



LOUIS FINSON  
THE FOUR ELEMENTS

ROB SMEETS



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Paul Smeets

Contents by  
Barbara Ferriani, Paul Huys Janssen, Sandra Janssens, Pierluigi Leone de Castris

**ROB SMEETS**  
OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

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## Preface

With reference to Divine Creation and the Redemption it bears, the alchemical process was defined as the “Great Work”. According to this, an enigmatic and chaotic original matter — characterised by a virulent struggle between opposites awaiting to be united — would gradually be raised to a state of perfect harmony.

The quaternary order of the elements, which in reality correspond to the three states of matter plus the agent allowing their transformation (*Fire*), refers to the recurrent concept of symbolism whereby the number four stands for solidity. *Earth*, *Water*, *Air* and *Fire* were considered by the pre-Socratics, already at their time, as the cardinal points of material and spiritual existence.

In 1611, Louis Finson created an extraordinary work in Naples, a unique example among the historic representations of *The Four Elements*. Executed just a year after Caravaggio’s death — whom Finson knew personally — the painting skilfully combines an attentive and early Caravaggism with a mannerism rooted in the tradition of Nordic painting.

Like all great paintings, Louis Finson’s *The Four Elements* encompasses multiple levels of comprehension and interpretation. Both experts and non-experts are given the opportunity to grasp and to begin to unravel the painting’s different levels of iconography and symbolism, to simply enjoy the power and the structure of the representation as well as to explore the meanings enclosed within the complex depiction and the relationship between the *Elements*.

The positions of the bodies, the gazes and the balance of forces reveal a splendid portrayal and an extraordinary synthesis of the apex of what was considered a veritable science at that time: alchemy. The man’s attempt to raise the human to the divine.

In this publication, four scholarly essays deal with the painting from four different perspectives. The first essay, by Paul Huys Janssen, is dedicated to the artist’s biography and the painting’s history. The second, by Sandra Janssens, concentrates on the symbolic meanings hidden within and represented by the painting. The third, by Pierluigi Leone de Castris, focuses on the cultural and artistic milieu in Naples when Finson painted *The Four Elements*. The fourth and final essay, by Barbara Ferriani, discusses the painting’s conservation and execution technique. Aware that a thorough understanding of such a complex painting can only be obtained by continually approaching it, we are pleased to present this work to scholars and art lovers.

Paul Smeets



*“The philosopher Empedocles said the Principles are the Four Elements, fire, air, water and earth, but with two main forces, friendship and discord, the former uniting and the latter dividing, which others call possible and impossible combinations [...]”*

Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, 1611



LOUIS FINSON  
(Bruges 1570/1578?-1617 Amsterdam)

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

Signed and dated lower right: [LVDO]VICVS. FINSONIVS. FECIT. NAPOLI. A 1611

Oil on canvas, unlined, 179 x 169.2 cm

Provenance:

Estate Louis Finson, September 1617; sold at auction by the painter and art dealer Abraham Vinck in Amsterdam at the end of 1617; acquired by the jeweller and art dealer Hans le Thoor (Jean Letoir); in 1618 offered for sale to Christian IV, King of Denmark in Copenhagen via the painter and art dealer Pieter Isaacksz; the negotiations went on until 1623 and finally collapsed; the painting was returned to Hans le Thoor.

Rombout family, Ghent until circa 1993; private collection.

Literature:

[P.A. Leupel], *Schilderijen den Koning van Denemarken te koop aangeboden, 1618*, in F.D.O. Obreen, *Archief voor Nederlandsche Kunstgeschiedenis*, vol. II, Rotterdam 1879-80, pp. 135-137.

D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, Brussels 1970, p. 154, no. 34.

A. Pigler, *Barockthemen, eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, Budapest 1974, vol. II, p. 509.

S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, *De jonge Rembrandt onder tijdgenoten. Godsdienst en schilderkunst in Leiden en Amsterdam*, Rotterdam 2006, p. 80, no. 42, p. 84.

R. Contini, “*Studia il mio Pensier* (Finson e un Disegno)”, *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 47 (2005) 2006.







According to Plato, the universe was created by a Maker-God, who "... *shaped it as a single visible living creature that included all creatures like him [...]. He shaped it as a sphere through a circular movement...*"

Timeus, IV century B.C.

### "The Four Elements" by Louis Finson: a rediscovered masterpiece

by Paul Huys Janssen

Louis Finson (Ludovicus Finsonius) was one of the earliest Northern followers of Caravaggio. He even knew Caravaggio personally. During the years 1606/1607 and 1609/1610 both painters stayed in Naples. Moreover, it is documented that Finson owned several paintings by Caravaggio and that he painted copies after originals by Caravaggio. I will return to this further on.

The date of birth of Louis Finson is not known exactly. He was born in Bruges as the third son of Jacques Finson and Maycken Bart. His elder brothers were Laurens and Arnoud. There was also a sister, called Clara. In 1580 their mother died and this has been used as the date *ante quem* for the year of birth of Louis. However, he probably was born earlier, about 1570/1575, perhaps as late as 1578<sup>1</sup>.

Jacques Finson had been a pupil of Ambrosius Benson and Pogier de Paeuw in Bruges around 1550. He is sometimes documented as a cloth-painter (*kleerschrijver*). This means that he painted trivial things like textiles and wall paper, but also statues. More interesting is that in some records

later on Jacques Finson is mentioned as painter (*schilder*). In 1555 he became a member of the painters Guild of Saint Luke, and already in 1556 he registered an apprentice, a young painter by the name of Hanneken Wancket. Jacques Finson held several functions within the guild and he eventually became a doyen in 1583/1584.

He married Maijcken Bart around 1560 or a little later. In 1580 it is stated that their eldest son Laurens was already married, so he must have been born in the early 1560s. He became a (cloth-)painter like his father. In 1583/1584, the same year that his father was elected a doyen, Laurens was appointed as an official in the guild of Saint Luke as well. Arnoud, the second son, became a painter too. He was probably born around 1565. In 1585 he married Thonymken Eeds from Bruges. We know nothing about their sister Clara Finson, who may have been born in the late 1560s. Louis Finson perhaps was the youngest child. A suggested date of birth in the early 1570s is by any means reasonable. He was of course initially trained in the workshop of his father to become, like his brothers, a painter as well.



