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Esther before Ahasuerus: A Design for a Tapestry by Pieter Coecke van Aelst

Standing out among the sixteenth-century Netherlandish drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings of the National Museum in Warsaw is an unpublished work, attributed to an artist from the circle of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Esther before Ahasuerus*. Dazzling in its execution, it shows an episode from the Old Testament Book of Esther (**fig. 1**; verso, **fig. 2**).[1] Esther, the Jewish wife of Persian ruler Ahasuerus, uncovered his vizier Haman's plot to kill all the Jews in the land in order to settle a score with her uncle Mordecai. Forced by her uncle to act, risking her life, Esther went to the throne room where Ahasuerus was sitting. He greeted her by tilting his sceptre and invited her to tell him the reason for her visit. "Then said he unto her, 'What wilt thou, queen Esther? And what [is] thy request? It shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.' And Esther answered, 'If [it seem] good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.' Then the king said, 'Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said.'" (Est 5: 3–5)[2]. It seems that the artist has captured this very moment, as Ahasuerus turns to give his order to a man standing in the foreground.

The composition of the drawing is straightforward: two groups fill the foreground. On the left are eight women wearing long robes. The woman at the head of the group, most likely Esther, has her knees slightly bent as she lifts the edge of her dress with her right hand to kneel. On the right are five men who, unlike the women, gesticulate energetically, seemingly in reaction to what is going on before them. In the centre, on a richly decorated throne, in a suit of armour and with a coat draped across his shoulders, sits Ahasuerus. He holds a three-pointed sceptre. One of the men behind him is leaning his head towards the ear of another, commenting on events. These are probably the eunuchs Bigthan and Teresh, who are plotting against Ahasuerus (Est 2: 21–23)[3]. But the king turns towards the man on the right, who is standing

[1] Pen, two shades of brown ink on traces of black chalk, light brown wash on brown paper with a fragment of a watermark: three balls (foolscap hat?); vertical chain lines, irregular spaces between chains (23–18–23–25–22–23–23–23–23 mm), 18.5 × 25.3 cm; in the four corners, at the meeting point of the double lines that frame the composition, piercings with a sharp tool (needle?), inv. no. Rys.Ob.d.715 MNW, the National Museum in Warsaw. In 2011 Dorota Nowak, head of the Conservation Workshop of Paper, treated this drawing, by cleaning the dust and small bits of grime off its recto and verso; removing bits of paper (leftovers of the page in the album into which the drawing had originally been glued) and leftover adhesive from the verso; removing the grease stains, which degraded the paper and limited its legibility (in the centre and at the bottom of the sheet); fixing the inks, water baths; fortifying the paper's structure; minor stippling and montage onto an acid-free passe-partout. See the conservator's documentation in the archive of the Conservation Workshop of Paper, the National Museum in Warsaw.

[2] Quotations from the King James Bible.

[3] See Guy Delmarcel, Nicole de Reyniès, Wendy Hefford, *The Toms Collection. Tapestries of the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries*, with contrib. by Eric Rochat et al., Fondation Toms Pauli (Lausanne: Verlag Niggli AG; Zürich: Sulgen, 2010), pp. 44–5, cat. no. 10.

before the throne, shown from the back in slight counterpose, leaning on his shield, a sword on his belt. A second man, holding a cane, stands at the door leading into the palace, perhaps this is Esther's uncle Mordecai.[4]

Meticulously drawn architecture serves as background. In the centre are columns on high pedestals crowned with profiled cornices; the wall they frame is covered with bas-relief and decorative geometric elements. The royal throne stands at the right wall, and above it are another bas-relief and unfurled draperies. The door next to it is only partly visible. The architectural details are cut off by the edge of the composition on the right side and at the top (we can only see a small part of the columns) deliberately, to give the space that is shown both greater equilibrium and monumentality. The perspective lines are marked by the door's cornices and transom. Architecture nearly fills the composition's frame, and it is only on the left, above the women's heads, that we can see a hilly landscape with classical buildings or ruins between the trees.

The Warsaw drawing presents an opportunity to study the work of a sixteenth-century draughtsman. First, the artist used black chalk to sketch out the layout of the composition, and its traces are faintly visible in several places. He defined both the architectural elements and the grouping of the figures. He was clearly dissatisfied with the overall effect and reduced the area of the composition by about one centimetre on the right by cutting out some of the doorframe and Mordecai's figure with a second, inner frame. Over time, the chalk sketch lost its sharpness and expression; what remains are worn-out lines, which come across as irregular streaks. We should therefore not draw far-reaching conclusions from this, but instead focus on analyzing those areas whose interpretation is more certain.

