Netherlandish artists on the move

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[... that is why those of our Netherlandish Nation, above all others in the world, are inclined to travel, and to visit foreign lands and peoples].

‘[...] I have remained in Manchester to this day, Ferber continued. It is now twenty-two years since I arrived, he said, and with every year that passes a change of place seems less conceivable. [...] Only once have I travelled abroad since my youth, two years ago, when I went to Colmar in the summer, and from Colmar via Basle to Lake Geneva. For a very long time I had wanted to see Grünewald’s Isenheim paintings, which were often on my mind as I worked, and especially the ‘Entombment of Christ’, but I never managed to master my fear of travelling.’

Unlike the Swiss born painter Max Ferber in W.G. Sebald’s The Emigrants, artists from the Low Countries have been known to be fond of travelling since the Middle Ages. Writing in the first half of the 1560s, the Antwerp-based, Florentine merchant Lodovico Guicciardini (1521-1589) mentioned in his Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi (Antwerp, 1567) that Netherlandish artists were dispersed all over Europe. He praised the mobility of Netherlandish artists as ‘something no less wonderful than honorable’ and he noticed how many of them, after having spent some time in Italy, traveled to other European countries and ‘even as far as Muscovy’, often drawn by the prospect of earning ‘large rewards from great princes, republics and other magnates’.

At the time Guicciardini was writing, before the outbreak of ‘the troubles’ in 1566, migration of artists was a rapidly increasing phenomenon in the Low Countries, caused by positive and honorable motives such as self-expression and artistic ambition and often resulting in ‘large rewards’ from new patrons and customers. For example, in his early twenties Jan van Scorel (1495-1562) journeyed from Utrecht via Nuremburg (where he met Dürer) to Venice, where he is documented for several years. He travelled on to Rome and further, as a pilgrim, to the Holy Land. Returning to Rome, in 1522 he entered the service of the new Dutch pope, Adriaen VI, and succeeded Raphael as keeper of the prestigious collection of ancient art in the Cortile del Belvedere. After the pope’s death in 1523, Van Scorel settled back in Utrecht, where he built a highly successful career as a learned and devout artist, making an honourable reputation – and a good living – based on the new ways of painting he had learned abroad and incorporating pictorial references to the sights of Jerusalem and Rome.

Soon after the publication of the Guicciardini’s Descrittione, however, Netherlandish mobility would acquire a completely different aspect, in which Antwerp played a central role as a source of forced migration.

Jan Muller (1571-1628) after Hans von Aachen (1552-1615), Portrait of Bartholomeus Spranger (1546-1611), first state, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (inv.no. RP-P-1877-A-360)