After the death of Mayken Bart in 1580, Jacques Finson remarried to Jozyne vande Voorde. She took it upon her to raise the children from his first marriage.

In those years the war between Catholic Spain and the rebellious Protestant provinces in the Netherlands, that had started in 1568, became more heated and vicious. Much of the fighting took place in Flanders. Towns were sacked and rebels as well as innocent civilians were murdered at random by the Spanish soldiers. Many people devoted to the Protestant religion and living in Flanders were forced to go into exile to the north. Those provinces were under strong control of the Dutch armies and the Spanish troops sent there, met with serious resistance. In 1585 Jacques Finson and his family fled from Bruges to the town of Veere, on the island of Walcheren in the province of Zeeland. At that time Veere was a thriving town with many merchants and an important sea harbour. It had for many years been the home port of the Dutch naval fleet. Jacques Finson stayed in Veere for the rest of his life. He died before April 1608. His son Arnoud registered in Veere as painter and he died there before 1617. His sons Pieter and David became painters too.

We have no information on the whereabouts of Louis Finson during the years 1585-1604. It is logical to assume that he moved with his father and his family to Veere in 1585. At that time Louis was still very young. If he was born as late as circa 1578, he would have stayed at home until well in the 1590s. What exactly happened remains a mystery. It is possible that he went to another town, perhaps Amsterdam, to complete his study. We only know for sure that Louis Finson, like so many painters, eventually ended up in Italy, the cradle of classical and Renaissance art and the place to be for any

young and ambitious artist. Like so many young painters from the Netherlands he undertook the long, and sometimes dangerous journey to Italy. Finson must have been in Rome in the early 1600s, although this is actually not documented. After that he went to Naples where he is recorded from 1604 until 1613.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century Naples was by far the largest town in Italy<sup>2</sup>. Well over 300,000 people were living there and this number would rise until 450,000 at mid-century. It was a thriving merchant city with links to all the other major harbour towns in Italy, like Genoa, Rome and Livorno. There were also important connections with towns in Flanders, Holland, England and Germany. Merchants from all these countries were living in Naples. However, Naples was not an independent town. It was ruled by the Spanish Habsburgs from 1516 until 1700. A large contingent of Spanish troops were stationed there to underline this power, as well as to stand against the King of France, who formed a constant threat because he also had laid a claim on Naples. To keep the Neapolitans under some sort of control, the nobility, who for the better part had been living in the countryside, were ordered to stay in town. So Naples became a very busy town with merchants from all over the world and nobility living in splendour. As good as the Spaniards tried, they were unable to undermine the network of the families. These formed the real backbone of Neapolitan society. So there came to be a curious mix of an elevated culture supported by the Spanish viceroys, together with a local tradition of stimulating Neapolitan interests and ambitions. On the one hand, this meant for artists that there were lots of possibilities to receive commissions, but that, on the other hand the Neapolitans preferred to give

them to their local painters. Sometimes these painters were adamant on preventing 'foreigners' to work in Naples<sup>3</sup>. It is known that well-known artists like Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni and Domenichino, among others, were strongly opposed. Nevertheless, in the end the Neapolitans embraced the outside influences and turned them into their own art.

Quite a lot is known about northern artists living in Naples around 1600.

Painters like Cornelis Smet (†1590 in Naples), Dirck Hendricksz (Teodoro d'Errico, ca. 1544-1618), Aert Mytens (1556-1602), Wenzel Coebergher (1561-1634) and Paul Bril (1556-1626) are recorded there<sup>4</sup>. As far as the biography of Louis Finson is concerned, we know that in 1604 he rented a house in Naples together with the painter and art dealer Abraham Vinck

who was already living there. Vinck originally came from Antwerpen where he was born in 1576 or 1577. He arrived in Naples in 1598 or 1599. In January 1602 he married a certain Vittoria 'Obechine' (Obbekens?)<sup>5</sup>. It is not known when they left Naples, but in 1610 they were living in Amsterdam. Both Vinck and his wife knew Louis Finson very well during their stay in Naples. Their friendship was dramatically

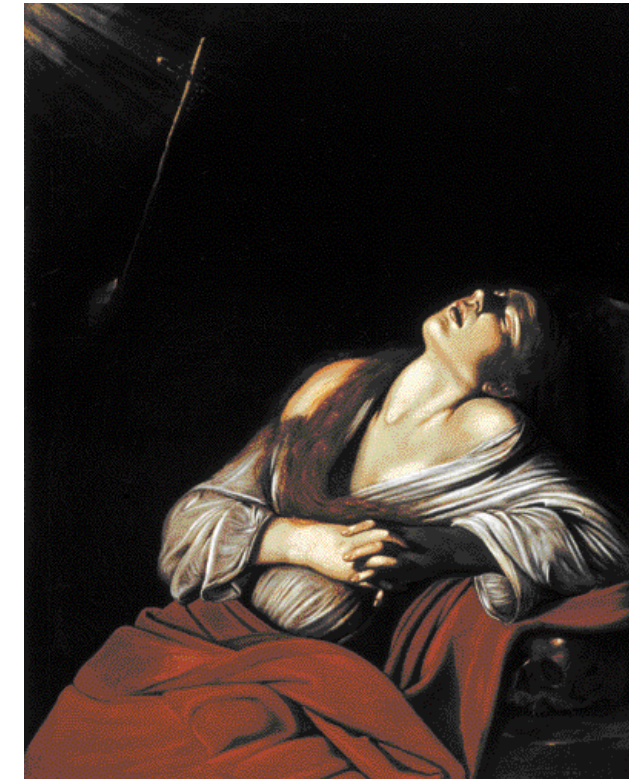
renewed later on. When in 1616 Finson went to Amsterdam, he stayed in the house of Abraham Vinck. A year later Finson died there.

