Early-modern Netherlandish sculptors in Danzig and East-Central Europe
A study in dissemination through interrelation and workshop practice

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the immigration of sculptors, stonemasons, stonecutters and stonemasons from the Low Countries and the subsequent success they enjoyed in their new milieus is one of the most intriguing, yet often underestimated episodes in the history of sixteenth-century Northern European art. The influx of skilled and often very gifted artists and craftsmen, who had been trained in the workshops of Mechelen, Antwerp and other Netherlandish towns, into Northern and Central Europe transformed its artistic landscape – turning some places, such as the great Baltic port of Danzig (Pl. Gdańsk), into important centres of Netherlandish art.

The Baltic area proved to be most readily accessible for Low Countries sculpture, largely due to the existence of traditional Hanseatic trade routes. As early as the mid-sixteenth century, three distinct yet interdependent centres particularly receptive to Netherlandish influence emerged there: the courts of two subsequent Kings of Denmark, Christian III and Frederik II; the courts of Swedish Kings Erik XIV and especially Johan III; as well as the court of Duke Albrecht I Hohenzollern of Prussia in Königsberg (Kaliningrad / Królewiec) (fig. 1). Sweden and above all Denmark sustained their artistic importance well into the seventeenth century, while the significance of Königsberg diminished in the 1590s. Around that time the capital of Ducal Prussia was replaced as a leading centre in the southern part of the Baltic region by Danzig, which was rapidly growing in wealth and influence at the end of the century. The crucial role in the dissemination of Netherlandish sculpture in the lands surrounding the Baltic Sea was initially played by the Antwerp studio of Cornelis Floris, whose foremost commissions were provided by the king of Denmark, the Danish admiral Herluf Trolle and the dukes of Prussia. As has been observed by Frits Scholten, experience gained by Floris in Italy, both in terms of all’antica formal language and workshop practice – he was seemingly the first in the Netherlands to apply full-scale models in clay or plaster – enabled him to establish a highly influential studio. His numerous alleged pupils or followers active in the Baltic region – such as Willem van den Blocke, Gert van Egen and Robert Coppens, all from Mechelen, as well as Philip Brandin from Utrecht – strongly contributed to diffusion of Netherlandish sculpture (fig. 2). Developments parallel to those in the Baltic region can be observed in the Holy Roman Empire and lands of the Habsburg dominion, where such sculptors were employed as Anthoni de