kept in the Haags Historisch Museum.

⁶ *Allgemeines Künstler Lexikon* 1992ff (note 4) vol. 1, p. 454.

⁷ See Van Mander's remark that 'many of Rijk's works were in Friesland, and some of them were destroyed too, so that I am unable to name any of them.'

⁸ 'Een Marien beeldt van Ryck met de stelt': *Archief voor Nederlandsche kunstgeschiedenis* ['Obreens Archief'], 5 (1882-1883), p. 117.

⁹ N. Beets, 'Rijckaert Aertsz of Rijk metter Stelt', *Oud Holland* 72 (1957), pp. 199-217.

¹⁰ 'Laet Rijk nu met sijn stelt naer mijne rijmen springen / mijn verzen moeten ook sijn name billijk singen. / Tbeen was Rijk afgeset / wanneer het was verbrand / Maar Rijk was rijk van geest / en wacker in de hand': Samuel Ampzing, *Beschryvinge ende lof der stad Haarlem*, Haarlem 1628 (reprint Amsterdam 1974), pp. 257-258.

¹¹ Carl Van de Velde, *Frans Floris (1519/1520-1575), leven en werk*, 2 vols., Brussels 1975, vol 1, cat. S91, pp. 237-238; Erik Vandamme (ed.), *Catalogus schilder-kunst. Oude meesters; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, Antwerp 1988, cat. 114, p. 139.

¹² Dorothee Klein, *St Lukas als Maler der Maria; Ikonographie der Lukas-Madonna*, Berlin 1933, p. 59. Hans Ost, 'Peter Paul Rubens' *Madonna mit dem Papagei*', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 69 (2008), p. 238.

¹³ Van de Velde 1975 (note 11), cat. S145, p. 287.

¹⁴ As far as I know no written source exists to account for this motif. Rather, it seems to go back to the pictorial tradition of an assistant grinding pigments as he appears in the background of a depiction of the legendary painter Tamara in a French manuscript of 1402, of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Ms. fr. 12420, fol. 86r), see Carol J. Purtle (ed.), *Rogier van der Weyden, St Luke Drawing the Virgin; Selected Essays in Context*, Turnhout 1997, p. 68, fig. 5. Sometimes, the lone figure of the assistant receives company, as in Maarten van Heemskerck's *Luke painting the Virgin* (Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts), where, in a loggia in the far background can be discerned three figures apparently working on cartoons 'of a peculiar tall format' (J. Bruyn, 'Old and new elements in 16th-century imagery', *Oud Holland* 102 (1988), p. 94). Probably these are cartoons for stained glass windows.

¹⁵ See the illustration of the painting in Van de Velde 1975 (note 11), in which the edges of the original panel have been indicated. Together with Floris's work, Peter Paul Rubens's *Our Lady with a Parrot* (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, fig. 5) was moved from the painter's chamber

to the *Beurs*. Rubens's painting (on which more in the following) has been enlarged as well, at both the bottom and the top. Because dendrochronological research (which, by the way – as the museum's restorer, ms Lizet Klaassen kindly informed me – has never been done on Floris's painting) has proven that the additions can not have been made before the early 1660s. They were possibly done on the occasion of the removal; Ost 2008 (note 12), p. 233.

¹⁶ Van de Velde 1975 (note 11), cat. T41, pp. 374-375.

¹⁷ For instance, around 1490, the Flemish painter, Colijn de Coter signed his *St Luke Painting the Virgin* (Vieure, Notre Dame) self-consciously 'COLYN DE COTER / PINGIT ME IN BRABANCIA / BRUSSELE'; on the edge of Mary's robe, as if to stress that he was not only the painter of the panel, but should be identified with Luke as well. An example from early sixteenth-century Antwerp, is a panel by Jan Gossaert (ca. 1513, Prague, Národní Galerie), signed by the artist on Luke's belt, thus at least suggesting the identification with the apostle.

¹⁸ Van de Velde 1975 (note 11), p. 238; see also, e.g.: *De schilderkunst der Lage Landen*, 3 vols., Amsterdam 2006-2007, vol. 1, p. 222. One exception is Leo Steinberg, 'Velazquez's *Las Meninas*', *October* 19 (Winter 1981), pp. 45-54, in which the author mentions Floris's *St Luke* as a sixteenth-century precedent to the Spanish master's work. Steinberg mistook the painted painter for a portrait of Frans Floris himself.