From 1605 and 1608 date records that tell us about Finson's work in Naples. In both cases payments were made to him for painting portraits<sup>6</sup>. In Naples Louis Finson also must have known Caravaggio, who stayed there from September 1606 until June 1607 and from October 1609 until July 1610. Finson made a copy after Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalen* that is generally thought to have been painted circa 1606<sup>7</sup> (fig. 1).

In the same period, most likely in 1607, Finson (perhaps together with Abraham Vinck) acquired Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Rosary* (now in Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) and a *Judith and Holoferne* (present location unknown, presumably lost). At a

moment not known to us, he bought an original or copy of Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*<sup>8</sup>.

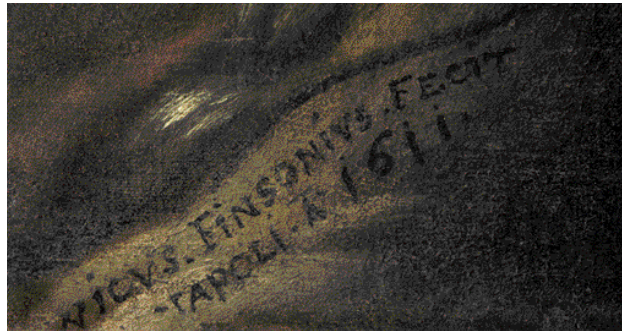
With Caravaggio's stay in Naples the Golden Age of Neapolitan painting commenced. Until then the local artists had worked in an insipid mannerist style, but Caravaggio's naturalism inspired many to follow his line<sup>9</sup>. When he came to Naples in 1606 his fame had gone ahead of



1. Louis Finson, *Mary Magdalen*, signed, Marseille, Musée des Beaux-Arts



him and almost immediately he was given the commission to paint the *Seven Acts of Mercy* for the church of the Pio Monte della Misericordia. This Brotherhood was founded just a few years earlier in 1601 and it was dedicated to such pious works as the Seven Acts of Mercy embody, as helping the poor, assisting the sick, giving shelter to pilgrims, etc. Another important commission Caravaggio received at that time was for the *Flagellation* (now Naples, Museo di Capodimonte). It was originally painted for the San Domenico Maggiore<sup>10</sup>. The visualization of dramatic action that pervades these and other paintings by Caravaggio (some of them unfortunately are lost) appealed to many painters. Battistello Caracciolo (1578-1635) who



2. Louis Finson, *The Four Elements*, Milan, Rob Smeets Old Master Paintings, (detail of the signature)

until then had painted in a mannerist manner immediately changed his style. His *Immaculate Conception with SS Dominic and Francis of Paul*, painted for the church of Santa Maria della Stella in 1607, is largely based on Caravaggio's *Seven Acts of Mercy*. It has even been called a paraphrase after Caravaggio's original<sup>11</sup>. In the following years Caracciolo completely absorbed the style of Caravaggio. Other Neapolitan artists who were influenced by Caravaggio are Carlo Sellitto (1584-1614), Giovan Bernardino Azzolino

(1572-1645) and Paolo Finoglia (ca. 1590-1645), the latter through the example of Caracciolo. Later on in the seventeenth century the art of Caravaggio would have a profound influence on painters like Massimo Stanzione, Bernardo Cavallino and Luca Giordano, among others<sup>12</sup>. During his stay in Naples Louis Finson painted portraits and history paintings<sup>13</sup>. The latter show a close variety of styles. His earliest works are dated in 1610. They are a *Resurrection of Christ* (Arles, church of Saint-Jean de Malte), a *Saint Anthony of Padova* (Montpellier, Musée Fabre) and a *David and Bathseba* (signed and dated LODOVICO FINSONI.F/ I NAPOLI/ 1610, art market, London, 1988)<sup>14</sup>. According to Mina Gregori the *Resurrection* in Arles was directly based on a *Resurrection* by Caravaggio painted for the church of Saint Anna dei Lombardi in Naples. This painting was lost during the earthquake that hit Naples in 1805<sup>15</sup>.

*The Four Elements* was painted in Naples in 1611 as the signature reveals: [LVDO]VICVS. FINSONIVS. FECIT. NAPOLI. A 1611 (fig. 2). The dramatic action, painted in powerful colours and strong lighting effects, proves that the artist at that time had become a master in his own right. By all means the influence of Caravaggio is decisive. *The Four Elements* are depicted in a remarkable and compelling fashion. The Elements are represented as two males and two females, entangled in a fierce struggle. In the upper right *Fire* is depicted as a strong young man surrounded by flames. His right hand is in a firm grip with that of *Water*, an older man in the lower left. He is seated with his knees up and surrounded by small waves. At the same time *Fire*, with his left arm, suppresses *Air* in the upper left. She is a young woman floating backwards with a grim face. She grabs *Fire* by

Air

Fire



Water

Earth

Louis Finson, *The Four Elements*, Milan, Rob Smeets Old Master Paintings, (scheme of the Elements)



his hair and tries to push him away with her right leg. *Earth* is depicted as an older lady lying on her back, surrounded by brown earth in the lower right of the painting. At the same time she tries to grip *Fire* by his left leg and pushes *Water*



3a Louis Finson, *The Four Elements*, Milan, Rob Smeets Old Master Paintings, (detail)

