The Spread of Alabaster Sculpture from the Low Countries

Since serial production of alabaster sculpture in the Southern Netherlandish workshops was largely focused on the export market, the question of how these works spread across Europe is an obvious one to ask. Answering it is not easy in view of the large quantity of extant works and their geographical dispersion, and also because many of them are museum pieces ‘without a history’. The reconstruction offered here is based mainly on material from Central and Northern Europe, which I shall try to present in the context of wider general knowledge about the way the art market operated in the Low Countries.¹

Before Amsterdam became one of Northern Europe’s largest centres of distribution for luxury goods, this function, as we know, was held by Antwerp.² It was here that in the 15th century the foundations were laid for a system of trade in artworks, based on a division of labour, assemblage and contracting, resulting in serial (and thus cheaper) production and efficient distribution for an anonymous market. The artworks that issued from the countless ateliers were treated as a product line whose primary function was to generate profit, and this produced a high degree of standardisation.³ The evolution towards universal types and themes is easy to trace using the example of Southern Netherlandish alabaster sculpture. In the previous chapter I pointed out that one such universal product that was easily adaptable to serve a range of functions was the Mechelen huisaltaartje. Moreover, the domination of certain subjects such as the Crucifixion and the Resurrection (cf. Fig. 79, 81, 87, 88, 93), which is revealed clearly with a browse through the illustrations in this book, proves that these were the Mechelen workshops’ ‘bestsellers’ – apparently due to the fact that they were suitable for use by the broadest possible range of clients.

Only a small percentage of works by Netherlandish artists were made to commission, while the majority were ready-made pieces designed for an unspecified, usually foreign clientele. Once again, alabaster sculpture is an ideal medium through which to trace this general development. Among the rare examples of works executed to commission are those made for the Dresden court. Analysis of these
(undertaken in subsequent chapters) shows that commissioners – as long as they had the financial means – could have input into the programme of the works they imported. We also read in the minutes of a 1564 meeting of the Zwickau municipal council of plans to commission an alabaster retable in Antwerp, though as this project never came to fruition we do not know whether this client intended to impose a specific programme on its Netherlandish suppliers.4

Most of the works discussed in this book are serially produced pieces, however, destined for the free market. It was not a new system: Late Gothic Flemish altarpieces had already been made along these same lines.5 As a system of production and sale, it not only guaranteed profits but was also convenient for buyers. Merchants or travellers passing through Antwerp could rarely afford to spend months in the Low Countries waiting for a work they ordered to be made. Clients and agents in this category were catered for by Antwerp’s permanent art markets, which sold such ready-mades. The wide range of altarpieces or epitaphs that are not entirely identical but do have certain identical features produce the impression that clients could select iconographic and decorative ‘ingredients’ from some sort of a catalogue of available elements, or indicate the parts they preferred in the workshop, and that these would then be put together in a whole. In order to take into account the needs of clients who wished to individualise in some way works bought on the open market, such pieces were often sold not entirely finished, with spaces left in which the coats of arms or portraits of the founders, or an appropriate inscription, could be added.6 The many adaptations indicate that alabaster products from Mechelen and Antwerp were often treated as semi-finished goods.

What of the actual distribution of these works? Alongside every atelier there was a shop in which the owner sold his merchandise himself. There were many of these in Mechelen. Marcus van Vaernewijck in his Spiegel der Nederlantscher audtheyt (1568) and Carel van Mander in his Schilder-Boek (1604) both mention 150 ‘winkels’ (workshops) in Mechelen.7 With such a large number, even given that the majority would have been painters’ ateliers, it is clear that there must have been a great selection for customers to choose from. Artists were also active in the sale of their works outside the studio, and would journey both around the country and abroad to do so. Where works were ordered from another town or country, it was the artist’s duty to deliver them shipside. Anthonis van Seron from Antwerp, the executor of the alabaster and marble elements for the tomb of Elector Maurice of Saxony in Freiberg Cathedral, undertook