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Technical art history : painters' supports and studio practices of Rembrandt, Dou and Vermeer

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APOLLO

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AUGUST 1988

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Art of Denmark under Christian IV



COVER PLATE

Detail of the saddle made for the wedding of the Prince Elect of Denmark, supplied by Gert Osserijn, 1633-34. Velvet, gold, pearls and gems, length 95 cm. Rosenborg Castle. Photo Lennart Larsen

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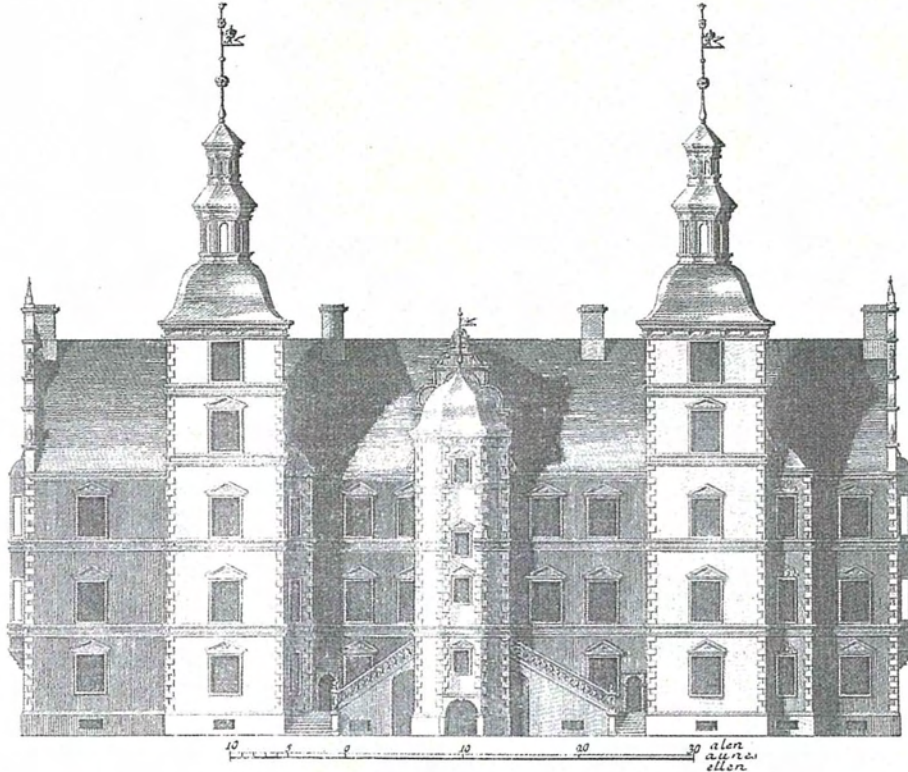
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The Winter Room at Rosenborg Castle

A Unique Survival of Antwerp Mass-Production

JØRGEN WADUM



A conservator examines this exceptional panelled room with a scientific eye and discovers some secrets of the mass-production of art in early seventeenth-century Antwerp

In 1606, having purchased a sizeable area outside the eastern ramparts of Copenhagen, Christian IV ordered the erection of a 'country house', which was completed in 1607. It was a two-storey house of modest size, now the nucleus of the southern half of the present Rosenborg Castle (Fig. 1). From 1613 to 1615, the country house was extended to its present length, and from 1616 to 1624, a third floor was added, as were 'The Long Hall' and three tall, slim towers with spires. By now, Christian IV had given the name of Rosenborg—Castle of Roses—to his 'large house in the garden'. The building was finally completed in 1633 when an octagonal staircase turret was erected at the centre of the eastern façade in connexion with a large, external double staircase leading to the first floor. Regrettably, in 1758 this staircase was demolished as part of an external 'restoration' by Lauritz de Thurah (1706–59).