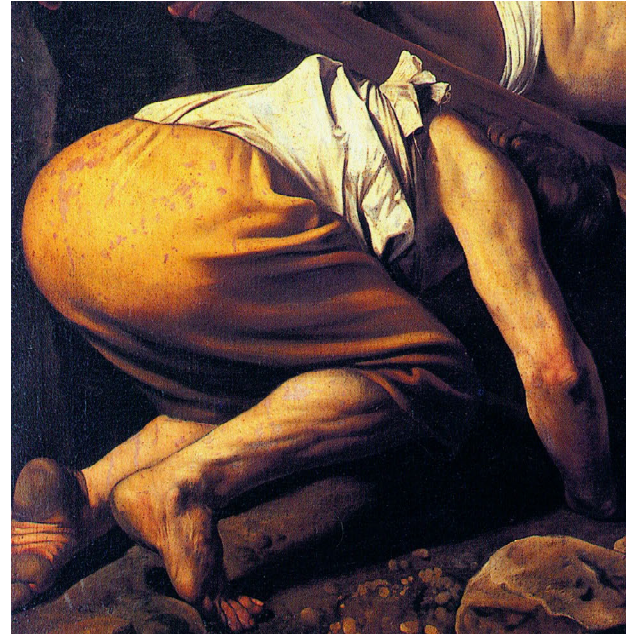
on his chest. The composition is filled with the four figures and there is no indication of any space. The packed and whirling representation of the human figures has resulted in a cropped-up composition. There are similarities with paintings that Caravaggio had made during his stay in Rome.

The figure of *Water* (fig. 3a) seems to refer to the figure of an executioner in Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, in the Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome (fig. 3b).

The same intense action can be found in Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* in the San Luigi dei Francesi, also in Rome, whereas

the position of the figure of *Earth* (fig. 4a) is reminiscent of that of Saint Paul in Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saint Paul*, in the Santa Maria del Popolo (fig. 4b).

The depiction of a fiercely struggling man can



3b Caravaggio, *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*, Rome, Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, (detail)

also be found in Louis Finson's *Samson and Delilah*. This was likewise painted during his stay in Naples (fig. 5).

By all means Finson was receptive to Caravaggio's display of dramatic action. This was quite aptly recorded a few years later by Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637), an intellectual living in Aix-en-Provence, and a patron of Finson. On January 13, 1614, he wrote in recommendation of Finson: *Il a tout la manière de Michel Angelo Caravaggio, et s'est nourry longtemps avec luy* (He has all the manner of Michelangelo Caravaggio, and he has long been influenced by him)<sup>16</sup>.

The artist has represented the subject of *The Four Elements* in an innovative and suitable manner. The essence is that the Elements embody the four main substances from which, according to the old idea, the world was made of. But the Elements are each others opponents, and therefore they are shown struggling with each other. *Fire* and *Water* are the main rivals because water destroys fire. *Water* is also an ally of *Air*; because it forms the basis for *Air*; that neither can be caught by *Fire*. *Air* also has the ability to slip through *Earth*, like *Water* always will run through it. The negative interrelations ascribed to *The Four Elements* are visualized here by their grasping and pushing arms and legs.

Personifications of *The Four Elements* were traditionally depicted as four females with attributes. These attributes served to identify them. In the well-known book by Cesare Ripa,



4a Louis Finson, *The Four Elements*, Milan, Rob Smeets Old Master Paintings, (detail)

*Iconologia* (first edition Rome 1593, second edition Rome 1603) descriptions were given how to depict *The Four Elements*. Normally they were accompanied by objects or animals that were

thought to be typical for each Element, like a fish for the element *Water* or plants for the element *Earth*. Most artists who took on the subject of *The Four Elements* choose for the traditional allegorical representations. And they almost always represented them in four separate compositions, hardly ever with all Four Elements together in one painting<sup>17</sup>. Louis Finson completely abandoned with this tradition. In his painting, each of *The Four Elements* is recognizable only because of a small detail, like *Water* sitting in small waves of water, or *Fire* who is surrounded by flames. Finson presented the Elements in a strong caravaggesque and realistic manner and by that means he superseded the sophisticated allegorical way of representation.

The choice of this subject for a painting fitted in with the growing interest in representing themes



4b Caravaggio, *The conversion of St. Paul*, Rome, Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, (detail)

that embody nature, the world and the cosmos. In the sixteenth century it had become more and more popular to depict in art universal themes that reflected the views of mankind on its



surrounding world. To understand that world one sought to explain it by means of encyclopaedic structural formulas. By this means the cosmic world and our own world, as well as our human behaviour, that is influenced by both, were ranged in cycles and series. The best known of these concepts are *The Nine Planets*, *The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac*, *The Fours Seasons* and *The Twelve Months*, *The Four Parts of the World*, as well as *The Four Elements*, *The Four Temperaments* and *The Five Senses*. This last subject was also chosen once by Finson. During his stay in Naples he made a painting with *The Five Senses* (fig 6), that is now in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Brunswick, Germany<sup>18</sup>.



5. Louis Finson, *Samson and Delilah*, Marseille, Musée des Beaux-Arts

The influence of Caravaggio is furthermore visible in other paintings Finson made during his stay in Naples. On 24 August, 1612 he received a final payment for the *Annunciation* that he had painted for the church of San Tomasso d'Aquino in Naples (now in the Museo di Capodimonte). This painting bears the signature ALOYSIVS.FINSONIVS.BELGA. BRVGENSIS / FECIT 1.6.1.2. It is, as far as is known, the only official commission for an altar-piece that Finson received in Naples<sup>19</sup>. The group on top with God the Father, supported by angels, is directly based on a similar group in Caravaggio's *Seven Acts of Mercy*, however in that case with the Virgin Mary and Child supported by angels. Another version of this composition was painted in the same year (Avignon, collection Aubanel, 1970). It has the signature: LODOVICVS / FINSONIVS / FECIT IN NEAPOLI/ AN° 1.6.1.2.

