In the cold winter of 1667–68, the young Florentine Prince Cosimo de’ Medici (1642–1723) started a journey through Northern Europe, not—as a persistent rumor would have it—to escape the horrors of a dynastic marriage, but with the explicit aim of learning about the blossoming intellectual and artistic culture in England and—especially—the Dutch Republic. On Monday 19th December 1667, Cosimo and his modest retinue arrived in Amsterdam, the city which at that time was the undisputed global hub of trade, knowledge and an emerging creative industry. Guided by his agents Francesco Feroni (1614–1696) and Pieter Blaeu (1637–1706), Cosimo visited the new town hall; the headquarters of the East and West Indian Trading Companies; churches and the Jewish synagogues; publishing houses (including, of course, the famous one owned by Pieter Blaeu’s brother Johannes) and many cabinets.
of curiosities. Cosimo took a special interest in paintings; he visited Rembrandt’s workshop (who, much to his regret, did not have anything suitable in stock) and saw the *Nightwatch* in the Doelen, the homebase of the *Schutterij*, the civic guards. However, the first painter whom the prince met was Otto Marseus van Schrieck (ca. 1620–1678), the creator of a strange genre of paintings in which snakes, insects and toads were depicted in mutual combat, against a dark background of thistles, fungi and moss [Fig. 5.1].

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5 Hoogewerff, Twee reizen 47. On Marseus see Steensma S., Otto Marseus van Schrieck. Leben und Werk (Hildesheim: 1999) and the excellent but as yet unpublished dissertation by Hildebrecht D.R., Otto Marseus van Schrieck (1619/20–1678) and the Nature Piece. Art, Science,