¹⁹ This identification was taken over by Dora Zuntz, *Frans Floris, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der niederländischen Kunst des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Strasbourg 1929, p. 27.

²⁰ Van de Velde 1975 (note 11), p. 238.

²¹ Jean Puraye, *Dominique Lampson, les effigies des peintres célèbres des Pays-Bas*, [Bruges] 1956, pp. 17, 66-67; for the genesis and conception of the artists' portraits, see: Sarah Meiers, 'Portraits in Print: Hieronymus Cock, Dominicus Lampsonius, and *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies*', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 69 (2006), pp. 1-16. The supposed portrait of Floris in the triptych his former pupil Pourbus painted in 1571 as an altarpiece for the funer-

ary chapel of the humanist Viglius d'Aytta, is a bystander in the scene of the *Circumcision* depicted on the left shutter of the triptych; see Simone Bergmans, *La peinture ancienne; ses mystères, ses secrets*, Brussels 1952, p. 49.

²² For the complex notion of *schilderachtig* in Dutch seventeenth-century painting and art literature, see Boudewijn Bakker, 'Schilderachtig: discussions of a seventeenth-century term and concept', *Simiolus* 23 (1995), nr. 2-3, pp. 147-162.

²³ '[...] gecoft van de Weduwe van Rijk met die Stelt, dyw tglas van de Graeft van Buyren achter tkoer alhuer in den Haeg gemaeckt heeft, dat patroen van tselve glas, ende daervoor betaelt: 2 L. 15 s.': Van Gelder 1918 (note 5), pp. 11-12.

²⁴ An alternative hypothesis could be that the church masters just assumed Mrs Aertsz to be a widow. We can not be sure where she lived when she sold the cartoon. A sixteenth-century artist like Anthonis Mor is known to have left his wife behind in Utrecht when venturing on his international career. If Aertsz had done the same thing, to the eyes of The Hague ecclesiastical officials his wife might have seemed a widow (or at least a grass widow).

²⁵ To account for this, Van Mander writes that Aertsz, with an untranslatable pun referring to both his first name, Rijk (literally meaning 'rich'), and his peg (*stelt*), used to say 'ick ben rijk en wel ghestelt' ('I am rich and prosperous'; translated literally: 'I am Rijk and well-stilted').

²⁶ For the earliest images depicting the theme in Byzantine and Western art, Klein's study of 1933 (note 12, esp. pp. 7-11) remains a point of reference. For the development in early modern art, see also: Gisela Kraut, *Lukas malt die Madonna; Zeugnisse zum künstlerischen Selbstverständnis in der Malerei*, Worms 1986; and Georg-W. Költzsch, *Der Maler und sein Modell; Geschichte und Deutung eines Bildthemas*, Cologne 2000, pp. 15-69.

²⁷ Instances of isolated panels of Luke painting were originally part of diptychs, triptychs or even more complex works of art, in which the image of the Virgin is placed on a separate panel. Also, in both German and Southern European painting, depictions exist of the saint holding the Virgin's portrait as his identifying attribute. And many a late medieval or renaissance prayer

book from Flanders and Burgundy contains a miniature of an autonomous St Luke painting the Virgin without her being present in the image itself.

²⁸ In Floris's painting the Virgin must in fact be the subject Luke is portraying. I know of only one, highly exceptional, instance in which the saint is depicted painting a crucifix, in a fourteenth-century miniature by Johann van Troppau (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1182, fol. 91), see Catherine King, 'National Gallery 3902 and the Theme of Saint Luke the Evangelist as Artist and Physician', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 48 (1985), p. 250, fig. 3. A canvas by the Spanish painter, Francisco de Zurbarán depicts the crucified Christ in the presence of a man with a palette in his hand, who sometimes is referred to as Zurbarán himself, or as St Luke (Madrid, Museo del Prado). However, both Martin S. Soria (*The Paintings of Zurbarán*, London 1953, p. 187, cat. 219) and Paul Guignard (*Zurbarán et les peintres espagnols de la vie monastique*, Paris 1960, p. 221, cat. 107), are reluctant to identify him with Luke. Joanna Woods-Marsden (*Renaissance Self-Portraiture; the Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist*, New Haven, London 1998, p. 238) states that Zurbarán has depicted *himself* – not in the guise of St Luke, but as a 'generic painter'. But then, recently, Xavier Bray argued that the painter should indeed be identified as Luke, on the ground that in seventeenth-century Spain the evangelist apparently was believed to have carved and polychromed at least one statue of Christ crucified (Exh.cat. *The Sacred made real, Spanish painting and sculpture, 1600-1700*, London (The National Gallery) 2009, cat. 4, pp. 80-81). However, in Spain nor elsewhere, there does not seem to have existed a tradition of Luke as a painter of the dead Christ.