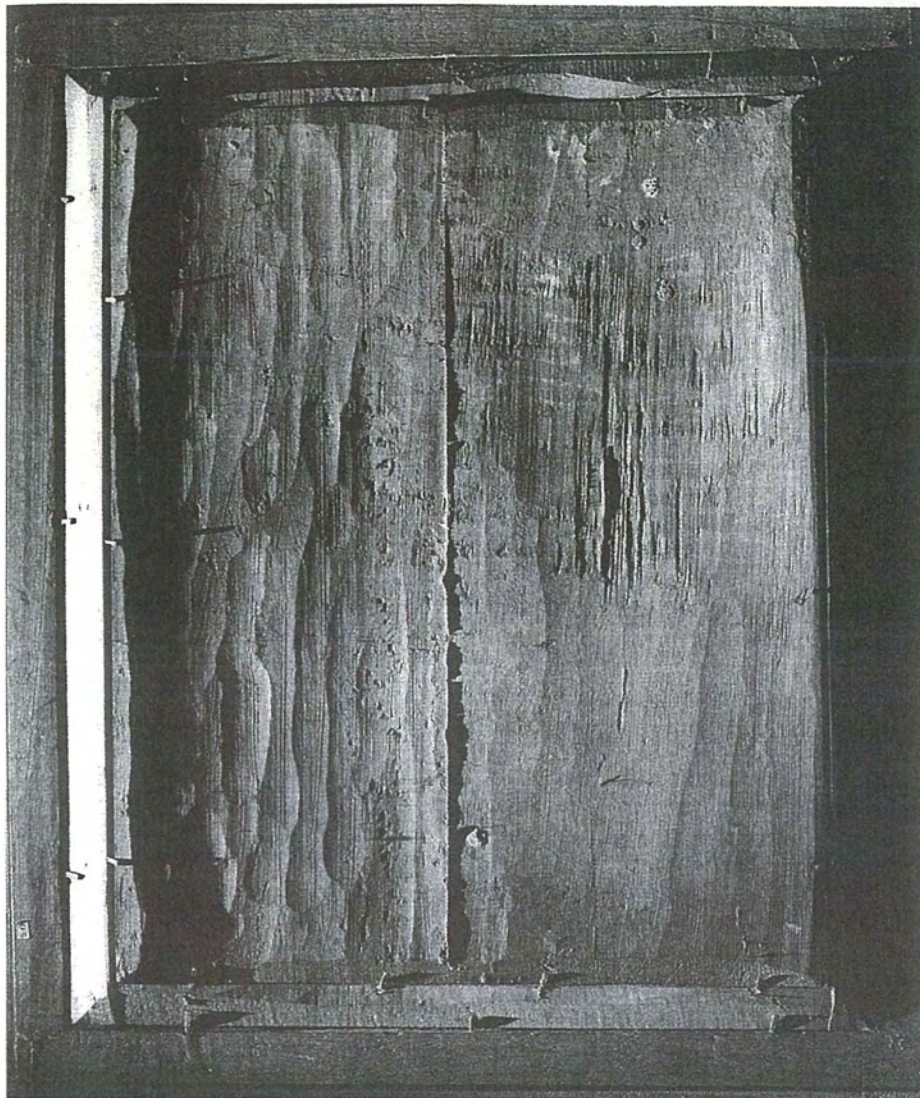
Figs 2-5 and 7 were photographed by the author

1 The east façade of Rosenborg Castle. Engraving by Lauritz de Thurah, 1748

Christian IV chose the ground floor of the northern wing for his private apartments. Today, two of his rooms are exactly as they were when brought into use in 1620 and they are the first that visitors to the castle see. The king's study is in the north-eastern tower. Its dado is painted with mythological and landscape subjects. The central decoration of the richly carved panelled ceiling is a scene from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, showing Angelica and Medoro carving their initials on a tree.¹ In this room, Christian IV composed many of the 3,000 and more auto-

graph letters still in existence. The large room next to the study, on the northern side, was the king's living room, known as the Winter Room (Plate I). Christian IV's monogram and the year 1615 are on the large, marbled sandstone mantelpiece. The ceiling paintings date from 1619 and were painted by Pieter Isaacsz for the room directly above. During alterations in the early eighteenth century, the paintings were moved to the Winter Room. The walls are decorated with seventy-five panel paintings set in richly carved oak panelling. In three rows, they are inserted between twenty-two fluted columns with Ionic capitals, strapwork, and impressive bases. The bases are carved with masks, each grimacing more astonishingly than the next.