The next stage is a drawing in pen and brown ink. Significantly, it does not replicate the careful earlier design, and at times firmly departs from it. For example, there is the new alignment of Esther's legs: initially much closer together, her right foot was parallel to her left, much like the position of the body of the woman on the far left. The new presentation with her legs further apart makes her more dynamic, as her right leg is decidedly moved back, her right foot at a right angle to her left, its perspective significantly foreshortened. Originally, the first man on the left was to be at the centre of the composition, much nearer to the women, and he thus covered the clearance in which we now see the door opening and the stairs leading to it. The innovation gives the composition depth. The light line in black chalk, which continues the arc of the man's arm in the doorway on the right-hand side (Mordecai), indicates that the initial concept showed his whole figure. It also seems that Ahasuerus's right leg was initially bent more at the knee and placed closer to the throne. Traces of black chalk appear elsewhere, but no longer form such clear shapes. The streaks and even blackened areas, for instance in the architectural sections, may be interpreted, however, as evidence of the intensive work the artist put into these parts of the composition. He also used slightly darker ink to correct the pedestal of Ahasuerus's throne, his left leg and the profiled cornice and column shafts. These slight changes did not, however, alter the composition. A delicate, subtle wash, which consistently emphasizes the areas of shadow, building up the forms of the figures, puts the finishing touches on the drawing. It also plays an important role in the landscape, clearly making the hill on the left stand out against the background of another, which is drawn only in pen.

[4] Ibid.

The writing below the composition, ~~*25* [35? 57?]~~ *Sonder den boort 25* [35? 57?] *ellen* (without border 25 [35? 57?] Ells) – indicates the work's original purpose (**fig. 3**): it is without a doubt the preliminary sketch for a tapestry.[5] It is in pen and brown ink in an identical tone to the rest of the drawing, which may indicate that both were done by the same hand.[6] But it is not out of the question that the writing was added later, in the workshop in which the tapestry was to be woven according to the drawing, as instructions for the maker of the cartoons (perhaps the same person who created the design) concerning the dimensions of the final composition. A third possibility is that the writing predated the drawing, to assist the artist in creating a design with the correct proportions. Even though instructions setting the height of the tapestry have not survived, it is very likely that such an inscription did exist at one time and that its fragment, cut off by the edge of the sheet, is visible on the left. Another inscription in a different hand and in slightly darker brown ink is found on the verso of the drawing, but is difficult to decipher (**fig. 4**).[7]

As he began his drawing, the artist knew the dimensions of the final work, which he needed to determine the proper proportions of the composition and therefore to draw the borders to enclose it. The fact that no line (apart from those made in black chalk) crosses these borders is evidence that the internal double frame was made earlier than the drawing in pen. This would not have happened had the artist drawn the frame after finishing his composition. Even though we can be certain that the drawing was related to the production of a tapestry, it does not meet the definition of a *petit patron*, a final design on whose basis the cartoon (*patron*) would be executed; we know this from the reduction of the width of the field of the composition and the presence of *pentimenti*, as well as the characteristic summary nature of the sketch. It is a preliminary drawing, actually two drawings (chalk and pen) that represent the initial stage of work on the composition and as such could be shown to the client for his approval.

In designing the composition of *Esther before Ahasuerus*, the artist used the conventional set of motifs that weave through the works of Raphael (1483–1520), Giulio Romano (1499–1546), Giovanni Francesco (c. 1496 – c. 1528) and Luca Penni (c. 1500/1504–77); they include rulers sitting on their thrones in distinctive poses, with classical architecture as background and soldiers flanking this arrangement on one or both sides, often leaning on shields that rest on the floor. These distinctive motifs can also be found in designs and cartoons made by Italian artists, which served weavers in Brussels to make tapestries, and allowed artists in the Netherlands to study them without needing to travel to Italy. Finally, they also appeared in local designs, such as the series "The Founding of Rome," especially the tapestry *The Rape of the Sabine Women*

[5] The number values have been interpreted in various ways. Marijn Schapelhouman, Curator of Drawings of the Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, reads them as *25 ellen*; Stijn Alsteens, Curator at the Department of Drawings and Prints, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, as *35 ellen*; Hillie Smit, co-author of a monumental catalogue of Rijksmuseum tapestries (Hillie Smit, Ebeltje Hartkamp-Jonxis, *European tapestries in the Rijksmuseum* [Zwolle: Waanders, 2004]. Catalogues of the decorative arts in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 5), as *57 ellen*.

[6] The writing is similar to the inscription on the drawing *The Jews Collecting the Twelve Stones from the River Jordan* (c. 1535–38, inv. no. 2002.431, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), but one should be extremely cautious in promoting the thesis that both inscriptions were made by Coecke.

[7] Marijn Schapelhouman identifies the writing: "*teeckeninge*[n] *Swart tot Groningen*" (Opinion based on its photograph during my archival survey of the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam in March 2011); Stijn Alsteens deciphered it as *Dessins* [?] *Dese* [?] *teckeyninghen hoert toe fransus* [?] (emailed photograph, 2 April 2011).

and The Presentation of Hersilia to Romulus[8] according to a design by Bernard van Orley or another of his compositions, *Month of February* in the series "Hunts of Maximilian,"[9] as well as in the works of other tapestry designers of the first half of the sixteenth century. The group of women being led by Esther echoes the grouping of the apostles in *The Charge to Peter* tapestry in the series "Acts of the Apostles," whose first edition based on Raphael's cartoons was produced in the workshop of Pieter van Aalst in Brussels in 1516–19.[10] It is noteworthy that a finished tapestry and not a cartoon must have inspired it, since it is the mirror image of the women in the Warsaw drawing.

