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The Sack of Tunis by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen: A Section of a Preliminary Drawing for his *Conquest of Tunis* Series

Five years ago, Karel Boon published a rare drawing by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen in the collections of the Rijksmuseum (Fig. 1)¹. This drawing, a fairly recent acquisition of the Rijksprentenkabinet, is in pen and ink with grey wash, and measures 35.5 by 34.5 centimetres. Boon summarily describes it as follows: *In the foreground a Tunesian [sic] man and woman who have been robbed and massacred; beyond women being assaulted and captured by soldiers. In the background the walled city [of Tunis].*² That Boon's attribution is correct can be demonstrated by comparing the drawing to Vermeyen's large cartoons for the *Charles V's Conquest of Tunis* tapestry series, which the artist executed for the emperor between 1546 and about 1550³. In them we find costumes and gestures similar to those in the drawing as well as the same dichotomy of carefully modelled foreground figures and more summarily rendered background ones. In addition, numerous details of the drawing, such as the schematically rendered feet, are very close to ones in Vermeyen's signed gouache, the *Pardon of Ghent* (Fig. 2)⁴. The two figures in the foreground of the Amsterdam drawing do not have their counterpart in the *Conquest of Tunis* or in any other of Vermeyen's surviving works, but the image of the massacred woman brings to mind the *defeated, voluptuously beautiful woman with a gash in her arm* which, according to

Karel van Mander, featured in the background of a now lost self-portrait by Vermeyen⁵. However, the vigour and confidence of the Amsterdam drawing virtually exclude the possibility that it is a copy after a lost work by Vermeyen. As Boon points out, *the group with the standing woman seen from the back appears in an altered version in the cartoon with the portrait of Vermeyen and his assistant* [i.e., the cartoon for the tenth tapestry of the *Conquest of Tunis* series]⁶. But the precisely rendered topography of Tunis in the background of the drawing establishes that it is more closely related to Vermeyen's ninth tapestry (Fig. 3), the cartoon for which has been lost⁷. Together with the tenth piece this tapestry presents one great panorama of the sack of Tunis (1535), with the ninth panel connecting to the right of the tenth. As the cartoons are the reverse of the tapestries, the lost ninth cartoon connected to the left of the tenth. The upper left of the ninth tapestry shows us the northern walls of Tunis, including the imperial troops that are pouring into the *Bab Suwaiqa* or gate of the market. Further to the right in the tapestry we see the suburb of *Bab Suwaiqa*, including several palm trees and domed tombs, as well as a cemetery⁸. The background of the Amsterdam drawing shows these same topographic features in reverse. The view of Tunis in the drawing therefore

Fig. 1. Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, *The Fall of Tunis*, ca. 1545. Section of a rejected modello for the ninth tapestry of the *Conquest of Tunis* series. Pen and brown ink with grey wash, 335 × 345 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet.



corresponds in orientation to the right third of the lost cartoon. This fact is more readily comprehended by comparing the drawing to a faithful contemporary copy of the cartoon (Fig. 4)⁹.

This oil painting illustrates the pertinent details more clearly than does the tapestry,

and it has the additional advantage of presenting the Tunisian landscape in the same orientation as the lost cartoon and the drawing.

The Amsterdam drawing is not one of the numerous sketches that Vermeyen must have rendered at the time of the Tunis

Fig. 2. Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, *The Pardon of Ghent* (1540), ca. 1540. Gouache, 292 × 215 mm. Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert 1.



expedition¹⁰. Although these drawings may have resembled the background groups of the Amsterdam drawing, they must have been smaller and more fragmentary than the Amsterdam sheet as a whole¹¹. Boon proposes that the drawing is a study for the *Conquest of Tunis* series¹², but, if so, it is at the very least a study for a whole section—roughly the left third—of the ninth tapestry. The amount of space that the city occupies at the top of both the drawing and the tapestry is about equal. The placing of the centre-plan hillocks and several of the figure groups in the drawing also correspond to those in the tapestry. The massacred man at the lower right of the drawing provides the same kind of

repoussoir effect that Vermeyen employed repeatedly in the lower corners of his *Conquest of Tunis* tapestries, and the stooping soldier at the right edge of the drawing is less surprising if we consider that, in the tapestry series, the scene is continued into the next piece.

