Jan Gossaert north of the rivers

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As is well known, the Late Gothic style dominated the Netherlands until the last years of the second decade of the sixteenth century when a drastic change in style occurred. This innovative aesthetic was to be the governing force of the sixteenth century and began, as far as one knows, with Jan Gossaert’s 1509 drawings after ancient sculptures in Rome and his 1516 painting of Neptune and Amphitrite, East Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Bode-Museum.1 These works are based upon a study of antique figures and architecture which impart a new sense of the substantial that was not present earlier in the Netherlands. This deep interest in the antique was well established in Italy roughly a century earlier where artists and patrons were attracted by the variety of motifs in the then recently discovered figure sculpture and reliefs from the ancient world.2 These antiquities contained graceful, refined and elegant forms sometimes rendered oddly and in an exaggerated way. Although not contemporary with Jan Gossaert, Giovanni Battista Armenini presents us with a good idea of what the antique meant to sixteenth-century artists. He wrote in his treatise on painting published in 1586 that the student learned more from copying ‘statues [reliefs on] arches and sarcophagi’ than from anything else because they impress themselves on the mind by being more certain and true.3 Armenini also stated that the best examples of the antique are the Laocoön, Hercules, Apollo, the great Torso [Belvedere], Cleopatra, Venus, and the Nile, all of which are found in the Vatican.4 This Italian fascination with using unearthed antique sculpture as models played an equally important role for the stylistic changes in the Netherlands. Its introduction into early sixteenth-century Netherlandish art transformed Late Gothic ideals into a new vision based primarily upon Hellenistic vocabulary. This permitted Gossaert and his followers to continue the traditional exaggerated forms of Late Medieval art but with a solidarity not present earlier and, above all, a completely new source for vocabulary. Gossaert’s contact with the major artists working in the Netherlands during the first three decades of the sixteenth century in sculpture, printmaking and painting was very much responsible for the dominating role played by this innovative style throughout the century.5 Gossaert’s new way was praised by sixteenth-century writers, among whom was Lodovico Guicciardini who wrote in 1567 that Gossaert was ‘the first Netherlander to bring the art of history and poetry painting with nude figures to his land’.6 These comments were echoed by Van Mander,7 who also wrote that when Gossaert was working in Utrecht, Jan van Scorel studied with him for a short time and subsequently went
to Italy where he too studied and copied antique sculpture as well as the excellent painting of Raphael, Michelangelo and others. One can only presume that Van Scorel was encouraged to visit Italy through his contact with Gossaert. It is interesting to note that nothing of Gossaert can be found in Van Scorel’s work or that of his workshop until several years after Van Scorel had returned from Italy around 1523-24. For example, Jan van Scorel’s ca. 1529 Madonna and Child, Utrecht, Centraal Museum (fig. 1), suggests a rekindling of the artist’s interest in Gossaert. Van Scorel’s figures are characterized by smooth and hard forms with a stone-like quality similar to Gossaert’s Madonna and Child, Madrid, Prado Museum (fig. 2). This is especially evident in the Christ Child whose hard muscles are separated into sections by the vivid contrast between light and shadow and the emphasis upon the contours. Something of Gossaert must also be present in the new type of Adam and Eve representations known only from a Van Scorel workshop or school piece preserved in the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem (fig. 3). This painting suggests that Van Scorel probably knew at least one example of Gossaert’s numerous representations of this theme dating from the early 1520s and that Gossaert’s work was known in Utrecht and Haarlem in the 1520s. This possibility is even more likely when one considers the Adam and Eve, Hatfield House, Marquess of Salisbury Collection (fig. 4), which was attributed to Van Scorel by Bruyn in 1954 but recently given to Marten van Heemskerck by Harrison, Faries and the 1986 exhibition catalogue in