The drawing belonged to Albrecht von Sebisch (1685–1748), a Wrocław (Breslau) burghermaster, long-time mayor of the city and from 1741 chairman of the municipal council in the newly created Prussian municipality.[11] Ernst Wilhelm von Hubrig (1712–87) inherited his collection of drawings, etchings and paintings after Sebisch's death, and in 1767 donated it to the city. It was then that all 1,133 drawings were pasted into two albums, *Desseins originaux Pars I* and *Desseins originaux Pars II*; *Esther before Ahasuerus* and three others on page 63 of the first volume. Its specific placement within the collection was marked in pencil on its back (see **fig. 2**).[12] Sebisch may have bought the sketch during a European trip in 1708–12, when the Netherlands were one if his stops. He may also have acquired it in Vienna, where he served as Wrocław's envoy to the court of Emperor Charles VI in 1728–31. We know that it was at this time that Sebisch's art collection grew significantly with purchases of both old and contemporary works, including fourteen paintings he commissioned from Johann Georg Platzer (1704–61). Until the Second World War, the drawings were kept in the Schlesisches Museum der bildenden Künste in Wrocław and then moved to the National Museum in Warsaw in late 1945 in the so-called restitution campaign.[13]

Until recently, art historians have not attempted to resolve the attribution of the drawing. The sole trace of interest in it is a note on an old mount, which attributed the work to an artist

[8] C. 1525; see Paulina Junquera de Vega, Carmen Diaz Gallegos, *Catalogo de tapices del Patrimonio Nacional*, vol. 1 (Sigolo XVI) (Madrid: Editorial Patrimonio Nacional, 1986), pp. 93–9. The Warsaw drawing resembles especially closely the composition *The Rape of the Sabine Women and the Presentation of Hersilia to Romulus* (inv. no. A.264-7779, Palacio de San Ildefonso, Segovia). Ibid., p. 98.

[9] 1531–33, Louvre, Paris. The designs were made in c. 1530–31, the tapestries woven in the workshop of the brothers Dermoyen in Brussels. It is important to remember that Coecke may have been familiar with both cycles, since, according to Carel van Mander, he worked in Bernard van Orley's workshop in Brussels.

[10] Thomas P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance. Art and Magnificence*, with contrib. by Maryan W. Ainsworth et al., exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 12 March – 19 June 2002 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 204–10, cat. nos 18–22, fig. 18. On tapestries and their cartoons, also see *Raphael. Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel*, Mark Evans and Clare Browne, with Arnold Nesselrath, eds (London: V&A Publishing, 2010).

[11] See Piotr Borusowski, "'Dessins Originaux'. Osiemnastowieczna kolekcja rysunków w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie. Stan i perspektywy badań / 'Dessins Originaux'. An 18th century collection of drawings at the National Museum in Warsaw. State and prospects of research," in *Między Wrocławiem a Lwowem. Sztuka na Śląsku, w Małopolsce i na Rusi Koronnej w czasach nowożytnych*, Andrzej Betlej, Katarzyna Brzezina-Scheuerer, Piotr Oszczanowski, eds (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2011), pp. 231–8. Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Historia Sztuki, 31 (for earlier literature); id., "Tehnilised uuringud ja päritolu selgitamine Albrecht von Sebischi (1685–1748) joonistuste kogu rekonstreerimisel / Technical examination and provenance research in the reconstruction of the drawing collection of Albrecht von Sebisch (1685–1748)," *Eesti Kunstimuuseumi Toimetised / Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia. Tehniline kunstiajalugu – kunstiajaloo tehnikad? / Technical Art History – Technics of Art History?*, 2(7) (2012), pp. 107–32.

[12] For a history and reconstruction of the albums, see Borusowski, "Tehnilised uuringud...," op. cit., passim.

[13] See Borusowski, "'Dessins Originaux'...," op. cit., passim.

from the circle of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–50), with a question mark.[14] This note was the starting point of my research.

Pieter Coecke van Aelst was born into the family of Deputy Mayor Jan Coecke.[15] According to Karel van Mander, the young artist was employed in the workshop of Bernard van Orley (1491/92–1542) in Brussels. It is likely that he travelled to Italy earlier than 1525 or 1526. "He had been to Italy and attended the universal school for painters of Rome – where he displayed much diligence in drawings and learning, with regard to figures as well as architecture."[16] Upon his return, he joined the workshop of Jan van Dornicke in Antwerp, and in 1527 became a master of the Guild of Saint Luke there. He travelled again in 1533–34, this time to Constantinople. Both trips influenced his work significantly, introducing Italianate, as well as oriental, touches both into elements of his landscapes (buildings inspired by Constantinople's) and of the costumes worn by his figures.

