Greener pastures?
Capturing artists’ migrations during the Dutch Revolt

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Introduction

The erupting Revolt in the Low Countries set in motion a massive displacement of people which would reshape the geo-political and economic makeup of the region, and which had an enormous impact on the social fabric of Netherlandish society, both in the north and in the south. An estimated 100,000 to 150,000 Flemings left their homes in search of a better future elsewhere. Among the departing hoards were scores of artists. Indeed, the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt in 1566-1568 ignited an unprecedented exodus of artists from the Southern Netherlands, and from Antwerp in particular. Countless Flemish painters, draughtsmen, print-makers, tapestry weavers, musicians, poets and other creative workers relocated to France, England, the Rhineland and especially the northern provinces in what would eventually become the Dutch Republic.

While there is no doubt that many artists left, it is much more difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty what persuaded each individual to pack up their belongings and leave: economic need, the prospect of commissions elsewhere, religious reasons or the presence of relatives and colleagues in foreign towns? During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jan Briels was the first to systematically map the movement of these individuals and examine the push and pull factors that made them move to different towns, but artist migrations have scarcely received any serious attention since then. Therefore, combining new insights into migration theory and concrete examples from the Flemish case, this essay will take stock of the possible motives and reasons relative to the increased mobility of artists between the Iconoclasm of 1566 and the signing of the Twelve-Years’ Truce in 1609. It was long assumed that religious motivations lay at the heart of many decisions to move from Antwerp and other towns in the Southern Netherlands to the Protestant north. However, already in 1972 the Italian economic historian Carlo Cipolla pointed out that ‘the dramatic story of the religious refugee has such an appeal that one is often inclined to forget that not all migrations of skilled workers and innovations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be ascribed to religious fanaticism’. And, more recently, the esteemed migration historians Jan and Leo Lucassen stressed that ‘almost all refugees combine political and economic motives’. Therefore, we need to critically re-examine the motivations for artists’ movements by taking into account economic, social, religious and artistic factors in addition to network effects and the perceived attraction of the artists’ destinations. Building on recent scholarship into the dynamics of...