Gossaert’s *Neptune and Amphitrite* and the Body of the Patron

Stephanie Schrader

In 1567 Ludovico Guicciardini credited Jan Gossaert (ca. 1478-1532) as being the first artist to bring Italianate style and subject matter to the Low Countries. Following Guicciardini, Giorgio Vasari, Karel van Mander, and scores of other art historians have called attention to the classicizing proportions and idealized musculature of Gossaert’s mythological nudes. Although he introduced these Italianate features, Gossaert maintained naturalistic motifs typical of his own Netherlandish tradition, such as the abundant amount of facial and body hair seen in his naked figures. Gossaert’s hybridization of Italianate and Netherlandish art is more than a matter of style, however. As we shall see, the artist’s depictions of nude gods and goddesses reflect the political and personal identity of his humanist patron, Philip of Burgundy (1463-1524). While serving as admiral of the Burgundian fleet from 1502 to 1517, Philip strove to create a humanist court at Souburg. Gossaert’s *Neptune and Amphitrite* of 1516 (fig. 1), the only surviving painting from this period, invited a comparison between the admiral and his ancient counterpart. An analysis of this painting, in conjunction with readings of humanist texts written about the patron, reveals how Gossaert’s mythological figures can be understood as erotic embodiments of Philip’s own virility.

**Gossaert as Philip’s Apelles**

*Neptune and Amphitrite* shows the nude sea gods at almost life-size scale. Painted nudes on this scale had not been seen in the Low Countries since Jan van Eyck depicted Adam and Eve on the exterior wings of the Ghent altarpiece eighty-four years earlier. Yet unlike the wiry proportions of van Eyck’s Adam and the long torso and swelling belly of the earlier Netherlandish artist’s Eve, the exaggerated bulk of Gossaert’s muscular forms recall the classicizing figures in prints by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). As many scholars have noted, Dürer’s *Adam and Eve* of 1504 was an up-to-date model from which Gossaert drew inspiration for his *Neptune and Amphitrite* (fig. 2).

Although Gossaert followed Dürer’s revival of the Vitruvian canon of proportions—most apparent in the fact that Amphitrite’s head is one-eighth the length of her body and her face is one-tenth the length of her body—one detects significant departures. First and foremost, Gossaert’s figures are substantially more muscular than Dürer’s. Neptune’s thick neck, wide chest, rippled stomach, meaty thighs, and bulging calf muscles reinforce his status...