Coecke's oeuvre is diverse, and drawing occupies a special place in it. Coecke made designs for altar paintings, stained glass windows[17] and, most importantly, tapestries. He was also interested in sculpture and architecture; in 1539 he translated the treatise *De architectura* by Vitruvius into Dutch, and published the translation of the fourth book of *Regole generali di architettura* [...] *sopra le cinque maniere degli edifice* by Sebastiano Serlio.[18] Van Mander remarks on the huge impact of the latter work on his contemporaries, artists and architects: "[...] he translated the books of Sebastiano Serlio into our language and thus by his strenuous effort brought the light to our Netherlands and helped the lost art of architecture onto the right path so that things obscurely described by Pollio Vitruvius can easily be understood, or even – as far as the orders of architecture are concerned – make reading Vitruvius unnecessary."[19]

Coecke, like Bernard van Orley, Michiel Coxie (1499–1592) and Jan Vermeyen (c. 1504–59), was among the most important Netherlandish artists who made tapestry designs and cartoons. Characteristic of his designs were not only their excellent compositions, rich motifs and eminent feel for landscape and architecture, but also their flourish, monumentalism and fascination with antiquity and the Renaissance, especially in its classic Roman form. The line in his drawings makes his sketches stand out unmistakably from those of other great draughtsmen of his time. It is generally believed that it was first Orley and then his students Coecke and Coxie who, for example by adapting the practices of Raphael and his school, introduced

14 The note reads: "Circle of Pieter Coecke van Aelst?" Its author did not leave his/her name behind, but the writing points to Maria Mrozińska, long-time curator of Old Master drawings in the National Museum in Warsaw.

15 Georges Marlier, *Pierre Coeck d'Alost. La Renaissance flamande* (Brussels: Finck, 1966) is still the definitive monograph of the artist; see also *Tapisserien der Renaissance. Nach Entwürfen von Pieter Coecke van Aelst. Ausstellung im Schloss Haltburn. 15. Mai bis 26. Oktober 1981*, Rotraud Bauer, with contrib. by Jan Karel Steppe (Eisenstadt: Amt der Burgenländischen Landesregierung, 1981); Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., pp. 379–91, which also includes earlier literature.

16 Hessel Miedema, *Karel van Mander: The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, vol. 1, *The Text* (Doornspijk: Davaco 1994), p. 130.

17 The drawing *The Circumcision of Christ* in the University of Warsaw Library's Print Room (inv. no. T.173 no. 123/I) is relevant here. See *Master European Drawings from Polish Collections*, Anna Kozak, Maciej Monkiewicz, eds, exh. cat., Nelson Atkins Gallery of Art, Kansas City, 17 April – 6 June 1993; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, 9 July – 29 August 1993; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, 10 October – 5 December 1993; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 9 January – 6 March 1994 (Washington, DC: Trust for Museum Exhibitions, 1993), pp. 35–6, cat. no. 15.

18 The last volume was published posthumously, in 1553.

19 Miedema, op. cit., p. 133.

new composition and stylistic schemes of the Italian High Renaissance into Netherlandish tapestry designs.[20]

Attribution research on Coecke's drawings is challenging. No new comprehensive publication has appeared since Georges Marlier's monograph of 1966, especially none that would analyse his drawings. Discussions of single works have appeared in exhibition and collection catalogues. His designs for the tapestries have been examined much more thoroughly, although they, too, need to be discussed in a broader context.[21] Making this more difficult is the fact that, as Karel G. Boon has noted, Coecke "[...] ran a thriving studio with many pupils and assistants. His works and inventions were often copied and adapted there, which makes it very difficult to identify authentic pieces: controversies continue to this day."[22] Yet these are precisely the drawings involved in the process of making tapestries that ought to be the point of reference in examining the attribution of the Warsaw drawing.

Drawings made for three series of tapestries in the 1530s, "Story of Saint Paul," "The Seven Deadly Sins" and "Story of Josue," should be used to define and study Coecke's draughtsmanship. The figures hold dramatic poses, drawn with a lively, vigorous stroke, which makes their outlines precise and harmonious with a rich, equally important wash. Gouache is often used, as, for example, in *The Conversion of Saul*[23] (**fig. 5**). Where the lines could be perfectly straight, assertive and fluid, in Coecke's sketches they quiver and vibrate. They give the impression of having been drawn in a hard pen, which left the lines slightly frayed, something that can be seen, for instance, in *The Capture of the City of Aï*.[24]

Stijn Alsteens, who considers the attribution of the Warsaw drawing to Coecke as convincing, nonetheless remarks that its lines are straighter and more restrained than those in other works that have been definitively attributed to Coecke.[25] Furthermore, this drawing lacks their meticulousness: details of dress, hands, feet and facial features are depicted in a cursory fashion. This manner of drawing initially brings to mind two sketches, *Solomon's Idolatry*[26] (**fig. 6**) and *The Marriage of Tobias and Sarah* (**fig. 7**).[27] Yet because of their characteristic chaotic stroke, as well as the proportions of the figures' hands (e.g., Sarah and Tobias), which are not absolutely correct, they seem different from Coecke's style, although they do appear to belong

[20] See, for example, *Arrasy flamandzkie w Zamku Królewskim na Wawelu*, Jerzy Szablowski, ed. (Warsaw: Arkady; Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1975), pp. 400–6; Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry from the 15th to the 18th Century* (Tielt: Lannoo Publishers, 1999), pp. 86–94; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 287 ff.