The Amsterdam drawing may be more than just a study, however. In my opinion it is the right section of the ninth of the 'small drawings' that Vermeyen showed to Mary of Hungary for approval shortly before June of 1546¹³. The obvious problem with my hypothesis is that the massacred man and woman and the stooping soldier of the drawing are not found at the left of the ninth piece of the *Conquest of Tunis* (or anywhere else in the tapestry series). In its stead we find a comparatively uninspired group of soldiers gambling for booty, and a few contrite Moors greeting Mulay Hasan and his following¹⁴. We must consider, however, that the documents establish that Mary of Hungary, who, in his absence, acted for Charles v in the commission of the *Tunis* series, required Vermeyen to make changes to his *modelli*¹⁵. The regentess may well have insisted that the butchered victims of the imperial sack of Tunis lacked the minimum of decorum demanded by a monumental tapestry series and reflected too severely on the gratuitous cruelty of the troops of her brother Charles¹⁶.

Another problem with my hypothesis is that the Amsterdam drawing is in reverse to the tapestry, which is not the case with the surviving *modelli* for such contemporary tapestry series as the *Battle of Pavia*, the *Hunts of Maximilian*, and the *Acts of João de Castro*¹⁷. Moreover, these other preliminary drawings are more consistently detailed and finished than the Amsterdam drawing. However, the *Conquest of Tunis* is the only Flemish tapestry series of which we know that the designer also took full responsibility for the production of the large cartoons¹⁸. Knowing that he would in the end have to produce cartoons with the action in reverse to its correct orientation, Vermeyen must have thought it most

Fig. 3 (left). *The Fall of Tunis*. Ninth tapestry of the *Conquest of Tunis* series. Designed by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, 525 × 920 cm. Woven in Brussels from 1548–1554. Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional (Photo Valencia de Don Juan, *Tapices de la corona de España*).



Fig. 4 (below). Anonymous Flemish Master after Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, *The Fall of Tunis*, ca. 1555. Canvas, 126 × 240 cm. Kunstsammlungen Veste Coburg.

is a discarded study, it must represent a stage in Vermeyen's work immediately prior to the rendering of his preliminary designs, and a date earlier than about 1544 is out of the question. In the light of the evidence, Boon's suggestion that the drawing was done shortly after 1535¹⁹, is untenable. Furthermore, his claim that *the style of our drawing points back to his [Vermeyen's] years of training in Van Scorel's workshop*, strikes me as quite wrong. The Amsterdam drawing is not related stylistically to Van Scorel's work. Furthermore, it has not yet been proven that Van Scorel trained Vermeyen²⁰.

The Amsterdam drawing does differ from other drawings attributed to Vermeyen, which, as Boon points out, are closely related to the artist's dated etchings of 1545 and 1546²¹. But this does not prove that the Amsterdam drawing is a decade earlier than the others. It served a totally different purpose, a preliminary design for a tapestry being different from a drawing which is preparatory to an etching and which imitates the graphic process. Its function is different,

but the Amsterdam drawing is clearly related to the others, particularly in the modelling of the two foreground figures. Furthermore, both types of drawings are related to aspects of the large cartoons.

To conclude, it is my conviction that the Rijksmuseum owns a drawing which was executed around 1545 by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, and which is a substantial section of a discarded *modello* for the ninth tapestry of Vermeyen's *Conquest of Tunis* series. It is one of only a few drawings which can be attributed to Vermeyen with certainty, and it is all that survives of Vermeyen's preliminary drawings for the *Conquest of Tunis*. Finally, the Amsterdam drawing reflects the key role which Mary of Hungary played in the patronage of Charles V in general, and in the genesis of the *Conquest of Tunis* series in particular²². It is unique evidence for the important decisions concerning the appearance and content of the *Conquest of Tunis*, his most important commission, which the emperor appears to have left to the discretion of his sister.

Notes

¹ Karel G. Boon, *Netherlandish Drawings of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries in the Rijksmuseum*, 2 vols., The Hague 1978, vol. 1, p. 170 & vol. 2, fig. 461.

² Boon, *op. cit.* (Note 1), vol. 1, p. 170.

³ See Rogier A. d'Hulst, *Tapisseries flamandes du XIV^e au XVIII^e siècle*, Brussels 1960, pp. 221–230 & 301, and Hendrik J. Horn, *Charles V's Conquest of Tunis: Cartoons and Tapestries by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, New Haven 1977, *passim* & esp. pp. 60–73, for information on the series and its commission, including the extensive literature. For the documents, see Jules Houdoy, *Tapisseries représentant la conquête du royaume de Thunes par l'empereur Charles Quint, histoire et documents inédits*, Lille 1873. However, Houdoy left out many of the documents (all in the Archives du Département du Nord in Lille), including several which establish that Vermeyen worked on the large cartoons until well after 1548, the year in which Willem Pannemaker commenced the weaving of the series, and in which Vermeyen's cartoons have been believed to have been completed. I hope to publish the complete documents in the near future.

