‘Una cosa non meno maravigliosa che honorata’
The expansion of Netherlandish sculptors in sixteenth-century Europe

Arjan de Koomen

Introduction: a historiographical hiatus
Sixteenth-century sculpture from the Netherlands is one of the blind spots of art history. There are, it is true, monographs dedicated to the most important practitioners, but its history has yet to be written. Even a short chapter in a survey book dedicated to this period is extremely hard to find. As a consequence, a most remarkable phenomenon has gone more or less unnoticed: how in the course of the sixteenth century sculptors from the Low Countries overran the greater part of Europe and became, from an international perspective, the dominant force in this field. It has often been stated that sculpture in general has been excluded from the historiography of the Low Countries. Yet the histories of fifteenth- and seventeenth-century sculpture have been, compared to that of the sixteenth century, abundantly put on record. The fact that Carel van Mander was a painter writing on painting might be called the heart of the problem. His *Schilder-boeck*, the major source on sixteenth-century art from the Low Countries, does not contain biographies of sculptors, although some are mentioned in passing if they happen to be closely connected to a painter under discussion. Other early sources do not enlighten the oblivion under which these sculptors have fallen. The sixteenth century itself has not produced many relevant sources. Archival documents from this period are scarce, and at the time the emerging genre of art literature was still an exclusively Italian phenomenon. Therefore, most written testimonies on Netherlandish sculptors from this period come from Italians like Guicciardini, Vasari and Lomazzo. Later treatises, such as the ones written by Samuel van Hoogstraten and Houbraken, are of no help since they deal exclusively with the art of painting. That Gerard de Lairesse included a chapter on sculpture in his *Groot Schilderboek* (1707) does not mean that he described the history of sculpture or sculptors. He rather confirms the idea of the infertility of Dutch soil in this respect: ‘in these lands the art of sculpture is not highly esteemed’, while Italy is ‘the land of promise’.

A further explanation for this lacuna might be that sculpture of the sixteenth century escapes a Netherlandish characterization, because its Italianizing tendencies result in a certain stylistic hybridity, while that of the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries both show recognizable stylistic properties. A more practical reason is that a complete representative overview is impossible because many sculptural works were destroyed in the sixteenth- and eighteenth-century waves of iconoclasm. Moreover, such an overview is scattered by the fact that many sixteenth-century sculptors left the Low Countries to live abroad for extended periods. With their major