[21] *Tapisserien der Renaissance...*, op. cit.; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., passim.

[22] Karel G. Boon, *The Netherlandish and German Drawings of the XVth and XVIth Centuries of the Frits Lugt Collection*, preface by Carlos van Hasselt (Paris: Institut Néerlandais, 1992), vol. 1, p. 92.

[23] 1529–30, pen, brown ink, brown wash, gouache (whites), paper, 25.8 × 41.5 cm. From the series "Story of St. Paul," inv. no. DYCE.190, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[24] C. 1535, pen, brown ink, brown wash, paper, 14.6 × 22.3 cm. From the series "Story of Josue," inv. no. 4818, Collection Frits Lugt, Fondation Custodia, Paris.

[25] Opinion based on a photograph. E-mail of 2 April 2011.

[26] It has been attributed to Coecke with a question mark. Pen, brown ink, brown wash, paper, 11.9 × 9.3 cm, inv. no. 1946,0713.971, The British Museum, London. See Arthur Popham, *Catalogue of drawings in the collection formed by Sir Thomas Phillipps, now in the possession of his grandson T. Fitzroy Phillipps Fenwick of Thirlestaine House Cheltenham* (London: privately printed for T. FitzRoy Fenwick, 1935), p. 180, cat. no. 1.

[27] C. 1540 (?), pen, brown ink, brown wash, paper, 7.3 × 11 cm, inv. no. RP-T-1964-44, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. See Karel G. Boon, *Netherlandish drawings of 15th and 16th centuries* (The Hague: Govt. Pub. Office, 1978), vol. 1 (Text), p. 49, cat. no. 135; vol. 2 (Illustrations), p. 54, fig. 135. Catalogus van de Nederlandse tekeningen in het Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 2.

in his oeuvre (in the case of the latter work), or at least within the orbit of his influence. *Esther before Ahasuerus* thus differs slightly from Coecke's drawings. It is difficult to deny its careful composition and its masterful use of perspective shortcuts, for example in Esther's right foot and in the left foot of the woman standing behind her or the architecture in the background. Can these divergences from features of Coecke's definitively attributed works be explained by the fact that this drawing is a preliminary, spontaneous sketch made early on in the process of designing a tapestry? May the fact that this sketch does not stylistically fully match the designs of the 1530s suggest that it was made in the next decade of his artistic activity? Finally, can the slightly different stroke in this sketch and the clearly calmer expression of the figures mean that this is not the artist's own work but someone's from his circle (as Maria Mrozińska suggests)?

Coecke's style evolved over the more than twenty years of his activity as an artist. His stroke also differs according to the drawing techniques and the function of a given sketch, and thus he made his designs for stained glass windows, paintings and tapestries differently. The obvious disparities between his 1530s and '40s works have challenged researchers of not only Coecke's drawings. Thomas P. Campbell describes it perceptively: "The 'Saint Paul,' 'Deadly Sins' and 'Joshua' series constitute a coherent group of designs with a very distinctive style. Typified by moments of high drama, featuring protagonists in violent action and extreme contraposto, these designs project an excitement that is often accentuated by unusual viewpoints, complex compositions, dramatic atmospheric effects and elaborate architectural settings. Yet the characteristic approach of these examples probably leads us astray when we attempt to assess the character of Coecke's later tapestry designs. This is the case because, as autograph examples in other media demonstrate, his later work incorporates figures of greater refinement and passages of calmer linear rhythms, although they do not altogether abandon the explosive compositions of former days."[28] It was likely this very change and the pronounced differences between the 1530s works and the later ones that gave Marlier serious doubts about the authorship of several of them.[29]

In attempting to define the characteristics of Coecke's later style, Campbell named a representative group of works as the starting point for further analysis. *Triumph of Mordecai*, dated c. 1545, is the only drawing in this group.[30] Its brushstroke is frugal, there is not a redundant line and the wash is equally spare. There is no shaky, moving, fluid stroke here that would make arcs, waves or serpentines to enrich the composition, which is very characteristic of Coecke's earlier work.[31] But even more importantly, the expression of both gestures and clothing is subdued and less visible, especially in the figures of the women on the right. Further features of Coecke's later style are common to several works other than drawings. In *Descent from the Cross*,[32] the central panel of the Passion triptych dated 1545–50, the figures standing under the

[28] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., pp. 374–5.

[29] Marlier, op. cit., pp. 345–7.

[30] Pen, brown ink, grey wash, paper, 16.9 × 28 cm, inv. no. 20736, Cabinet des Dessins, Louvre.

[31] Even though the drawing is a good point of reference for the artist's late works because of its compositional aspect and the types of figures used, attributing it to Coecke because of a totally different, less free drawing style is questionable. The sketch is probably a workshop copy, *Nachzeichnung*, which may be recording Coecke's original composition. This supports its attribution to a sixteenth-century Netherlandish artist (as the Louvre's internet database lists it). See *Aman conduisant Mardochée*, Inventaire du Département des Arts Graphiques, Musée du Louvre [online] [retrieved: 5 April 2013], at: <http://arts-graphiques.louvre.fr/fo/visite?srv=na>.

