

"ADAM AND EVE"

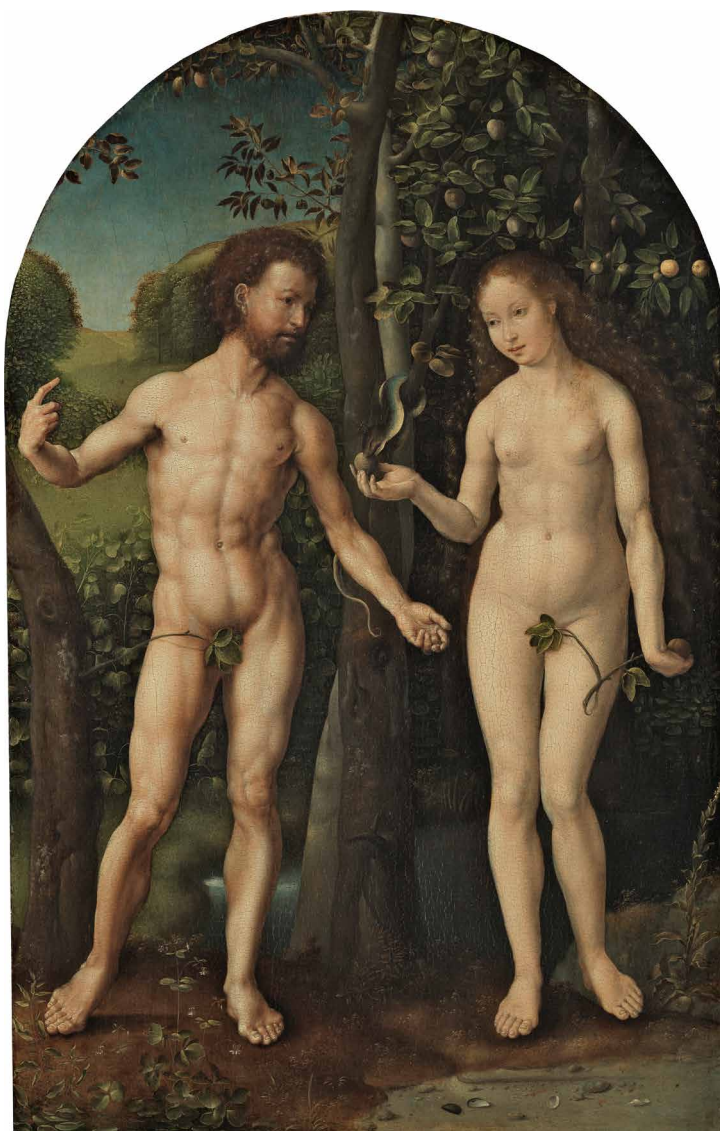
JAN GOSSAERT

02 JUNE – 06 SEPTEMBER 2015

JAN GOSSAERT was born in 1478 in Maubeuge, which is now part of France. It is this hometown which gave rise to the name 'Mabuse' by which he was known and with which he signed some works, sometimes in its Latinised version. The biography that Karel van Mander included in his *Book of Painters (Het Schilder-Boeck)*, published in Harlem in 1604, describes Gossaert as an eccentric character with disorderly habits which did not appear to be in keeping with the extreme rigour of his painting. The portrait engraved by J. Wierix and included in the work of *Dominicus Lampsonius, pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies*, published in 1572, shows him in rich costume with a bearded face crowned by an eccentric hat. In the portrait, there is a Latin poem comparing Jan Gossaert to the legendary painter Apelles. This parallel was drawn more than once; in 1616, the poet and humanist Geldenhouwer Gerard (1482-1542) who, like Gossaert, was a feature in the court of Philip of Burgundy considered him the "Apelles of our time".

Gossaert was essentially a court painter. He began in the service of Philip of Burgundy, bastard son of Philip the Good, then went to the court of another Philip, the Admiral of Zealand, and was finally a painter for Dona Mencía de Mendoza, the wife of the Count of Nassau-Breda, Henrique III. In addition to these positions, he worked for Emperor Charles V, Margaret of Austria and Christian II, the king of Denmark.

Jan Gossaert was, in fact, an unusual character in Renaissance Nordic painting. Nothing is known of his artistic training before his enrolment as a painter in the Antwerp Guild in 1503. He is likely to have trained in that city because his style subscribes to the taste for exaggerated ornamentalism that characterises the so-called "Antwerp Mannerism". This style of painting is marked by its fanciful use of architecture, the elaborate poses of the figures and a taste for rich props such as jewellery, fabrics and profusely ornamented weapons, echoed in contemporaneous Portuguese paintings. In short, a style of painting that reflected the taste and etiquette of the refined courts of Nordic princes in the early modern period.