Many of the paintings that Finson had made in Naples remained unsold. Perhaps due to some lack of success he decided to go to Spain via Southern France, but his stay in the Provence would turn out far longer than foreseen. He had taken his paintings with him. On February 27, 1613, in Marseille, Finson received the commission to paint a *Christ Raising Lazarus*. This painting was ordered by Jeanne de Saco, widow of Barthélemy de Libertat of Marseilles (the painting is still at its original site in Marseille, parish church of Château-Gombert). In those months Finson came to the attention of Nicolas-



6. Louis Finson, *The Five Senses*, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum

Claude Fabri de Peiresc. On 25 May, 1613, he wrote: *Il y a un excellent peintre flamand à Marseille nommé Luiggi Finson, qui y faict des pieces comparables à celles des plus célèbres des siecles passez* (there is an excellent painter in Marseilles with the name of Louis Finson, who makes paintings comparable to those by the most celebrated painters in past times)<sup>20</sup>. This Peiresc admired the paintings by Finson, and he saw to it that Finson received a number of commissions, for history paintings as well as for portraits. Within a couple of months his reputation was

well established in the Provence. Some of the paintings that he had made in Naples were now sold to his new French clientele. For example, the *Resurrection of Christ* from 1610, already mentioned (and now in Arles), was sold to the Gaillard family in Aix-en-Provence who had their coats-of-arms added. In 1613 Finson painted a *Crucifixion of Christ* for the Chambre des Comptes of the Parliament of the Provence (now at Château La Calade, Bouches-du-Rhône) and he also painted an *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (Aix-en-Provence, Cathédrale Saint-Saveur).



In a few years time Louis Finson made a successful career in Southern France and his surviving oeuvre is for the larger part preserved there. For that reason Finson is sometimes listed among the French painters<sup>21</sup>. In 1613 he worked in Aix-en-Provence and Marseilles. In 1614 he was in Arles. For the church of Saint Trophime he painted a third version of the *Annunciation* of 1612 in Naples, mentioned above. He also painted a *Saint Stephen Stoned to Death* and an *Adoration of the Magi*. This last painting was ordered by Gaspard du Laurens, archbishop of Arles.

Finson received several commissions for portraits like that of *Paul Hurault de l'Hôpital* (1592-1624), the archbishop of Aix-en-Povence. Peiresc possessed a collection of portraits of his friends and colleagues. He asked Finson to paint some portraits for this gallery, for example of his friend and teacher Jules Pacius de Beriga in Montpellier. In 1614 Finson went there to portray Pacius twice, one portrait for Peiresc's gallery and the other one for Pacius himself. Later on Peiresc would ask painters like Simon Vouet, Frans Pourbus the Younger and Peter Paul Rubens to paint portraits for his gallery<sup>22</sup>.

From Montpellier Finson went to Bordeaux to settle a financial affair that had long been delayed, but on the way he fell seriously ill in Toulouse. This is recorded by Peiresc who wrote of the *maladie de Thoulouse* (bad health at Toulouse). Finson at that time was in the company of the painter Martin Faber (1587-1648), who looked after him<sup>23</sup>. Finson eventually reached Bordeaux, but he was still too ill to go to Paris as he had planned to work for Merri de Vic, counsellor to the King of France and another friend of Peiresc. The delayment was explained in a letter by Peiresc to De Vic: *il est si malaide qu'il s'en est reposé. Déjà comme il croit de la ville de Bordeaux où il a dû rester* (he is still very ill and

resting. He thinks it wise to stay in Bordeaux and rest). Finally, in the Spring of 1615 Finson arrived in Paris. In that year he painted a *Circumcision of Christ* for the Chapel of the Jesuits in Poitiers and a *Martyrnm of Saint Sebastian* (parish church Rougiers, Var). For Merri de Vic he painted a *Charity of Saint Martin* (parish church Emmenonville, Oise). These paintings reflect no more than a shadow of the powerful art Finson once created.

Also in 1615, apparently as soon as his contracted work was done, Finson left Paris and went back to the north. The reason for this may have been his worsening health. We may assume that he stayed with his family in Veere for a while. In August 1616, Finson was in Amsterdam where he lived with his old friend Abraham Vinck. On 19 September, 1617, the last will of Louis Finson was drawn up in the house of Vinck<sup>24</sup>. Finson was very ill at that time: *swackelijcken van lichame te bedde liggende* (weakly in his body lying in bed). He was even unable to place his signature under the document: *midts zijne debiliteyt niet schrijven en conde* (because of his debility could not write). He must have died within a few days.

The last will of Finson contained some interesting stipulations. To Vittoria, the wife of Abraham Vinck, he left a golden ring with seven diamonds, and to their children some jewellery as well. Two paintings by Caravaggio, the *Madonna of the Rosary* and a *Judith and Holoferne*, that Finson owned in share with Abraham Vinck, were given to Vinck. He was also given a painting of *Venus and Bacchus* done by Finson. These and other paintings had been brought to Amsterdam either by Finson or by Vinck, all the way from Naples. Finson left all his drawings and papers to his nephew, the painter David Finson, a son of his brother Arnoud Finson. To his eldest brother Laurens Finson, who was still alive at that



7. Louis Finson, *Massacre of the Innocents*, Andenne (Belgium), Church of Saint Begge, (detail). © Irpa-Kik Belgium

moment, Louis Finson left half of his estate, existing of gold, silver, art and paintings. The other half of the estate would go to the children of Arnould Finson. Although it was requested that an inventory was to be made, no such document has been preserved.

In agreement with the family, within a couple of weeks, Abraham Vinck organized an auction in which the paintings bequeathed by Louis Finson to his family were offered for sale. Among them was *The Four Elements* from 1611, and other paintings by Finson. Also offered for sale was a third painting by Caravaggio, or attributed to him, a *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*. It was bought by the merchant Pieter de Wit on behalf of François Seghers from Antwerp. Two paintings by Finson were bought by the

Amsterdam jeweller and art dealer Hans le Thoor (also known under his French name Jean Letoir). These were a *Massacre of the Innocents* (fig. 7) and *The Four Elements*. Both paintings were in Le Thoor's house when in 1618 he was visited by Pieter Isaacksz (1569-1625). Isaacksz was *painter of the King's chamber* of Christian IV of Denmark (1577-1648). He was also his agent and Isaacksz suggested to sell these two paintings to the King. The *Massacre of the Innocents*, which was described as a large painting (it actually measures 270 x 400 cm), was prized 750 *Rycxdaelders* and the smaller *The Four Elements* (179x169.2 cm) was considered to be worth 125 *Rycxdaelders*. Both paintings were brought to Copenhagen for the King to see them. The negotiations were not



successful and they went on for several years without the King arriving at a decision. In 1621 the King offered to pay 500 *Rycxdaelders* for the large painting of the *Massacre of the Innocents*.