⁴ For basic information and much of the early literature, see Kurt Steinbart, 'Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen', *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 6 (1931), p. 100, and Gerrit J. Hoogewerff, *De Noord-Nederlandsche schilderkunst*, 5 vols., The Hague 1936–1947, vol. 4, 1941–1942, p. 262. The gouache is in the collections of the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique in Brussels (Ms. 6355: Recueil de pièces relative à l'histoire de Gand, fol. 1: 'Sentence promulguée contre ceux de Gand, le dernier jour d'avril 1540.'). It is now preserved separately, in a frame, and was displayed in that way in the exhibition *Van Orley et les artistes de la cour de Marguerite d'Autriche*, held in the Musée de l'Ain in Bourg-en-Bresse in the summer of 1981. For the event and its historical background, see Frédérique A. F. T. Reiffenberg, 'Le pardon des Gantois en 1540', *Annuaire de la Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique* (1840), pp. 68–70, and Louis Prosper Gachard, ed., *Relation des troubles de Gand sous Charles-Quint par un anonyme; suivi de trois cent trente documents inédits sur cet événement*, Brussels 1846, *passim*. Reiffenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 69, pointed out that the promulgation which preceded the gouache is in no way illustrated in it, and suggested that the drawing

was made for Pierre Verreycken, who may be the man reading the sentence in Vermeyen's drawing. The work is signed *J. C. Maius*. Steinbart, *loc. cit.*, dated it shortly after the events, but we have no proof to this effect.

⁵ Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem, 1604, fol. 224v. Translation mine.

⁶ Boon, *op. cit.* (Note 1), vol. 1, p. 170.

⁷ The series originally numbered twelve tapestries. The surviving ten pieces are in the Spanish royal collections. About half of these are normally on display in the *Palacio Real* and *Armería Real* in Madrid, and in the Room of Honour of the Escorial. The ten surviving cartoons are on permanent display in the upper gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

⁸ On the topography of late mediaeval Tunis, see Robert Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Hafsidés: Des origines à la fin du XV^e siècle*, 2 vols., Paris 1940 & 1947, vol. 1, pp. 338–357, and Jean-Pierre Vittu, 'Jean Cornelisz Vermeyen, peintre de Tunis en 1535', *Institut des belles lettres arabes* 140 (1977), pp. 251–259.

⁹ Six of such paintings after Vermeyen's cartoons are preserved in the collection of the Veste Coburg and were once widely believed to be by Vermeyen and *modelli* for his *Conquest of Tunis* series. For an early example of this view, see Eduard von Engerth, 'Nachtrag II zu der Abhandlung über die im kaiserliche Besitze befindlichen Cartone, darstellend Kaiser Karls V. Kriegszug nach Tunis, von Jan Vermeyen', *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 11 (1890), p. 113. For a recent example, see Vittu, *op. cit.* (Note 8), p. 248. These notions were refuted by Horn, *op. cit.* (Note 3), pp. 62–63, as well as by Rotraud Bauer, *Historische Schlachten auf Tapisseries aus dem Besitz des Kunsthistorischen Museum Wien*, exhibition catalogue, Schloß Halbturn 1976, p. 18.

¹⁰ We know that Vermeyen made numerous drawings because his *Tunis* series is replete with observed detail even though it was rendered a decade after the Tunis expedition. This observed detail is the subject of Part II of Horn, *op. cit.* (Note 3), pp. 97–162.

¹¹ The size of the drawings is established by the *Conquest of Tunis* itself, as Vermeyen repeatedly depicted himself drawing *in situ* in a book measuring approximately twenty by thirty centimetres.

¹² Boon, *op. cit.* (Note 1), vol. 1, p. 170.

¹³ See Houdoy, *Tapisseries représentant la conquête ... de Thunes*, pp. 15–17, for the complete document. The pertinent and opening paragraph reads as follows: 'Premièrement a promis et promet ledict Jehan Vermey de sa main propre, sur bon grant papier, faire et conduire lesdictz grans patrons selon les petits qu'il a monstrés à sa Majesté et iceulx amender de ce qu'il sera de besoing et ce selon le vray naturel, sans y riens obmectre ne laisser derrière, et pour s'ayder à iceulx prendre a ses frais sçavans et souffisans compaignons painctres des pays de pardeça, quoyqu'ilz luy coustent, afin que iceulx patrons soient faitz le mieulx que possible sera.' The italicized letters and words are ones which Houdoy found difficult to read and which he reconstructed with reference to the repetitious wording of numerous similar passages in the contract of Vermeyen and in the much longer contract of the weaver Willem Pannemaker. Vermeyen's contract has continued to deteriorate since Houdoy transcribed it, and much of the document is now illegible. Note that the wording of the above passage indicates that Mary of Hungary viewed the same drawings which Vermeyen and his assistant subsequently used as their working models in the rendering of the large cartoons. This fact explains my practice, perhaps disturbing to some readers, of calling the Amsterdam drawing both a *modello* and a preliminary drawing.

