The acquisition of Flemish landscapes for Italy on the Antwerp art market

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During research on the formation of the sculpture collections assembled for the Florentine palace of Lorenzo di Piero Ridolfi between 1540-70, a fascinating letter documenting the acquisition of Flemish painted maps on the Antwerp art market has come to light in the papers of the Ridolfi family at the Archivio di Stato in Florence. The letter (App. 1), addressed to Lorenzo Ridolfi's wife, Maria di Filippo Strozzi (1515-bef. 1570) in Florence, was written by Giorgio Dati (1506-1557) in Antwerp on 12 January 1543 (modern style 1544). Lorenzo Ridolfi (1503-1576) was a member of a prominent patrician Florentine family, and younger brother of the more famous Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi (1501-1559). His marriage to Filippo Strozzi's daughter in 1529 forged close links with that powerful and rich family, and after his return to Florence from self-imposed exile in Rome, Lorenzo's desire to move across the river from his family's traditional neighbourhood in via Maggio on the Oltrarno to a more magnificent residence in the heart of the city, and adjacent to his wife's family palace, was probably decisive to his acquisition in November 1542 of the palace of Leonetto Tornabuoni in via Tornabuoni. From an examination of the Ridolfi account books for the years 1543-51, and of one ledger kept separately by Maria Strozzi Ridolfi between 1543-45, Marco Spallanzani has demonstrated that Lorenzo and his wife almost immediately set about making various structural changes to the palace, and to restoring and decorating it. The data from these accounts can be supplemented by additional information contained in two further sources. The first is Lorenzo Ridolfi's personal correspondence, within whose files the present letter is included, and which confirms that the main period of artistic acquisitions occurred between 1543 and c.1558. The second source are two recently discovered inventories of Lorenzo's palace, drawn up in 1564 and in 1570, and which include some of these acquisitions. Before examining these sources in more detail, an interpretation of the Dati letter may help us understand the sort of paintings chosen to decorate the palace, and the place they occupy in the taste for things Northern in Florence at this date.

The letter makes clear that Maria Strozzi Ridolfi was actively and personally involved in the choice of decoration for the via Tornabuoni palace, for it is to her, and not to Lorenzo, that Dati addresses his letter. Clearly Dati was acting as her agent in Antwerp in locating and acquiring Flemish painted maps ('carte dipinte') for the decoration of sopraporte and other