Art and Artistry in Lucas de Heere

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There is no art found under heaven
Of which a true artist does not have an understanding.
All arts are therefore contained within Pictura.¹

The fragmentation of scholarly disciplines that has occurred since the eighteenth century has led to a tendency among scholars to study and appraise separately the work of all-round artists like the Ghent painter and poet Lucas de Heere (1534-1584).² Moreover, the fact that these assessments are made in normative-aesthetic terms arises out of an altered conception of art that took hold in that same period. This has led to a lack of proper understanding of De Heere’s versatility, although this was the very hallmark of a Renaissance artist. Using De Heere’s picture poems and other art-related poetry in Den Holen Boomgaerd der Poësen (‘The Court and Orchard of Poetry’; fig. 1), an anthology printed in 1565 by Ghileyn Manilius in Ghent, this article will suggest that the Netherlandish artist could be characterised by a capacity to encompass visual and verbal modes of signification, and to juxtapose different genres and conceptions of artistic creation within the remit of Pictura. In this regard I finally suggest an analogy between the conceptions of art and the artist discernible in Den Hof en Boomgaerd der Poësen and a specific painting genre, the so-called gallery paintings that became significant in Antwerp from the mid 1610s.

Profile of an artista

There were few to equal De Heere’s range of activities, in the visual arts and beyond. He was a painter (fig. 2), a draughtsman, an engraver, a poet of ballads, sonnets and psalms, a propagandist and a chronicler, as well as the deviser, organizer and director of ceremonial entries.³ Apart from Den Hof en Boomgaerd der Poësen, his literary work included a lost set of lives of painters, a forerunner of the magnificent set of biographies later composed by his former pupil, Karel van Mander (1548-1606).

If we are prepared to accept socio-economic information as an argument, De Heere’s wealth alone can serve as an indication of his contemporary standing. When his home town of Ghent surrendered to the Duke of Parma in 1584, his fortune was estimated at 1050 pounds: ‘an

Detail figure 15, The just judges (from the Ghent Alterpiece, completed 1432)