¹⁴ Mulay Hasan was the King of Tunis who, deposed by the pirate Barbarossa in 1534, turned to Charles V for aid. For these and related matters, see Julius S. Held, 'Rubens' <King of Tunis> and Vermeyen's Portrait of Mulay Ahmad', *The Art Quarterly* 3 (1940), pp. 173–181. Hasan can be identified by the curious device (perhaps the handle of a dagger) which he wears on his left hand, which he is also seen wearing in the woodcut portrait of the king, rendered after Vermeyen, which Silvester van Parijs published in Antwerp shortly after the Tunis expedition. For some information on this print and for an illustration, see Steinbart, *op. cit.* (Note 4), pp. 98–99, n.1 & fig. 15.

¹⁵ Houdoy, *op. cit.* (Note 3), p. 15.

¹⁶ See Ernest Mercier, *Histoire de l'Afrique septentrionale (Berbérie) depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à la conquête française (1830)*, 3 vols., Paris 1888–1891, vol. 3, 1891, p. 139, who wrote that 70,000 of the indigenous population died in the sack of Tunis and that the city's Jewish inhabitants were either massacred or enslaved. He called the sack 'un des pillages les

plus affreux dont l'histoire ait conservé le souvenir.'

¹⁷ See Nicolas Beets, 'Zestiende-eeuwsche kunstenaars: II. Barent van Orley', *Oud-Holland* 48 (1931), pp. 145–171, for illustrations and the still basic discussion of the preliminary drawings for Van Orley's *Hunts of Maximilian* and *Battle of Pavia series* (although it may by now have been superseded by Mary-Ann Ainsworth's Yale dissertation on *Barent van Orley as Designer of Tapestries*). A *modello* for the ninth piece of the *Acts of João de Castro series* was discovered by Dora Heinz, *Europäische Wandteppiche I: Von den Anfängen der Bildwirkerei bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Braunschweig 1963, p. 204.

¹⁸ See Houdoy, *op. cit.* (Note 3), pp. 15–17, for the documents concerning the commission of the large cartoons of the *Conquest of Tunis series*. No comparable documents have survived for other Flemish tapestry series of the time. Unless documentary evidence is found, we must assume that the rendering of large cartoons was normally left to specialized cartoon painters and that the *Conquest of Tunis* was the exception to this rule.

¹⁹ Boon, *op. cit.* (Note 1), vol. 1, p. 170.

²⁰ For summaries of this vexing problem, see the revised English edition of Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Heinz Norden, trans., 14 vols., Leyden & Brussels 1967–1976, vol. 12, 1975, p. 141, or Bob Haak, 'Het portret van Kardinaal Erard de la Marck door Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 11 (1963), pp. 17–18, who argued that Vermeyen was trained by Jan Gossaert van Mabuse. At one time this was also the view of Boon, 'Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen', *Thieme-Becker Künstlerlexikon*, vol. 34, Leipzig 1929, p. 278 and *Idem*, 'Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen (ca. 1500–1559), De Heilige Maagd met het Kind en een musicerende engel', *Openbaar Kunstbezit* 8 (1964), p. 24a.

A generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada made it possible for me to see virtually all the Scorelesque works which have ever been attributed to Vermeyen. That experience only served to confirm me in the opinion that Haak was on the right track.

²¹ Boon, *op. cit.* (Note 1), vol. 1, p. 170. The basic study of Vermeyen's etchings remains A. E. Popham, 'Catalogue of the Etchings by Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen', *Oud-Holland* 44 (1927), pp. 174–182. The most notable of the

drawings is the *Woman at a Spinet* in Berlin-Dahlem. It was attributed to Vermeyen by Elfried Bock and Jacob Rosenberg, *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Die Zeichnungen alter Meister im Kupferstichkabinett: Die niederländischen Meister: Beschreibendes Verzeichnis sämtlicher Zeichnungen*, 2 vols., Berlin 1930, p. 56, no. 516. The attribution was accepted by Steinbart, *op. cit.* (Note 4), p. 113, fig. 27. Egbert Haverkamp Begemann, 'Een getekend portret door Jan Cornelis[z] Vermeyen', *Bulletin Museum Boymans-van Beuningen* 6 (1955), pp. 29-32, attributed a portrait of a man to Vermeyen on the basis of its similarity to the Berlin drawing. For other such attributions, see Paul Wescher, '«Head of an Old Woman» by Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen', *The Art Quarterly* 17 (1954), pp. 171-175, and Otto Benesch, 'Beiträge zum Werk des Rubens', *Alte und neue Kunst* 3 (1954), p. 19.

²² Horn, *op. cit.* (Note 3), pp. 58 & 73-75.