²⁹ For many examples by such artists as Katharina van Hemessen, Sofonisba Anguissola, Anthonis Mor, Palma Giovane, and Dirck Cornelisz. van Oostanen: Woods-Marsden 1998 (note 28), respectively fig. 131, 132, 150, 155, 153.

³⁰ Georges Marlier, *La Renaissance flamande: Pierre Coecke d'Alost*, Brussels 1966, p. 266 (as by Coecke), and Bruyn 1988 (note 14) p. 92 (as by a 'close collaborator' of Coecke). Purtle 1997 (note 14), p. 123.

³¹ Compositions with a painter

looking at the beholder while working at a panel or canvas of which only the back can be seen, occur in works by among others Rembrandt, Gerrit Dou and David Teniers, and perhaps most notorious of all, Velázquez's *Las Meninas*.

³² For instance, Klein (1933 [note 12] p. 59) remarks on Floris's painting that it be *weltlicher* ('more secular') in respect to older depictions of the theme, and contends that the unusually 'profane' composition can be explained by the placement not on an altar but in the gathering house of the Guild. Identifying not only Luke with Rijckaert Aertsz, but also the assistant with Frans Floris, she concludes the painting to be 'nur eine Art Maske [...], um die Porträts zweier bekannter Maler in den Raumen der Gilde würdig aufzustellen'. Kraut (1986 [note 26], p. 100) writes: 'Es fragt sich, ob hier überhaupt noch das Thema "Lukas malt die Madonna" dargestellt ist, oder ob nicht nur eine Allegorie mit dem Emblem des Lukasstieres gemeint ist'.

³³ Ost 2008 (note 12), pp. 229-258, esp. pp. 236-252.

³⁴ Van de Velde 1975 (note 11), cat. 35, pp. 186-187.

³⁵ Vandamme 1988 (note 11), cat. 312, p. 323 (dating the work to 1614). Michael Jaffé, *P.P. Rubens, Catalogo completo*, Milan 1989, cat. 913, p. 305, places the painting before 1620, while according to him additions to the left and the right hand side (generally believed to be painted by Rubens himself) were added some ten years later. Ost 2008 (note 12, p. 236) dates the 'Erstfassung' to 1614, the additions a decade later. He contends that Rubens painted the additions (among which are the parrot and the figure of St Joseph) when he presented the panel as a gift to St Luke's Guild.

³⁶ For examples in works by, among others, Antonello da Messina, Correggio, Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo, see John Shearman, 'Only connect... *Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*' (The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1988), Princeton 1992, especially pp. 33-40; for Savoldo: Mary Pardo, 'The Subject of Savoldo's Magdalen', *The Art Bulletin* 71 (1989), pp. 67-91.

³⁷ For more on the Italian *riforma*, see e.g. Manfred E. Welty, *Breve storia della Riforma italiana*, Casale Monferrato 1985; Antonio Gentili, Mauro Regazzoni, *La spiritualità della Riforma cattolica; la spiritua-*

lità italiana dal 1500 al 1650, Bologna [1993].

³⁸ See Isa Ragusa, Rosalie B. Green (eds.), *Meditations on the Life of Christ; an Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. ital. 115, Princeton 1961.

³⁹ I myself followed this line of interpretation, that on second thought does not appear convincing as regards to this particular painting, in a small article about *Rezeptionsästhetik* in renaissance art: 'Over de schouder van Gabriël, in de huid van de Maagd; de participerende beschouwer in de schilderkunst van de renaissance', *Desipientia, zin & waan*, 14 (2007), nr. 2, pp. 4-8.

⁴⁰ As Zuntz (1929 [note 19], p. 27) put it: 'Ein feines, stilles Gesicht mit nachdenklichen Augen'. Recently, Joanna Woodall (*Anthonis Mor; Art and Authority*, Zwolle 2007, p. 33) observed 'the saint's abstracted expression and orientation towards the space in front of the image imply that the Virgin is both embodied nature and a vision within the artist's mind' – thus combining both aspects discussed here.