[32] Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon.

cross hold more classical and elegant poses (**fig. 8**). The sparseness of the women's gestures and their melancholy faces make them similar to the figures in the drawing in the Louvre. There are similar features in the monumental woodcut *Customs and Fashions of the Turks*, made from sketches from Coecke's trip to Constantinople and worked up probably in the mid-1540s, then published after Coecke's death by his second wife, Mayken Verhulst.

The value of the analysis of these works is apparent in that, as Campbell remarks, they are proof of the use of particular types of figures and compositions, which in turn appear "in a number of the most poetical and beautiful of the tapestry series conceived during the 1540s."[33] Figures with a similar expression can be found in a few cycles of tapestries dating to c. 1550, including the so-called "Poesia," portraying scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,[34] "Story of the Creation"[35] and especially "Story of Vertumnus and Pomona" (e.g., *Vertumnus Transformed into a Gardener*, **fig. 9**).[36] Their designs were, of course, made a little earlier, probably around 1545.

Two tapestry series, "Story of Caesar," whose *editio princeps* was delivered to Henry VIII in 1543–44, and "Story of Abraham," given to the English ruler at about the same time, are another point of reference for the sketch in Warsaw. The former series has not survived, but there does exist one tapestry from its second edition of 1549, a scene of *The Assassination of Caesar*, which was bought by Pope Julius III in 1555.[37] The second series remains intact.[38] Assuming that it took two and a half to three years to weave one whole set of a tapestry, the cartoons must have been made in the early 1540s. In the context of the *Esther before Ahasuerus* composition, especially important is the extensive and monumental architectural background in the tapestries discussed here. The columns and pilasters on pedestals, profiled cornices, as well as walls richly decorated with bas-relief and marble geometrical panelling, are present in several compositions, including *God Appears to Abraham* (**fig. 10**), and form a virtually theatrical scenography.[39] Even though complex architectural motifs were present in Coecke's earlier work, they are expressed differently here. The precise perspective and the evident Italian influence may be related not only to Coecke's experiences during his travels to Italy, but also, and most

[33] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 384.

[34] The series consisting of five tapestries was bought in 1556 by the son of Charles V, Philip (later Philip II of Spain); it had been made in the workshop of Willem de Pannemaker. See Junquera de Vega, Diaz Gallegos, op. cit., pp. 105–15 ff; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 384; pp. 424–8, cat. no. 49 (Cecilia Paredes on the *Perseus Liberating Andromeda* composition and the whole series).

[35] C. 1550, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence. The seven tapestries include *The Creation of Eve*. Cosimo I Medici bought the series in 1551 from the Antwerp merchant Jan van der Walle. See Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., pp. 276–7, fig. 122, and p. 385.

[36] C. 1545–50, inv. no. 10076061, Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio Real de Madrid. The series with this tapestry was bought in 1561 or 1562 by Philip II of Spain. Jan Vermeyen, Josse van Noevele, Leonard Thiry and Pieter Coecke van Aelst or an artist from his workshop have all been identified as the author of the design for this series. Its first edition was made for Mary of Hungary before 1548 by an unknown Brussels workshop. See Junquera de Vega, Diaz Gallegos, op. cit., pp. 105–33; Cecilia Paredes, "Des jardins de Venus aux jardins de Pomone: Note sur l'iconographie des décors des tapisseries de Vertumne et Pomone," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'historie de l'art*, vol. 68 (1999), pp. 75–112; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., pp. 384–5 and 389–90.

[37] Vatican Museums; see Thomas P. Campbell, "New Light on a Set of History of Julius Caesar Tapestries in Henry VIII's Collection," *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1998), pp. 2–39; id., *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 383; id., *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 277–81, fig. 14.1.

[38] Royal Collection Trust, Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II; see Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 384 and pp. 416–23, cat. no. 48; id., *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty...*, op. cit., pp. 281–97.

[39] 1541–43, inv. no. RCIN 1046.3, Royal Collection Trust, Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II.

importantly, to his work in the late 1530s and '40s on a translation of an architectural treatise by Sebastiano Serlio.[40] In *God Appears to Abraham*, the positioning of Abraham's figure in his chair on the left and the static figures of the Holy Trinity in meticulously draped classical robes are analogous to Ahasuerus and the women moving towards him in the Warsaw sketch. Also striking is the similarity in the relationship between the proportions of the main figures and the architectural background. Finally, it is noteworthy that the design for the tapestry of the story of Abraham was its mirror image, as the direction of his composition concurred with the direction of *Esther before Ahasuerus*.