Even though the living room contains a unique collection of Flemish paintings from a single period, few historians have studied and described them, and only in appendices



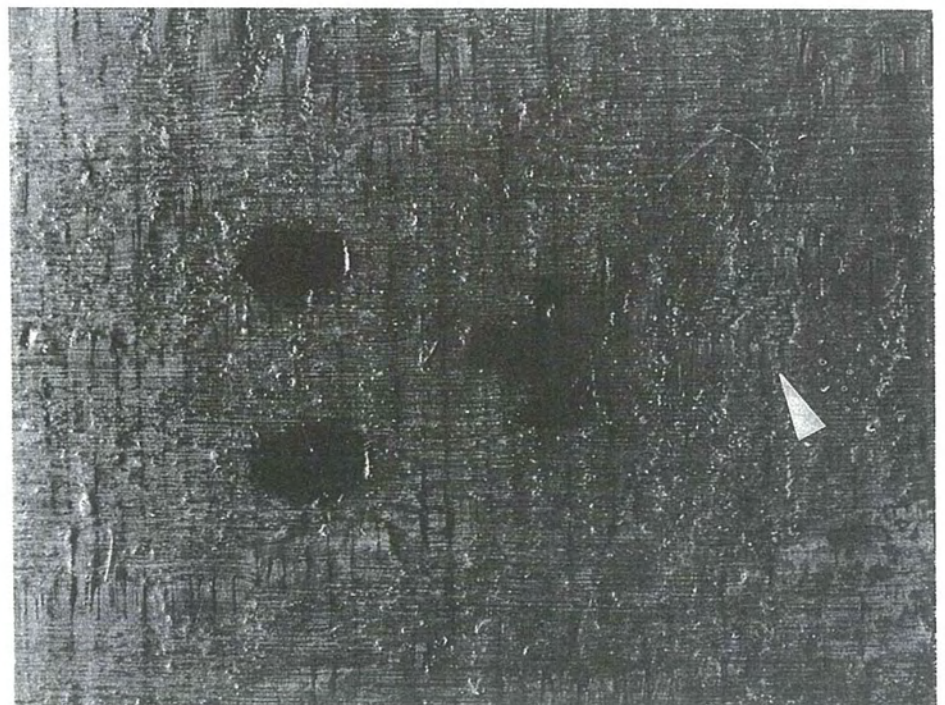
ferent processes used in the framing, have confirmed my hypothesis that the room is the result of a single commission, the paintings and their frames having been produced in Antwerp, while the fitting of the many framed paintings into the fine panelling was carried out in Copenhagen. The main stages of the creation of the Winter Room were therefore as follows.

The joinery work of the panelling was begun in 1614 by Gregers Greus (active before 1598–1616). Valentin Dresler (active before 1613–19) gave the ceiling its stucco which was picked out by the painter, Samuel Clausen (active before 1615–21). The mantelpiece was built in 1615, as shown by the date. It has so far been assumed that with this, the Winter Room was completed.

More than 100 years ago, F. R. Friis, one of the first historians to write about the building of the castle, found a document according to which a Copenhagen master joiner, Willum Moor (active before 1616–19) in 1616 and 1617 completed the work left by the death of Greus. He drew the conclusion that the work on the Winter Room, as one continuous project, was only completed then.² Much later, another historian, Bering Liisberg, thought that the first decorations of the Winter Room were finished in 1615 and that Willum Moor and, later, Hans Jørgen Dill (active between 1619 and 1624) redecorated the room in the years between 1615 and 1620 to give it its present appearance.³ The most recent description of the history of Rosenborg's construction, is by Vilhelm Wanscher, in 1930. In it he claims that 1615 must have been the year of completion, primarily basing this on the in-