Hans le Thoor agreed to this if the King was willing to pay the 125 *Rycxdaelders* for the *The Four Elements* in addition. This proposal was rejected, perhaps because the King didn't want to be put on the spot, and both paintings were thereupon returned to Le Thoor.

In 1624 he started a law suit against Pieter Isaaksz because Le Thoor thought that had been misled by him. He claimed the sum of 625 *Rycxdaelders* from Isaaksz for the two paintings by Finson, plus 7 percent interest per year. This claim was rejected by the court of justice in Amsterdam<sup>25</sup>.

The painting of the *Massacre of the Innocents* is now in the church of Saint Begge in Andenne, near Namur (Belgium). It was bought in 1854 and it is not known where it was before that time<sup>26</sup>. *The Four Elements* was lost for several centuries until it turned up in a private collection in Belgium.

The rediscovery of *The Four Elements* adds new information to our knowledge of the life and art of Louis Finson. This splendid painting was thought to be worthy enough to be offered to the King of Denmark. It must surely be regarded as the impressive ascertainment that Finson in Naples attained the highest artistic mastery.

## Notes

1. The biographical data on Louis Finson are taken from D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, Brussels 1970; M.J. Bok in *Nieuw Licht op de Gouden Eeuw, Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten*, catalogue of the exhibition, Utrecht (Centraal Museum)/Braunschweig (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum) 1986/87, p. 257; B. Nicolson & L. Vertova, *Caravaggism in Europe*, Turin [1989], vol. I, p. 105; J. De Maere & M. Wabbes, *Illustrated Dictionary of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Flemish Painters*, Brussels 1994, vol. I, pp. 152-153; J. Briels, *Vlaamse schilders en de dageraad van Hollands Gouden Eeuw 1585-1630*, Antwerp 1997, p. 327 and D. Bodart, *Louis Finson*, in K.G. Saur, *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, Band 40, Munich/Leipzig 2004, pp. 186-188. The suggested date of birth as 1570/1575 is given by Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 8. More recently Bodart changed it to 'circa 1578', D. Bodart, *Louis Finson*, in K.G. Saur, *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
2. For a short outline of the history of Naples at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see G. Galasso, *Society in Naples in the Seicento*, in C. Whitfield & J. Martineau eds., *Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano*, exh. cat., London (Royal Academy of Arts) 1982, pp. 19-23.
3. For the patronage in Naples, see E. Waterhouse, *Foreigners in Naples and Outside Commissions* and F. Haskell, *The Patronage of Painting in Seicento Naples*, in C. Whitfield & J. Martineau eds., *Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano*, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56 and 60-64 respectively.
4. An overview is presented by P. Leone de Castris, *Pittura del Cinquecento a Napoli: 1573-1606 l'ultima maniera*, Naples 1991.
5. This information was supplied by P. Leone de Castris (see his contribution to this catalogue). It was previously been thought that Vink came from Hamburg, see D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 69. For Vinck, see J. Briels, *Vlaamse schilders en de dageraad van Hollands Gouden Eeuw 1585-1630*, *op. cit.*, p. 399. There is one documented painting by Abraham Vinck representing *The Virgin with Child and Saints Cornelius and Biagio* (Aversa, Seminario Vescovile), see

P. Leone de Castris, *Pittura del Cinquecento a Napoli: 1573-1606 l'ultima maniera*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

6. The document from 1605 was published by A. Delfino, "Documenti inediti...", *Ricerche sul '600 napoletano* (1985), pp. 89-112, esp. p. 100. The document from 1608 has been published by V. Pacelli, "New Documents concerning Caravaggio in Naples", *Burlington Magazine* (1977), pp. 819-829, esp. p. 829, note 35.
7. D. Bodart, *Louis Finson*, in K.G. Saur, *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, *op. cit.*, p. 187. For the painting of *Mary Magdalen*, see D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 7, esp. pp. 95-96. L.J. Slatkes in M.J. Bok, *Nieuw Licht op de Gouden Eeuw, Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten*, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 55. In 1613, while in the Provence, Finson signed and dated another version of this painting (private collection, Saint-Rémy de Provence). Several other copies of this composition are known; D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-109.
8. The *Madonna of the Rosary* and *Judith and Holofern* were offered for sale in Naples in 1607, see D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Finson also made copies after these paintings, D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-139.
9. See C. Whitfield & J. Martineau eds., *Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano*, *op. cit.*
10. For the late works by Caravaggio, see *Caravaggio, l'ultimo tempo 1606-1610*, exh. cat., Naples (Museo di Capodimonte)-London (National Gallery) 2004-2005.
11. C. Whitfield & J. Martineau eds., *Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano*, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 5.
12. L. Rocco, *Il Secolo d'Oro della pittura napoletano da Battistello a Luca Giordano*, Naples 1994.
13. G. Papi, "Finson e altre congiunture di precoce naturalismo a Napoli", *Paragone* 52 (2001), no. 39, pp. 35-47.
14. For the paintings by Finson, see the *catalogue raisonné* by D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 69 ff. and B. Nicolson & L. Vertova, *Caravaggism in Europe*, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107. See also *La peinture en Provence au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, exh. cat., Marseilles (Palais Longchamp) 1978, pp. 66-75.
15. M. Gregori in C. Whitfield & J. Martineau eds., *Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
16. D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
17. See A. Pigler, *Barockthemen, eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, Budapest 1974, vol. II, pp. 507-511 (see also the contribution of Sandra Janssens to this catalogue).
18. See C. Rooker in *Nieuw Licht op de Gouden Eeuw, Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten*, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 56, who dates the painting to the last years of Finson's life, that is 1616-1617. I agree with Bodart who dates the painting to circa 1605-1610, in D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-163, no. 43.
19. S. Macioce, *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Fonti e documenti 1532-1724*, Rome 2003, p. 273.
20. D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
21. C. Wright, *The French Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, Boston 1985, pp. 183-184. See also the lengthy overview published by G. Isarlo, *Caravage et le caravagisme européen*, Aix 1941, pp. 121-138.
22. P.J.J. van Thiel, "La collection de portraits réunie par Peiresc à propos d'un portrait de Jean Barclay conservé à Amsterdam", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 65 (1965), pp. 341-354; D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-180.
23. D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
24. See D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229.
25. For this story, see D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-234; and J.M. Montias, *Art at Auction in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 2002, pp. 144-150.
26. D. Bodart, *Louis Finson (Bruges, avant 1580-Amsterdam 1617)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-129, no. 13.





