

SIGN OF THE TIMES

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE SIGNATURE IN NETHERLANDISH PAINTING 1432-1575

Ruben Suykerbuyk Research Master's Thesis 2012-©-2013
Utrecht University

Abstract concerning the Frans Floris monogram

During Massys' exile, a by then relatively unknown man returned from his Italian sojourn and settled in Antwerp. The tide would quickly turn, however: within a few years after his return, Frans Floris (1519/20-1570) would dominate the Antwerp art scene of the third quarter of the sixteenth century.

Born in Antwerp, he had spent some time in the workshop of Lambert Lombard in Liège in 1539, to subsequently become a free master in his native city again in 1540/41. Immediately afterwards, he set out for Italy for a for that time exceptionally long period, and only returned in 1547.²⁰⁷ His assimilation of antique sculpture and mastering of contemporary Italian painting would greatly contribute to his popularity and influence all over the Netherlands. But besides his stylistic crossover between northern and Italian painting, one of the most renewing aspects of Floris' production was his workshop conception, which he devised and organized according to the Italian model of painters like Raphael and Giulio Romano. As already briefly touched upon above, in essence it comes down to a theoretical division between the invention of the *istoria* and the actual execution of the artwork in question. Throughout the sixteenth century, as a part of the changing status of the artist, more and more the *inventio* was considered to be the essential creative act. As a consequence, in a way the actual execution being – at least partly – given to assistants received a theoretical basis and approval.

Although it is quite sure that already before Floris painters entrusted parts of the execution to assistants, the mere scale on which Floris seems to have done this was without precedent.²⁰⁸ If we are to believe Karel van Mander, he had more than 120 assistants in total, and even though this might be a rhetorical exaggeration, it is doubtlessly rooted in truth.²⁰⁹ Van Mander uses the term 'discipulen', but this cannot be equated with 'pupils': with one exception, none of the names that the author mentions are registered as such in the *Liggeren*. Floris consciously chose already trained artists to come and work for him, which illustrates to what extent his workshop was carefully thought out and consciously organized.²¹⁰

His signature too appears to have been carefully thought out. In the first place, from the outset of his career onwards, Floris used a very consistent signature, not fundamentally changing it ever at all.

Mostly it is in the form of 'FFF ET IV' or 'FF IV ET FA', respectively standing for 'Frans Floris fecit et invenit' or 'Frans Floris invenit et faciebat'.²¹¹ Secondly, such a twofold signature including the concept of invention was without precedent, especially so consistently written in an abbreviated form, so much so that it becomes a kind of logo.²¹² And finally, every type of painting got its proper signature: whereas history paintings are usually signed with the aforementioned twofold signature, portraits and study heads are consequently signed only with 'FFF' – 'Frans Floris Fecit' – since there was no invention as such involved in these types.²¹³ Regarding the overall percentage of extant signed paintings, Floris comes close to Massys: 53% of his extant paintings carry a signature.²¹⁴ More specifically, 42% of his study heads and 68% of his history paintings are signed. To judge by its form, Floris' signature reflected his workshop practice, since it implies that he not only worked on the painting itself, but more importantly also was responsible for the invention of the idea behind it.²¹⁵

Furthermore, also links with Hieronymus Cock (1517/18-1570) and his printing business *Aux Quatre Vents* have been suggested, since in the prints he published from 1548 onwards he consistently distinguished between the invention and the execution of the prints.²¹⁶ Finally, Floris might also have taken inspiration from his teacher Lambert Lombard (1505/06-1566). Although no signed paintings are known from his hand, various of his drawings bear inscriptions like 'Lambertus Lombardus fecit inventor'. Furthermore, sometimes he abbreviated his name to 'LL', which might have inspired Floris to do so too.²¹⁷