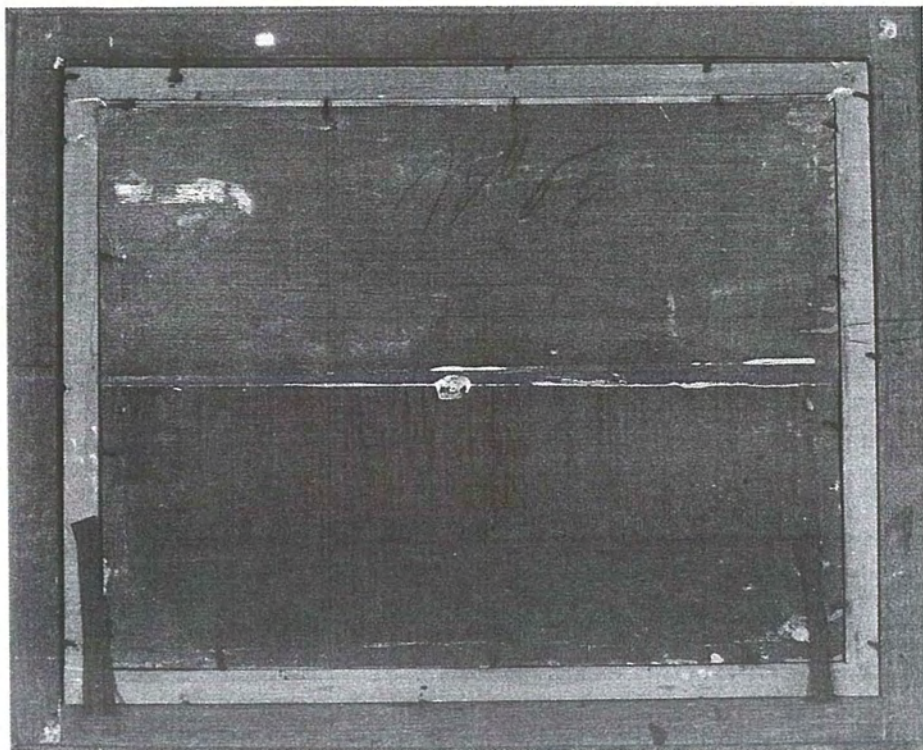
to the building history of the castle. It has been assumed hitherto that these seventy-five panel pictures were already in the king's large collection of paintings before the Winter Room was completed. This assumption was supported by the fact that some of the paintings have been cut and it seemed natural to conclude that this was done to achieve a uniform size for this decorative project.

However, extensive examination of the paintings, the painting techniques used, the panels' construction and formats, and the dif-



² Back of the panel and its frames illustrated in Fig. 6. Photographed under raking light. The raised burr recurs at the same intervals on a number of boards showing that they were manufactured in a single process

³ The city arms of Antwerp burnt into the back of the panel illustrated in Fig. 5. To the right, the stamped clover leaf mark of the carpenter and frame-maker, Michael Claessens II (before 1590–after 1637)



These irregularities are parallel with the direction of planing and have been caused by large or small notches in the cutting edge of the plane iron. These notches produced raised burrs, and careful measurements in



scription on the fireplace.⁴ He connects documents about later considerable panelling work in the castle to an unspecified room on the first floor.

My research, however,⁵ proves that these descriptions are misleading in one or more points. The Winter Room in its original form was indeed completed in 1615. Shortly afterwards, however, the king ordered a complete, carefully planned, transformation, and that is the room we see today. At one stage, work was speeded up, but this was typical of this Danish Renaissance king, who was prone to making sudden and quick changes in his building projects.

The seventy-five paintings are mostly of landscapes or of hunting scenes, though some have religious or mythological motifs. None of the many paintings is signed, though one is dated 1613, and the Danish archives have so far not been able to provide irrefutable evidence of their origins.

During my studies, many of the paintings were taken out from the panelling, in most cases for the first time since they were mounted. This has made it possible to study the craftsmanship applied to the individual panels and their frames. Furthermore, the brickwork behind could be scrutinized for evidence of possible structural alterations.

All seventy-five pictures are painted directly onto oak panels, mostly on two or three planks glued together. These joints are visible on the back, and so is the bevel-

4 Photo by U-V fluorescence of the back of painting and frames, south wall no. 10, *Forest Scene with Fox Hunt*, Antwerp, 1618/19. Oil on panel, 53.8 × 68.8 cm. The lower panel bears the mark of Guiliam Aertssens (before 1612—after 1627)

4a Drawing of Guiliam Aertssens's mark

ling of the panels, necessary to make it possible to nail the frames to them.