*“The world is principally the whole of all things born in Heaven and Earth [...] On the other hand however, from a spiritual viewpoint it is opportunely represented as a man. And while the one is formed by the four elements, the other is characterized by the four humours.”*

Isidore of Seville, 560-636

## The Battle of the Elements and Humours in “The Four Elements”

by Louis Finson

by Sandra Janssens

At first sight the scene in Finson’s painting *The Four Elements* looks like a fierce struggle of four nude figures, two male and two female. All engaged in a battle against each other no one however seems to be winning. The background for each figure enables their identification. Behind the young woman in the upper left corner a clear blue sky is depicted, marking her contour sharply; she represents *Air*. The muscular young man next to her, on the right hand side, wears a red mantle and is surrounded by flames. These attributes make him the personification of *Fire*. An old woman is lying on her back on the brown soil, indicating her as the symbolical representation of *Earth*. The elderly man sitting on little waves in the left bottom corner is *Water*.

The pale body of *Air* seems to be floating as *Water* pushes her upwards by her head with his hand. With her legs she is entangled with the body of *Fire*, while she grasps him by his hair. *Fire* blocks her attack by pushing her other hand away. At the same time he holds with each of his legs respectively *Water* and *Earth* down. *Water*

is also fighting in two directions. With one hand he is defending himself from *Fire*, and with his legs he pushes *Earth* down. She in her turn tries to fight back by stretching out her arm to grab *Water*’s chest. With her other hand *Earth* holds back *Fire* by his leg. The battle is clear but left undecided.

Although allegories of the Four Elements *Fire*, *Water*, *Air* and, *Earth* were a popular theme in the iconography of the sixteenth and Seventeenth century, the manner in which Finson painted the scene is beyond tradition as we know it so far.

Since antiquity, one way to picture the Elements had been to personify them with human figures. Within this formula the representation of *The Four Elements* in prints, paintings and frescoes can be divided on a formal basis into two groups. They are either depicted in one single scene or are each granted their own space, being in the four corners of a ceiling fresco or on separate canvases or sheets of paper.

As an example a series designed by Hendrick Goltzius can be mentioned. Each Element is



personified in a separate print as a male or female figure in the presence of its most evident attributes. For example *Fire* is characterized by a male muscular figure in an active pose, holding flames in both hands, with flame like hair, and accompanied by a salamander, an animal impervious to fire according to Pliny and Aristotle<sup>1</sup>.

Otherwise *The Four Elements* could be represented together in a singular picture plane. Very popular at the beginning of the seventeenth century were the easel paintings with the Elements represented as four figures in an ideal landscape, painted for example by Jan Brueghel the Younger and Frans Francken the Younger<sup>2</sup> or Hendrick De Clerck and Denis van Alsloot<sup>3</sup>. The collaboration of painters each one with his specific specialization, whereby one painter was responsible for the depiction of the natural Elements and the other for the human figures, was an efficient way of working for artworks destined for the market. The whole surrounding fauna and flora, being painted by a specialized artist, made

nature the true protagonist of the artwork. Thus such representations can be seen as an ode to nature. The figures personifying the Elements are usually sitting, lying, floating or standing, related to the Element they represent, for example *Fire* floating in the air as in the painting by De Clerck and Van Alsloot. Interaction between the figures does often not occur or when present it takes the form of a polite conversation correlating the peacefulness of nature. When represented in a single scene the four figures are arranged to form a square or a group as compositional

feature. For example, in *Paradise* by Hendrick De Clerck and Denis van Alsloot, they are scattered to the corners of the picture plane and in the *Landscape with Allegories of The Four Elements* by Jan Brueghel and Frans Francken, they are brought together in the middle.

A scheme, closer to Finson, can be found in the work of, for example, Hendrick Goltzius engraved by Jacob Matham<sup>4</sup> (fig. 1) and Abraham Bloemaert<sup>5</sup> (fig. 2).

The four personifications are here brought together in a balanced square or tondo composition against a neutral background setting. However the intense interaction through facial expressions and movements present in Finson's painting is lacking in the work of both Goltzius and Bloemaert.

In the examples seen above the artists choose to depict the figures either to be solely women or a mixed cast of male and female. The latter combination of men and women also used by Finson was subjected to the convention of general biological belief. The theory of Humours shaped the

construction of gender. As was typical with a mixed cast Goltzius used a man to personify *Fire*, and a Woman for *Water*. Contemporaries would have understood his choices, since they too believed in the hot-dryness of a typical man, and the cold-wetness of a typical woman. Finson, however, pictured *Water* as an old man but this choice can also be explained through humoral theory. As men aged, they became less hot and dry. Men lost heat as they aged and grew wet again, but they retained nevertheless more heat than a woman. *Water* was believed to