The style of the figures in the Warsaw drawing is different from that of Coecke's early works: the figures lack the nervous, dynamically positioned, at times convulsive poses.[41] In contrast, their gestures are spare, their expressions subdued and the composition is virtually static. The difference in pen stroke, which Alsteens remarked on, is visible. The women's clothing is drawn with short, straight lines, which often do not connect and do not render the figures precisely. The lines merely mark the creases in their clothing and suggest the forms of the bodies underneath. Most of the faces have also been outlined cursorily, and hands and feet are often drawn with only three or four lines. What strikes the viewer is the contour-like character of the drawing. Its wash is subtle and, unlike earlier drawings, it does not match the pen's expressiveness: applied in large bright spots, it only marks shadows cast by the figures in the scene and those on their faces and bodies. The figures in the foreground are slender, elongated in the Mannerist style and the expression of their bodies is toned down, which brings this drawing stylistically closer to the works from the mid-1540s. The architectural background, the proportions and the clothing of the figures resemble those in the tapestries of the stories of Julius Caesar, and especially of Abraham, whose designs and cartoons were made at the beginning of that decade.

The lack of analogies for *Esther before Ahasuerus* in the surviving tapestry designs means that similarities need to be sought in other drawings by Coecke. *Gaius Fabricius Luscinus Refusing the Gifts from Pyrrhus* (**fig. 11**) at Fondation Custodia in Paris[42] resembles the Warsaw sketch quite closely. Even though its composition is more monumental, covering a wide, open space filled with dozens of dynamic figures, what is striking is its similar architecture. It seems that it was the same hand that drew, on the right side, the rhythmically presented pilasters and the profiled cornices that crown them and, deep on the left, a façade of the temple with High Renaissance forms, and Ahasuerus's palace. They affirm that the author knew Serlio's designs for, for example, church façades, which he published in his treatise on architecture.[43] It is true that the figures are more dynamic, their hands and feet more elaborate, but their faces, especially the women's, with their characteristic eyes (small circles for the figures in the foreground, dots for those in the background) and noses are alike. The composition is

[40] Treatise first published in Venice in 1537. See Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 383.

[41] *Arrasy flamandzkie...*, op. cit., pp. 404–5.

[42] Pen, two shades of brown ink, brown wash, on an outline in black chalk, paper, 14.6 × 22.3 cm, inv. no. 5928, Collection Frits Lugt, Fondation Custodia, Paris.

[43] Krista de Jonge, "The Court Architect as Artist in the Southern Low Countries 1520–1560," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 59 (2009), pp. 111–35; Yves Pauwels, "L'introduction des ordres d'architecture dans les Pays-Bas : entre Italie et Espagne," in *Relations artistiques entre Italie et anciens Pays-Bas XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles / Artistieke relaties tussen Italië en de Nederlanden 16de–18de eeuw*, Ralph Dekoninck, ed. (Brussels: Turnhout; Rome: Brepols, 2012), pp. 53–9. Belgisch Historisch Instituut te Rome, Artes, 3; Samantha Heringuez, "Les peintres flamands du XVIe siècle et les éditions coeckiennes des livres d'architecture de Sebastiano Serlio," *Revue de l'art*, nº 180 (2012), pp. 45–52.

outlined in black chalk and enclosed in a single-line ink frame. The reinforcement of the line in light brown ink, which gives it darker accents, is visible throughout most of the sketch and resembles a procedure in *Esther before Ahasuerus*. The two share a change in composition: in the Warsaw drawing a narrowing and in the Paris drawing a significant broadening. Karel G. Boon has determined[44] that the nature of the drawing in the Fondation Custodia resembles the *Design for a Triptych with Scenes from the Life of Saint John the Baptist* (**fig. 12** and **fig. 13**).[45] Indeed, they have many features in common. J. Richard Judson describes its style as the one in which "[...] the figures are outlined with long continuous contours, the light application of the washes[...]."[46] We can add to the shared characteristics of the two drawings their method of presenting architecture: in the right panel of the *Triptych*, which shows *The Dance of Salomé*, and the recto of the left panel with its scene of *Birth of Saint John the Baptist*. Judson, pointing out the similarity between several figures and those in the central section of the Lisbon triptych mentioned earlier, proposed c. 1540 as the date of the creation of the London design.[47] He is right if we consider the architecture in the drawings (which resembles that of the tapestry of *The Assassination of Caesar* and the works in the "Story of Abraham" series), the contoured nature of the lines and the sparseness of the wash shared by the two works. Because of the stylistic similarity of the architectural parts, the subdued expression of the figures in the Warsaw drawing and its procedures with contours and method of its wash, which make it resemble the works at the Fondation Custodia and in the British Museum, it seems justified to date *Esther before Ahasuerus* a little later, at 1541–43.

The tapestry based on the Warsaw design has not been found, yet the motif of the group of figures on the right, the similarly developed architectural background and the proportions of the whole composition, can be found in the tapestry *Romulus Reveals the Head of Numitor to Amulius* in the series "Story of Romulus and Remus" (**fig. 14**).[48] Even the platforms with the thrones of the two rulers are similar. This scene, and its whole series, must have become well-known since its subsequent editions continued to appear as late as the early seventeenth century.[49] Even without any surviving cartoon or preliminary sketch, art historians have long attempted to examine the stylistic features of the composition to hone in on the author of its

[44] Boon, *The Netherlandish and German Drawings...*, op. cit., p. 96.