Each painting has three frames: the innermost frame is gilded, with a black decorative pattern painted on it; the second frame is painted black and this too, is embellished, but with gilded designs. Outside these two frames is a third of plain oak which keeps the other two, and the painting, in place in the oak panelling.

The laterally reversed, wavy pattern, typical of oak, is repeated on the back of the boards, which shows that each board section has been sawn radially from the trunk. This means that warping through drying-out is almost avoided. As a result, the condition of the paintings in general is excellent though they have been in the same place for more than 360 years. On several planks, traces of the saw's cutting are clearly evident, while others have been given a final planing (Fig. 2). This process has been of immense importance to the understanding of the way in which the room was decorated. Analysis of the plane traces on the back of the pictures show that there are many irregularities in the otherwise smoothly planed surfaces.

many instances show equal distance between them. This proves that the same plane must have been used in the treatment of the backs of the boards concerned.

The inescapable conclusion is that several boards were manufactured in one single work process. Had this not been the case, the plane marks would not have been uniform, since a carpenter's plane would have been sharpened after a certain period of use.

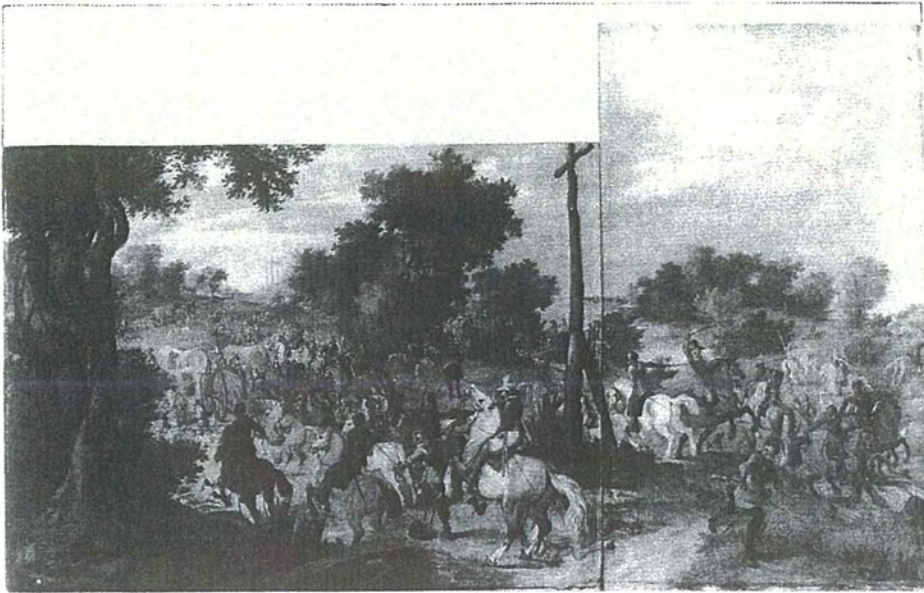
This characteristic was found also in an analysis of the two inner frames—those adorned with gold and black. Like the picture panels, these frames were produced within a brief span of time, a fact which clearly indicates that the entire work had been commissioned as one.

The city arms of Antwerp have been stamped or burnt into the back of several panels and some also show the makers' marks of a number of Antwerp carpenters. Four panels have been stamped with a small clover mark (Fig. 3). This was used by the

Plate I The south wall of the Winter Room at Rosenborg Castle, with eighteen Flemish paintings set in oak panelling. This unique survival has recently been restored. Photo Naesby

Plate II *Fridlev, Son of King Frode II, slays a Dragon* by Gerrit van Honthorst (1590–1656), after 1639. Oil on canvas. Diameter 3.1 m. Private collection, Sweden. This subject is taken from Saxo and belongs to the sequence dealing with legendary Danish kings. Fridlev is seen slaying a dragon with a sword, spears having proved useless. In the background, the king's men are unearthing the dragon's treasure





carpenter and frame maker, Michael Claessens II (before 1590– after 1637). He lived in Korte Gasthuisstraat in Antwerp in a house named 'Het Gulden Klaverblad'.⁶ In 1617, Michael Claessens was master of the carpenters' craft which, together with other crafts, was organized in the painters' Guild of St Luke.⁷

Another panel maker's mark is found several times over. Unfortunately, the carpenter's identity cannot be established with any certainty. It is possible that he was Guiliam Aertssens (before 1612– after 1627) though his mark was slightly different.