Jan Gossaert
(Maubeuge, Hainault, ca. 1478 – Middelburg,
before 1536)

Adam and Eve

ca. 1510

Oil on panel

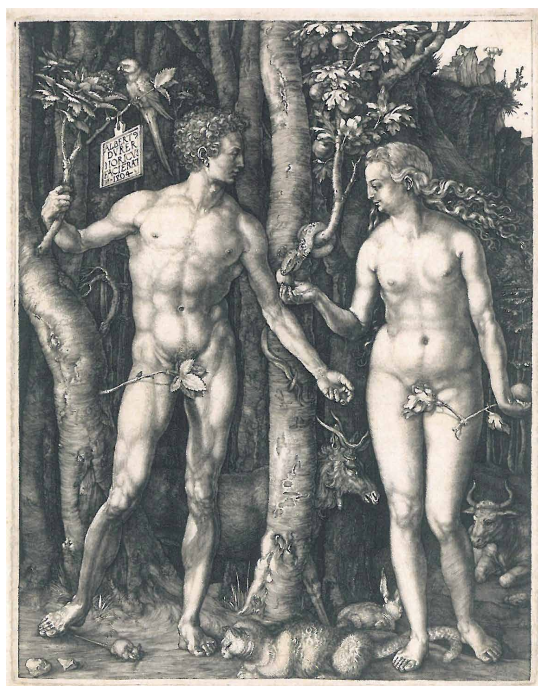
56.5 × 37 cm

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, inv. 163 (1930.26)

The courtly nature of his paintings is evident in the refinement of the compositions and the themes of his work in which portraits and mythological subjects abound. The circles he moved in also obliged him to execute designs for ornaments, engravings, party decorations, tapestries and art objects. Undoubtedly of most importance was living with other artist and poet courtiers who profoundly marked his work such as the humanist, poet and Philip of Burgundy's biographer, Gerard Geldenhouwer, and Conrad Meit (1480-1550), Margaret of Austria's sculptor. Their friendship and influence contributed to the sculptural nature of the human figures in Gossaert's paintings.

His particular interest in sculpture seems to have started when he accompanied Philip of Burgundy on an ambassadorship to Pope Julius II in 1508 and 1509. As well as Rome, he visited Trento, Verona, Mantua and Florence, where he met some of the leading Renaissance painters. It was above all in Rome where Gossaert dedicated himself to the study of buildings and statues of antiquity, partly by order of Philip, who was fascinated by the ancient ruins.

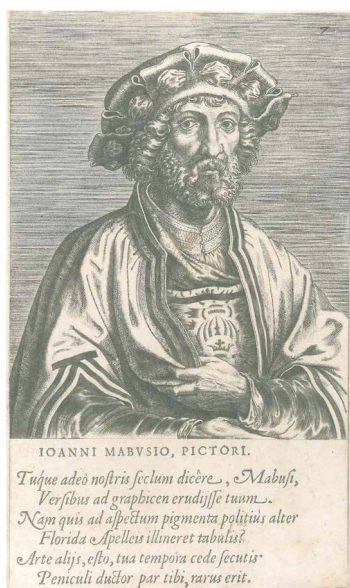
The small painting from the Thyssen collection, exhibited here as a guest work, was painted shortly after Gossaert's return from Rome in about 1510,



Albrecht Dürer
Adam and Eve
1504, engraving

possibly in Bruges. It was the first of a series of pairs of figures that he painted and which were to become one of his specialties. *Adam and Eve* is directly based on the famous engraving of the same subject by Dürer in 1504, which had been circulating in the Flemish art world since Lucas Cranach visited the court of Margaret of Austria in Malines in 1508, taking many German engravings with him. It is likely that Gossaert became fascinated by the sculptural nature of the bodies in Dürer's engraving in which Adam is based on the celebrated ancient art statue of the *Belvedere Torso* (Vatican, Museo Pio-Clementino). Gossaert's admiration for Dürer, which manifests itself in this adaptation, was later reciprocated; during a trip to the Netherlands in 1520-21, the celebrated painter from Nuremberg noted in his diary that he had purposely gone to Middelburg to see one of Mabuse's famous works.

Although the poses of Gossaert's figures follow the poses in the engraving almost exactly, the background landscape is totally different. Dürer depicts the harmony of Paradise by representing the coexistence of different animals while Gossaert's landscape symbolises the later history of the fall into sin and the path to redemption above all. The only tree is the leafy apple tree identified with the original sin and the empty space in the background seems to indicate the path leading out of Paradise after expulsion. The white columbine in front of Adam can be identified as a symbol of Christ who will redeem Adam's sin while the mullein next to Eve is often interpreted as a Marian reference, since it is also known as Aaron's rod and related to Tree of Jesse, guaranteeing redemption by Christ born of a Virgin from the House of David. The blackberries facing the coral elements behind Adam and Eve were identified as antidotes to the poison that the serpent symbolises. In other interpretations of the same subject (National Gallery of London, circa 1520, and Berlin Gemäldegalerie, circa 1525-30), Gossaert always perceived the landscape of original sin as a narrative space for the later history of the expulsion from paradise.



J. Wierix
Portrait of Jan Gossaert
1572, engraving

In the exhibition catalogue for *Man, Myth and Sensual Pleasures – Jan Gossaert's Renaissance*, the art historian Maryan Ainsworth recently defended the notion that he had collaborated in these landscapes with another artist who had possibly trained in Bruges. In fact, Gossaert was a painter of fantastic architecture rather than landscapes, skilfully mastering perspectives and reproducing complicated Renaissance and Gothic decorations. Above all, however, he was a painter of human figures, affording them sculptural relief and truly monumental dignity. Karel van Mander's biography, already mentioned, praised him first and foremost as being "the first to bring to Flanders a good way of composing and painting religious works populated with nude figures taken from fables which was not then used in our country".

The exact date of his death is not known but is thought to have occurred in Middelburg before 1536.

JOC

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