[45] Pen, brown ink, brown wash, paper, 21.1 × 31.9 cm, inv. no. 1854,0628.38, The British Museum, London. See John Oliver Hand et al., *The Age of Bruegel. Netherlandish Drawings in the Sixteenth Century*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, 7 November 1986 – 18 January 1987, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 30 January – 5 April 1987 (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 116–7, cat. no. 37 (J. Richard Judson).

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid. Karel G. Boon dates the drawing at the Fondation Custodia to 1534–35, but it would seem that if we take into account Judson's reasoning about the London *Triptych* (and considering the fact that Serlio's original *Regole...* was published in 1537), its creation date should be moved closer to 1540.

[48] Private collection, London, 210 × 310 cm. Made in the workshop of Willem de Pannemaker in Brussels c. 1540–45. It is one in a series of four tapestries purchased in 1550 by the son of Charles V, Philip (later Philip II king of Spain). See Campbell, *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty...*, op. cit., pp. 306–7, fig. 15.6.

[49] Including tapestries at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (series VIII and XXI), c. 1560, see Elisabeth Mahl, "Die Romulus und Remus-Folgen der Tapisseriensammlung des Kunsthistorischen Museums," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, vol. 26 (1965), pp. 7–40. Neue Folge, 25; The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, see Anna Gray Bennett, *Five Centuries of Tapestry from The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Revised Edition* (San Francisco, Calif.: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 1992), p. 166, fig. 64; The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1625, see Gray Bennett, op. cit., pp. 166–9, cat. no. 46. See also Delmarcel, op. cit., p. 159, fig. 5.5; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., pp. 397, 398, fig. 189.

design. Because of the evident influence of Italian art on it, one of the earliest attributions was to Tommaso Vincidor (died c. 1536; a pupil of Raphael, who was one of the team working on the cartoons for the tapestries in the series "Acts of the Apostles" and the decorations of the Vatican Loggia), who spent roughly the last ten years of his life making tapestry cartoons in the Netherlands.[50] Regardless of its authorship, Anna Gray Bennett proposes c. 1535 as the date the original was made.[51] Guy Delmarcel, who does not dismiss the possibility that its author was an Italian, believes that it may have been made by a Flemish artist heavily influenced by Italian art, someone like Michiel Coxie.[52] Campbell supports this attribution, suggesting that the tapestry be dated 1540–45.[53] He recently restated his opinion and went one step further, pointing to the visible idealization of the figures and the classical architecture. He ventured that the figures of Romulus and his companions may be imitations of the figures painted by Raphael and his collaborators in the Vatican Stanze.[54] Looking at the Warsaw drawing, we should also consider another work. The tapestries bought by Henry VIII in the middle of the 1540s most likely included the "Story of Solomon" series. Even though it has not survived, we know about the appearance of two compositions from the series of tapestries made in Mortlake around 1625, including one entitled *The Queen of Sheba Arrives at the Court of King Solomon*. Its composition and protagonists seem to echo the Warsaw drawing.[55] According to Campbell, its figures are very similar to those from the "Story of Abraham" series, although they lack their grace, which may mean that the designs and the cartoons of the original works were made by someone from Coecke's circle, and not by the master himself.

Determining the relationship between *Esther before Ahasuerus* and *Romulus Reveals the Head of Numitor to Amulius* may shed a light on the attribution of not only the drawing but also of the tapestry design. The similarity of their motifs is too great to be accidental, as is the chance that two artists used identical models. Another explanation may be that the two works share a prototype, whether a tapestry, a painting or a fresco. This, however, is unlikely since the cartoon for *Romulus* must have been a mirror image of *Esther*. If, therefore, there does exist an interdependence between the two, one must have been the model for the other and, hence, either the Warsaw drawing was inspired by a scene from the history of Rome or *Romulus* is a copy of a tapestry based on the cartoon from the National Museum. Resolving this issue continues as a challenge for art historians, but it seems that *Esther before Ahasuerus* may serve as the starting point for a renewed effort to resolve the question of the attribution of the cartoons to "Story of Romulus and Remus."

Should we consider the work from Warsaw, much like the drawings in Paris and London, to be the work of Pieter Coecke van Aelst? The sketch fits in stylistically with his works of the first half of the 1540s, the time Coecke was working on a translation into Dutch of the treatise by Serlio and was strongly influenced by his architectural inventions. The attribution of *Esther before Ahasuerus* should take into account a slightly different character of the stroke,

50 Mahl, op. cit., pp. 38–40, which includes older literature and a recapitulation of an earlier discussion of the authorship of this design.

51 Gray Bennett, op. cit.

52 Delmarcel, op. cit., p. 156.

53 Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance...*, op. cit., p. 397, fig. 189.

54 Campbell, *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty...*, op. cit.

55 Easton Neston, Northamptonshire. Ibid., pp. 304–5, fig. 15.5.

that could be explained either by the character of the drawing (an early stage of a design for a tapestry), or by the different style of his draughtsmanship from the '40s. In my opinion, considering the current state of research, these doubts do not dismiss the attribution to Coecke.

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