5 *Attack on a Convoy* by Pieter Snajers (1592–1666), 1618/19. Oil on panel, original format approx 87.5 × 105 cm. South wall no. 2 and north wall no. 12

6 *Forest Scene with Falconers returning Home*, Antwerp, 1618/19. Oil on panel, 51.5 × 66 cm. South wall no. 12. Photo Rosenborg Castle

The mark is seen on the back of eight of the pictures (Figs 4 and 4a). Even more significantly, the mark was also found on the outer, black frames of thirteen of the twenty-seven

paintings. This clearly shows that, while several carpenters were engaged in the manufacture of the panels at the same time, it is probable that only one panel maker framed most of them. If this man was Guiliam Aertssens, it is possible that he had been commissioned to supply all the panel paintings. If that is the case, the paintings should be described as Antwerp works and not broadly as Netherlandish.

Comparative analysis of drawings, prints and paintings by Antwerp artists of the period has so far produced direct or related prototypes for about sixty of the paintings in the Winter Room. Among these are landscape paintings by Joos de Momper II (1564–1635), in which Jan Brueghel I (1568–1625) painted the figures. Such collaboration is found in three of the finest panel paintings, comparable with works found in major European museums. Furthermore, in one instance, Hendrik van Balen I (1575–1632) assisted as easel painter.⁸ Sixteen other paintings are so closely related to Momper's methods and style that they must be attributed to his studio.⁹ Four other paintings can be attributed to Momper but with Sebastiaen Vrancx (1573–1647) as collaborator.¹⁰

A Vrancx apprentice, Pieter Snajers (1592–1666) produced one painting, now divided into two (Fig. 5). The greater part is a painting on the south wall of the Winter Room, a battle scene, showing a convoy being attacked by soldiers. The cut-off section is on the north wall, and was originally the right-hand third of the picture. This divided painting contributed to the earlier assumption that the paintings were in Christian IV's collection prior to the fitting-out of the Winter Room. However, the frame around the painting on the south wall carries the five-pointed star mark of an Antwerp frame maker.

Fifteen hunting scenes are in the style of David Vinckboon (1576–c. 1630) who lived in Amsterdam at the time (Fig. 6). However, the artist who painted them must have been from Antwerp, as shown by marks on the back, and he probably came from the circle of Vrancx.

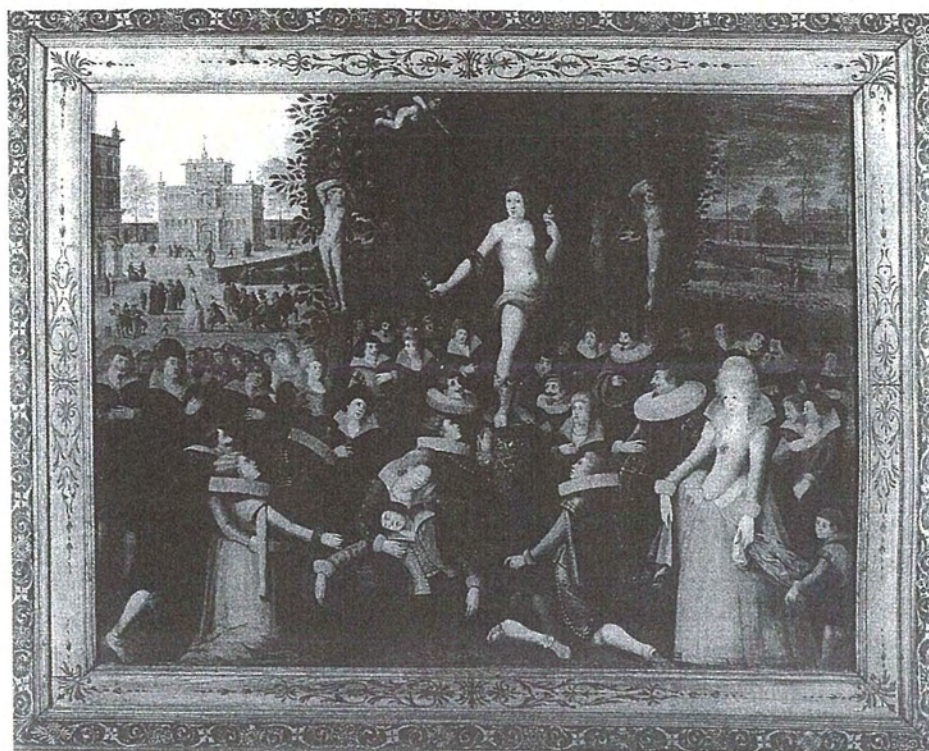
Three mythological paintings can be attributed to Louis de Caullery (before 1580–1621/22). They show Ceres, Bacchus and Venus (Fig. 7) respectively, hailed by enthusiastic crowds of people. The pictures of the three deities are placed next to each other in the centre of the south wall and illustrate a proverb in common use at the time: 'Without Ceres and Bacchus Venus freezes.'¹¹ Their position may have been chosen as a symbolic indication that behind the south wall was the apartment of Christian IV's beloved Kirsten Munk (1598–1658) (see Figs. 5 and 6, p.114), whom he married in December 1615 after a persistent courtship, having finally won his mother's consent.¹²