⁴¹ Klein 1933 (note 12), pp. 69-81; Kraut 1986 (note 26), pp. 59-77. Recently, Jürg Meyer zur Capellen (*Raphael, a Critical Catalogue of His Paintings*, vol. II, Landshut 2005, pp. 282-283) characterized the painting in the Accademia di San Luca as a 'Raphael pastiche of the late sixteenth century which was granted an astonishing career in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. The author proposed an attribution to 'Frederico Zuccari (after Penni?)'.

⁴² An instance of the hand of an evangelist led by an angel is Caravaggio's first version of *St Matthew* for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome (formerly Berlin, Kaiser Friedrich Museum, destroyed 1944). This element seems to have a precedent in Flanders, in a painting of *St Luke Composing his Gospel* by Frans Pourbus the Elder, now in Brussels, Musée Royal des Beaux-

Arts. See Irving Lavin, 'Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two *St Matthews*', *The Art Bulletin* 56 (1974), 1, pp. 59-81, and 'A Further Note on Caravaggio's First Saint Matthew', *The Art Bulletin* 62 (1980), 1, pp. 113-114.

⁴³ In some Byzantine icons, Saint Luke is depicted in the act of painting, while an angel is standing behind him, apparently giving him instructions (see Crispino Valenziano, *Evangelista e pittore, discepolo e scultore; la Madonna di San Luca e il Crocifisso di Nicodemo: miti verso l'autentica icone cristiana*, Panzano in Chianti 2003, pp. 88-90). Only some 120 years after Floris's painting, in 1652-1653, the Bolognese painter, Giovanni Francesco Barbieri called Guercino, painted a St Luke showing the audience his finished painting in the presence of an angel (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City). The pose and gesture of the angel leave little doubt that it was he, rather than the evangelist, who was responsible for the painting.

⁴⁴ The icon, probably from the thirteenth-century, appears to be an overpainting of a much older, possibly late-antique original: Gerhard Wolf, *Salus Populi Romani: die Geschichte römischer Kultbilder im Mittelalter*, Weinheim 1990, pp. 24-28.

⁴⁵ Nothing is known about the commission and the earliest whereabouts of the painting. In the seventeenth century it seems to have been in at least two Antwerp private collections. Ariane Mensger, *Jan Gossaert: die niederländische Kunst zu Beginn der Neuzeit*, Berlin 2002, p. 201.

⁴⁶ For Spranger's painting, see Marcus Dekiert, *Alte Pinakothek, Holländische und Deutsche Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, Ostfildern 2006, p. 278 (with reference to older literature). I am indebted to Hugo van der Velden for bringing Spranger's painting to my attention.

⁴⁷ This is a concept well-known throughout Europe in spiritual literature from the late Middle

Ages and early Renaissance. For example, in Northern Italy the importance of *orazione mentale* (a practice of forming mental images of sacred stories) was stressed in tracts like the anonymous *Zardino de oration*, Venice 1454 (and many later editions), whereas in the Netherlandish Modern Devotion movement 'meditation without images' was a concept that remained crucial at least during the fifteenth century: see Bernhard Ridderbos, *De melancholie van de kunstenaar; Hugo van der Goes en de oudnederlandse schilderkunst*, Den Haag 1991, esp. Ch VI: 'Beeldloze contemplatie in de tijd van Hugo van der Goes', and Kees Waaijman, 'Image and Imageless', *Spirituality Renewed. Studies on Significant Representatives of the Modern Devotion*, Louvain 2003, pp. 29-40 (originally published in: Kees Veelenturf (ed.), *Geen povere schoonheid. Laatmiddeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, Nijmegen 2000, pp. 32-42).

⁴⁸ A beautiful evocation of this concept, albeit in an entirely different cultural context, is given by Orhan Pamuk in his masterly novel *My name is red*, originally published in Turkish as *Benim Adım Kırmızı* in 1998. Pamuk describes how illuminators in the Ottoman Empire of the late sixteenth century concentrated on the repetition of examples of compositions and motifs from illuminations of the legendary Persian School of Herat. Painstakingly reproducing older examples again and again, they got to know them by heart. Among these artists, blindness seems to have been almost a status symbol. As one blinded painter explains: 'Yes indeed I am blind, yet I remember each of the splendours of the manuscript I've illuminated for the last eleven years, down to each mark of the pen and each stroke of the brush, and my hand can draw it again from memory. My Excellency, I could illustrate the greatest manuscript of all times for you. Since my eyes will no longer be distracted by the filths of the world, I'll be able to depict all the glories of Allah from memory, in their purest form': Pamuk 2001 (note 1), p. 77.