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Allegorical Female Busts by Bernaert de Rijckere in the National Museum in Warsaw

In 1878 Pieter Génard published an article on the Antwerp painter Bernaert de Rijckere (Courtrai c. 1535–1590 Antwerp).¹ Pursuing a typically xixth century interest in going back to the source, the author uncovered a mass of archival data from which he could deduce the eminent social standing and essential wealth of this artist. Documents establish that Bernaert de Rijckere, born and educated in Courtrai, owned houses in Antwerp, Courtrai and plots of land in Lendele. After moving to Antwerp in 1561 he was enrolled as a master in the guild of St. Luke and also became a member of the chamber of rhetoricians 'De Violieren'. His paintings were popular among several prominent families of the city, such as Della Faille and de Doncker, who were befriended by him. After his death some of his paintings were purchased by the Prince of Orange. However, the works known to Génard at the time he published his book on De Rijckere - a Carrying of the Cross and the triptych of the Descent of the Holy Ghost in Courtrai, two portraits of the Clarys, a married couple, in the Antwerp museum, and two further matrimonial portraits of J. B. de Doncker and his wife - aroused the author's interest, leading him to believe that many more important works by this prolific and talented painter might be rediscovered among anonymous or wrongly attributed pieces. His assumption proved to be truly prophetic. In 1970 a painting of the Four Evangelists in the sacristy of the church of San Marcos in Madrid was found to be signed and dated 'B. D.Ryckere 1563', paving the way towards further attributions (see below). Since then, the oeuvre of this Antwerp painter has been gradually emerging in the course of establishing its rightful authorship. First in the procession, a 'group-potrait historie' staged as the Finding of Moses in the National Museum in Warsaw (fig. 1) could be attributed to De Rijckere on grounds of stylistic comparison with the Madrid altarpiece.² The authorship, intuitively but convincingly forwarded by the Spanish art historian J. Ollero³ received additional substantiation in 1972 from K. G. Boon⁴, who had found drawings relating to the Warsaw composition among a set of drawings in the Cabinet des Dessins in the Louvre purported to be the work of a certain 'Monogrammist B'. Boon identified a preparatory drawing (fig. 2) for the whole composition and three preliminary studies showing separate figures (fig. 3), some of them dated 1562. The group also includes a drawing of various heads of women (fig. 4) wearing complicated Floris-like head-dresses similar to those worn by the ladies in the Warsaw picture.³ This enabled Boon to establish the identity of the Monogrammist B (whose signature was a capital letter B placed centrally under the date, usually in the upper left corner of the composition), as that of the Flemish painter Bernaert de Rijckere. The artist's drawings were later described extensively by the same author in an article of 1977.⁶ Final and conclusive proof of the authorship of the Warsaw Finding of Moses was supplied by the publication in 1979 of a slightly modified version of this painting (fig. 5) which had turned
up on the art market in Vienna in 1972. It differed from the Warsaw picture in several respects, notably in the placing of some of the figures, and was signed with the full name of Bernaert de Rijckere and dated 1562. The Vienna painting also helped to confirm the authorship of a mythological composition representing *Diana and Actaeon* (fig. 6), monogrammed with a ‘B’ below the date, 1573, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, but formerly attributed to Anthonie Blocklandt. It