The year 1615 is inscribed over the fireplace. It is tempting, then, to lend symbolic meaning to the Winter Room in relation to the marriage with Kirsten Munk. Indeed it is particularly apt to interpret the entire Rosenborg as a castle of love. After all, the very division of the castle into a female and a male section would be symbolic of this. The southern, female wing is adorned with a Venus figure on the gable. The gable of Christian IV's northern, male wing is embellished with a figure of Mars, its execution inspired by a print of Hendrik Goltzius.¹³ Furthermore, although the exterior is like a fortified castle with bastions and moats, this is purely ornamental and of no defensive use, and merely reflects the romanticized ideas of the builder. It is true to say that, in type, Rosenborg is related to contemporary Netherlandish interpretations of romantic palaces.¹⁴

However, this interpretation cannot be applied specifically to the Winter Room. To begin with, in its first version it was ready in May 1615. In the brickwork behind the panelling one can see that the door into the study in the tower was moved one foot further north. The original door opening, behind the panelling, has a grey-painted frame and its existence confirms that the Winter Room had two periods of decoration.¹⁵

Then, the Antwerp archives reveal important information: in November of 1617, the carpenters' craft, of which Michael Claessens was a master, decided that in future, all panel and frame makers were to put their personal mark on their work. A month later, this decision was sanctioned by the Guild of St Luke.¹⁶ Out of thirty-one panel paintings and frames investigated, twenty-five have such marks. The decision of the carpenters' craft was clearly put into practice immediately.

It follows that the panels, not to mention the paintings, cannot have been produced until after December 1617; in other words, in the spring of 1618 at the earliest. The many registered, identical plane marks on panels and frames bear witness to quick and simultaneous work. Presumably, the few paintings without a maker's mark, and the painting dated 1613, had been in the stock of an art dealer or board maker in Antwerp. In order to honour the huge commission from Christian IV for seventy-five paintings, he probably took what he had in stock, besides commissioning various painters to produce a given number of paintings as soon as possible. Perhaps he himself supplied the boards, and on receipt of the paintings, he gave them prefabricated frames. In fact, many of the paintings show marks in the paint which were made accidentally after the framing, showing that the paint of the pictures was not quite dry at the time. This, too, is proof of the speed with



7 *The Acclamation of Venus* by Louis de Caullery (before 1580–1621/22) or his studio. Oil on panel, 51.2 × 66.1 cm. South wall no. 8

which the Antwerp carpenters and painters worked to produce decorative material, even for other countries as well.

