‘The Five Senses’ by the Antwerp Artist Jacob de Backer

Agnes Czobor

In his monograph of 1926 on Jacob Adriaensz Backer, the Rembrandt pupil from Friesland, the eminent Rembrandt scholar Kurt Bauch published for the first time a series of etchings of the five senses. Each shows a female figure representing one of the senses, surrounded by appropriate attributes and striking a fitting pose. A third reference to the sense being symbolized is included in the background of each print, in the form of a mythological scene illustrating some activity pertaining to that sense (figs. 1-5). Bauch considered these etchings early works by J. A. Backer, despite the fact that such representations of the five senses, crowded with symbolical references, had become antiquated by the seventeenth century. Although Bauch was aware of this, he nonetheless rejects the idea that the etchings may have been the work of J. A. Backer’s ‘ancestor’ Jacob, alias Jacques de Backer of Antwerp, whom Bauch considered a Fleming.

Since 1926 it has come to be acknowledged that the series of the five senses is indeed by the Antwerp artist, and they are listed as such in Hollstein in a volume that appeared in 1949. A few years ago a painting of the Sense of Sight, with the same composition as the etching of Sight in the series, turned up in a Budapest private collection (fig. 6). This discovery places it beyond all reasonable doubt that Jacob de Backer was also the author of a series of paintings of the five senses. In fact, it appears that he first painted the pictures and only afterwards etched the same compositions in reverse. This can be deduced from the differences between the painting and the corresponding etching, the former being more sophisticated and richer. This supposition is confirmed by a drawing in the Prentenkabinet in Leyden (fig. 7), a preparatory drawing for the representation of the Sense of Smell and the only sheet that can be ascribed without doubt to the artist. The drawing is a mirror image to the etching, but is not a preparatory study for it. It is a typical sketch for a painting. Aside from more general characteristics indicating this, it even has colour notes on the garments (blau, root, gell, etc.).

Two more paintings of the series came to light at a sale held in Budapest in December 1970. They are of nearly the same dimensions, and portray the Senses of Touch and Taste ((figs. 8-9). It seems quite possible that the whole series of paintings used to belong to the same owner in Budapest, giving hope that the two missing pictures may also turn up there some day. The
paintings of Touch and Taste were in considerably worse condition than Sight when they were sold. The new owner, however, has had them restored. With the removal of the very yellow varnish and the restoral of a missing piece of a few millimetres in the middle of the broken panel of Touch, the differences in condition between Sight and the two pictures discovered later have been considerably reduced.

The colours of all three pictures are of an Italian vividness, the artist’s favourite colours being a bright red, a strong yellow, a pale green and rose. The reclining female nudes in the allegories of Sight and Taste – particularly the figure looking at herself in a mirror in the painting of Sight – reveal that the painter must have been trained in Italy. Figures of this kind are typical Mannerist derivatives of the reclining Venuses of Venetian painting. We shall return to the gay colours and the other evidences of Italian influence.
