Wtewael’s Netherlandish History reconsidered

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Long admired but little understood, Joachim Wtewael’s drawings concerning the history of the Netherlands are now recognized as a rich allegory on the Revolt against Spain and the early years of the Dutch Republic. In a probing analysis, Elizabeth McGrath identified key characters and events. The series opens as a Habsburg suitor courts Lady Belgica, the personification of the Netherlands, continues with the persecution and plundering of her lands, and ends with her triumph under the watchful leadership of Prince Maurice of Orange (Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina; figs. 1–3). Following Lindeman, McGrath dated the series around 1610, just after the conclusion of the Twelve Years’ Truce, which is the subject of one of the drawings. On the basis of that dating and documentary evidence of Wtewael’s Orangist orientation at the time, McGrath interpreted the drawings as a polemic for the militantly anti-Spanish policies of Prince Maurice.

While subscribing to many of McGrath’s conclusions, I should like to advocate a later date, between 1622 and 1625, which leads to different interpretations of the concluding scenes and of Wtewael’s polemic. An overview of Wtewael’s development as a draughtsman is essential to dating the allegory. Wtewael’s dated drawings are scarce, but it is possible to establish the outlines of a chronology. Two secure points—fortunately several decades apart—are provided by the signed and dated Study for a Goldsmith’s Piece of 1603 or 1608 (London, British Museum; fig. 4), and the Wedding of Peleus and Thetis of 1622 (Haarlem, Teylers Stichting; fig. 5). In addition, the publication in 1605 of the Thronus justitiae, designed by Wtewael and engraved by Willem Isaaksz. Swanenburg, provides a terminus ante quem for five related drawings. Although less firmly datable, drawings associated with dated paintings are also helpful in establishing a chronological framework.

In style, the London Study for a Goldsmith’s Piece is one of a group of drawings from the first decade of the century that display a miniaturist’s approach in figure proportions and in delicate decorative pattern, achieved with both line and wash. A drawing of the Judgment of Paris (Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet), related to a painting of 1602 (Cleveland Museum of Art) shares with the London drawing deftly sketched contours, meticulous detail, and judicious use of a light wash. Significantly, many of the cabinet-sized copper paintings for which Wtewael was famous date from these years. The small-scale, agile figures with precious gestures and the playful putti in the London study have counterparts, for example,
in his *Holy Family with St. John, Elizabeth, and Angels* (formerly Gotha, Schlossmuseum), which also bears the same ambiguous date of 1603 or 1608. Although connected with a single project, the five *Thronus justitiae* drawings are quite varied in style and technique, reflecting different purposes and probably changes in Wtewael’s style over a period of several