Thus, the Winter Room which was ready by May 1615 was not that which we see today. In 1616, Christian IV decided to demolish the interior of the 'old' room and to commission the making of a new one, for which careful directives were given. Among these was the order for seventy-five paintings from Antwerp. They were produced in Antwerp standard format,¹⁷ including two frames for insertion in the oak wall panels. In order to fit in paintings and frames it was necessary to alter the oak panelling. This part of the work was executed with such haste that the altered parts were not given the same finish as that of the surface of the other parts. The work was carried out in the period between 1618 and 1620. In the latter year, a Danish joiner, Hans Jørgen Dill, received his payment for the final stages of the work on 'the large panel works' in the king's palatial country house outside Copenhagen.¹⁸

Earlier theories that the main wall decorations of the Winter Room resulted from a random selection of paintings from the king's collection can therefore be discounted; furthermore, it is highly unlikely that the

room was ready by 1615. It was only in 1620 that the Winter Room appeared in all its splendour. Nowhere else has anything similar survived intact, and as it has recently been restored it can be enjoyed now largely in its original form.

¹ Meir Stein, *Christian IV's Billedeverden*, 1987, 73 ff. In the opinion of the author, the paintings were by Danish artists.

² F. R. Friis, *Samlinger til Dansk Bygnings- og Kunsthistorie*, 1872–78.

³ H. C. Bering Liisberg, *Rosenborg og Lyshuset i Kongens Have*, 1914.

⁴ Vilhelm Wanscher, *Rosenborgs Historie 1606–1634*, 1930.

⁵ This research project was carried out for the final examinations by the Conservation School of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.

⁶ The information was kindly given to me by Jan Van Damme, Antwerp. My discussions with him about the panel makers' marks were most fruitful.

⁷ Ph. Rombouts and Th. van Lierus, *De Liggeren en andere historische Archieven der Antwerpse Sint Lucasgilde*, 1864–76.

⁸ Klaus Ertz, *Josse de Momper der Jüngere. Die Gemälde*, 1986, pp. 312–20.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jørgen Wadum, 'Sebastiaan Vrancx' værksted og Rosenborg Slot', *Iconographisk Post*, 1987, no. 4, pp. 24–42 (English summary).

¹¹ 'Sine Cerere et Baccho Frigit Venus'.

¹² C. Molbech, 'Uddrag af K. Christian den Fierdes Skrivecalendere', *Nyt historisk Tidsskrift*, no. 4, 1852, p. 354, note 183.

¹³ Hugo Johannsen, 'The Graphic Art of Hendrick Goltzius as Prototype for Danish Art During the reign of Christian IV', *Leids Kunsthistorische Jaarboek* 1983, 1984, p. 85f.

¹⁴ Henrik Bramsen, *Arkitektstudier tilgænet H. H. Engkvist; Rosenborg M/K*, 1979, pp. 139–49. In these 'architectural studies', the author says that Christian IV may have seen a small gouache (23.5 × 33 cm) by Hans Bol (1534–93) which was in a private Danish collection prior to 1690. A tournament is going on in the foreground, geese are being driven and couples are courting by canals around a small palace which is slightly reminiscent of Rosenborg. Knights are fighting for the favour of the ladies who defend themselves with roses.

¹⁵ Bering Liisberg, and only he, is correct in his interpretation of archive material about a first and a second Winter Room, pp. 50–55. My results of research demonstrate this.

¹⁶ Jan Van Damme, 'De Antwerpse "taferelmakers" en hun merken', *De Leiegouwe, Drijmaandelijks tijdschrift van de leiegouwe vereniging voor geschied-, taal- en volkskundig onderzoek in het Kortrijkse*, jg. XXIX, afl. 1–2, March 1987, pp. 259–64.

¹⁷ Fifty-six paintings in the Winter Room are of approx. 49 × 65 cm which are the measurements of a 'salvators' or '8 stuivers' format painting. Four paintings originally measured about 75 × 104 cm, which is the '27 stuivers' format. This is seen against the background of Dr J. Bruijn's results in *Oud Holland* 93 (1979), 'Een onderzoek naar 17de-eeuwse schildersformaten, voornamelijk in Noord-Nederland', pp. 96–115.

¹⁸ Hans Jørgen Dill, Danish joiner, took over William Moors's work on the panelling in the western end of the big new house' in August 1619, and finished the job in March 1620. Dill was paid his final fee in July 1620. Liisberg, op. cit., p. 52f.