Introduction

Some areas of the turbulent years between the first wave of Iconoclasm in 1566 and the Fall of Antwerp in 1585 are still a neglected subject in Southern Netherlandish art-history. Research such as Carl Van de Velde’s study on Floris, David Freedberg’s PhD dissertation and book on iconoclasm, Justus Müller Hofstede’s article on the young Otto Vaenius, Martin Zweite’s book on Marten de Vos, some articles by Adolf Monballieu, Jan van Roey and Carl Van de Velde, and more recently Anne T. Woollett’s PhD dissertation on militia altarpieces have been both enlightening and inspiring. But as to activities of artists, the actual possibilities and limitations of the painter’s craft, the social and economic context of the painter’s trade, and their working conditions, the often rich archival sources remain untapped.

First, this contribution aims to explore the aspirations, professional prospects and artistic endeavours of Ambrosius Francken (1544/1545-1618), a young painter, during a time of economic crisis. After the spectacular general economic boom of the 1560s, the economy, including the art market suffered from the economic, political and religious instability in the Southern Netherlands. How does this translate to the painter’s profession? Ambrosius Francken, a journeyman of the famous Antwerp history painter Frans Floris (1544/1545-1618), is an interesting case. While Ambrosius left no ego-documents, fortunately, his background is well-documented, as is the case for the whole of the large Francken-family. Administrative records left by different members of the dynasty provide interesting information on social mobility and resilience. When ego documents are absent or rare, the researcher needs to zoom in on the background of the artist’s interaction as can be read in various documents on loans, obligations, investments, baptismal records and inventories. Artists in sixteenth-century Antwerp were part of an urban network, which functioned both as social capital and buffer. Through relationships with various social, religious, and professional groups, they can be situated in the social context of the larger early modern Antwerp community. The Dutch art historian Marten Jan Bok rightly stated that these often neglected archival documents in which painters act, bear witness to their mutual contacts.

Second, this contribution also looks into the situation of religious art at a time in which religious painting specifically was the object of distrust or downright anger as Antwerp was taken over by image-breaking Calvinists who stressed the word, not the image. In his PhD dissertation of 1972, published in 1988, on iconoclasm and art in the Netherlands, Freedberg wrote that the Francken brothers made a name as a result of the Silent Iconoclasm of 1581. Indeed, both Ambrosius and his older brother Frans profited from the high demand of new altarpieces after these events. But both were active in the arts long before that time.

‘Den quaden tyt’? The artistic career of the young Ambrosius Francken before the Fall of Antwerp*
The career of Ambrosius Francken and his siblings started when their father Nicolas sent them from small-town Herentals where he taught them the basics, to nearby Antwerp. Nicolas Francken was probably a well-to-do artist, but few facts are known about him.7 Ambrosius Francken came to the workshop of the renowned Frans Floris in Antwerp between ca 1566 and ca 1568, at a time when the workshop was turning out history pieces that were in high demand by merchants and rich burghers. Antwerp needed a continuous influx of workers of all trades to keep its market going, and this certainly applied to artists who were lured to the town in search of a market.8 On the supply side, recent statistical analysis of the Liggeren, (the membership lists of the guild of Saint Luke) by Martens and Peeters shows that the majority (78 per cent) of the Antwerp artists up to 1585 were immigrants from Brabant, Flanders, but many also came from further away.9 Ambrosius went to Floris’ workshop in order to train and extend his education but especially to work there as a journeyman.10 These workers were expected to have the competence of a schooled artist, without the master’s title. Floris, according to Carel van Mander, was reputed to have employed some hundred and twenty journeymen in the course of his career.11 Was that a rhetorical number, or was it a loose count whereby anyone, even those in the orbit of Floris for a short time, was included? In any case, Van Mander only mentions some thirty disciples by their name. As the average Antwerp workshop between 1501 and 1579 ranged from about five to seven persons in the course of its entire existence, Floris’s workshop was extraordinarily large.12

An aspiring artist’s apprentice had approximately one chance in five to become a master.13 On average, those who became a master worked between one and eleven years as a journeyman after his circa four-year training period. This means that the journeyman’s phase was something any aspiring artist on the road to effective master-ship would pass through, some ending it with the title, others dropping out, dying, taking up another trade, or remaining a journeyman for the rest of their lives. The precise activities of Ambrosius in the workshop remain a matter of conjecture; he would have been about twenty-two years of age and he thus probably had more than four years of basic training. While working with and for Floris, young artists not only perfected their craft and sharpened their talent with a master of great fame. They probably also considered it an investment in their future: when Ambrosius left the workshop around 1568, he was armed with an extensive network of contacts that would be of continuing importance for the rest of his career. But the times were not favourable to history painting. In August 1566, the first wave of Iconoclasm swept over the Netherlands; many altarpieces and other works of art in churches and cloisters were irreparably damaged or destroyed.15

The wander years 1568-1572

In the years after 1566, the atmosphere in Antwerp became grim: many migrants who had initially come to Antwerp, now fled out of religious or professional motives as the tensions put a halt to economic possibilities. Documents state that craft and trade had come to a halt.16 In 1568 Ambrosius left Floris’s workshop for Tournai, presumably in search of work: after the iconoclasm had raged through the Netherlands, many towns such as Tournai, or Mechelen, found themselves in need of repairs and decoration of their religious buildings. Other Floris-trainees as well as his relatives such as Cornelis Floris II (ca 1513/1514-1575), and his brother the glazier Jacob Floris († 1581)17 also worked in Tournai for some time. It is reasonable to suppose that he went there armed with recommendations by Floris. Van Mander mentions Ambrosius in the service of bishop Gilbert d’Ognies, but he does not give any further information.18 The town had been much vandalised during the Iconoclasm, so that it attracted a fair number