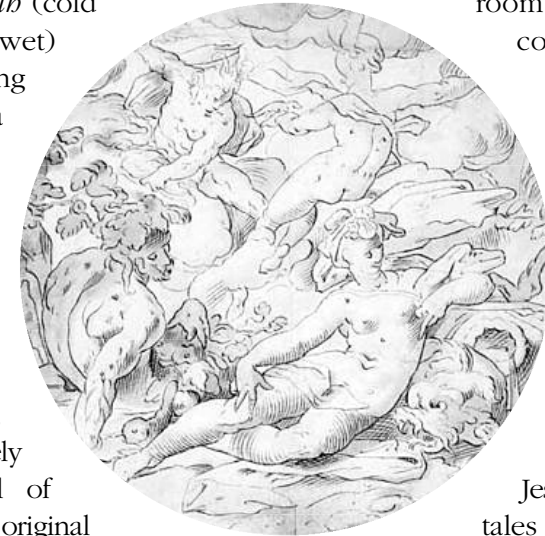
1. Hendrick Goltzius  
engraved by Jacob Matham,  
*The Four Elements*

be hot and wet. According to this medical and popular belief, it made logical sense to depict river gods and the element *Water* as elderly men<sup>6</sup>. This choice was made, for example, by Goltzius, who used an old man to symbolize *Water* in the *Creation of the World: Day Two*, ca. 1589, engraved by Jan Harmensz. Muller and by Rubens, who used elderly men to represent the river gods on the *Arch of the Mint*<sup>7</sup>.

No clear expectations however existed for how the Element of *Earth* (cold and dry) and *Air* (hot and wet) should be pictured. Not being closely identified with a specific sex they could be represented by either. In Finson's painting hot-wet *Air* and cold-dry *Earth* are both female.

The fierce struggle between the Elements in Finson's painting, as mentioned above, is a rare exception and is likely to implicate another level of significance. Although the original function and destination of Finson's *The Four Elements* is not known, on the basis of a similar representation within

a specific iconographical program documented in late sixteenth century Rome, a more elaborate interpretation of the iconography can be tempted. In the infirmary of the Novitiate of S. Andrea al Quirinale in Rome a lost painting is described in a contemporary treatise of 1611 as '*the four humours and the four elements, represented by four men of different colours locked in combat, each grabbing and trying to throw the other, like the antagonists in Pollaiuolo's Battle of the Nude Men (ca. 1465). The red man with a mantle of flames was Fire and Choler; the man with wings*



2. Abraham Bloemaert,  
*The Four Elements*,  
private collection

*of a violet blue was Air and Blood; the man completely covered in scales of a turquoise colour was Water and Phlegm; and the man wearing a cuirass of bricks was Earth and Melancholy.*'<sup>8</sup> Arthur Bailey is the first to bring the fascinating and original painting cycle produced by the Jesuits of S. Andrea al Quirinale under the attention of scholars<sup>9</sup>. The Novitiate, centred around an interior courtyard, included a dormitory, refectory, lavatory, recreation room and infirmary, all of which contained painted decorative cycles.

The comprehensive series of frescoes, canvases, and relief panels included in the recreation room martyrdom paintings typical for Jesuit iconography. The vast decoration of the entire complex however combined biblical scenes, stories from the lives of the saints, images of Jesuit heroism past and present, tales of antiquity, allegories, geographical vistas, and visual pharmacopoeia, which made the iconographical program exceptional

especially against the background of hospital decorations in Renaissance Italy. Above all the iconographical program of the infirmary was extraordinary, thanks to its unusual complexity, which comprehended the Early Modern equivalent of illustrations from a medical journal. The infirmary was built in 1594 and enlarged in 1605. Most of the paintings probably date from the mid to the late 1590's<sup>10</sup>. The Novitiate was built by Jesuit brothers, and the very few references in the accounts concerning payments to artists, suggests that most part of the



decorations was executed by Jesuit artists who unfortunately remain anonymous. The artists mentioned in the accounts, Rutilio Clemente (1558-1643) or Durante Alberti (1538-1613) can not be directly connected with the infirmary paintings<sup>11</sup>.

Unfortunately, the painting cycle of the whole complex is badly preserved. Not a single painting from the pre-1610 decoration survives, and only a handful of those are reproduced in engravings of rather poor quality. Nevertheless, study of the represented subjects and their meaning is rendered possible thanks to Louis Richeôme's *La peinture spirituelle* (Lyon, 1611). Richeôme wrote this treatise by order of the Father General of the Novitiate. Like the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, it was a handbook for the novices, but based entirely on the S. Andrea paintings and gardens. In it each painting of the Novitiate cycle was discussed separately.

The painting of *The battle of The Four Humours and The Four Elements* described by Richeôme, on which we will concentrate to propose an interpretation for Finson's painting, is situated in the second room of the Novitiate infirmary. As a counterpart to *The Moral Causes of Maladies* in the first room, *The Natural Causes of Maladies* are depicted in the second room. The combination of the causes of maladies and the struggle of the Elements/Humours in the context of an infirmary suggests an interpretation linked to contemporary medical thought. Therefore we

have to turn to medical theory as it was practised in that time in the tradition of Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen.

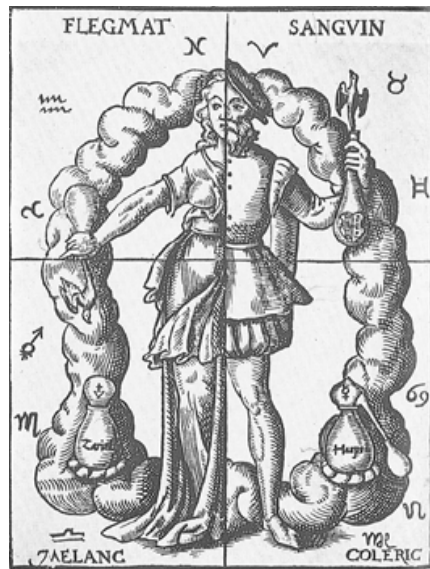
In his treatise *De natura hominis* (The Nature of Man) Hippocrates states: '*The human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pain and health.*

*Health is primarily the state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportions to each other. Pain occurs when one of these substances presents either a deficiency or an excess.*'<sup>12</sup> Thus the balance of the Four Humours is essential to the bodily health, according to the core of Hippocrates' theory.

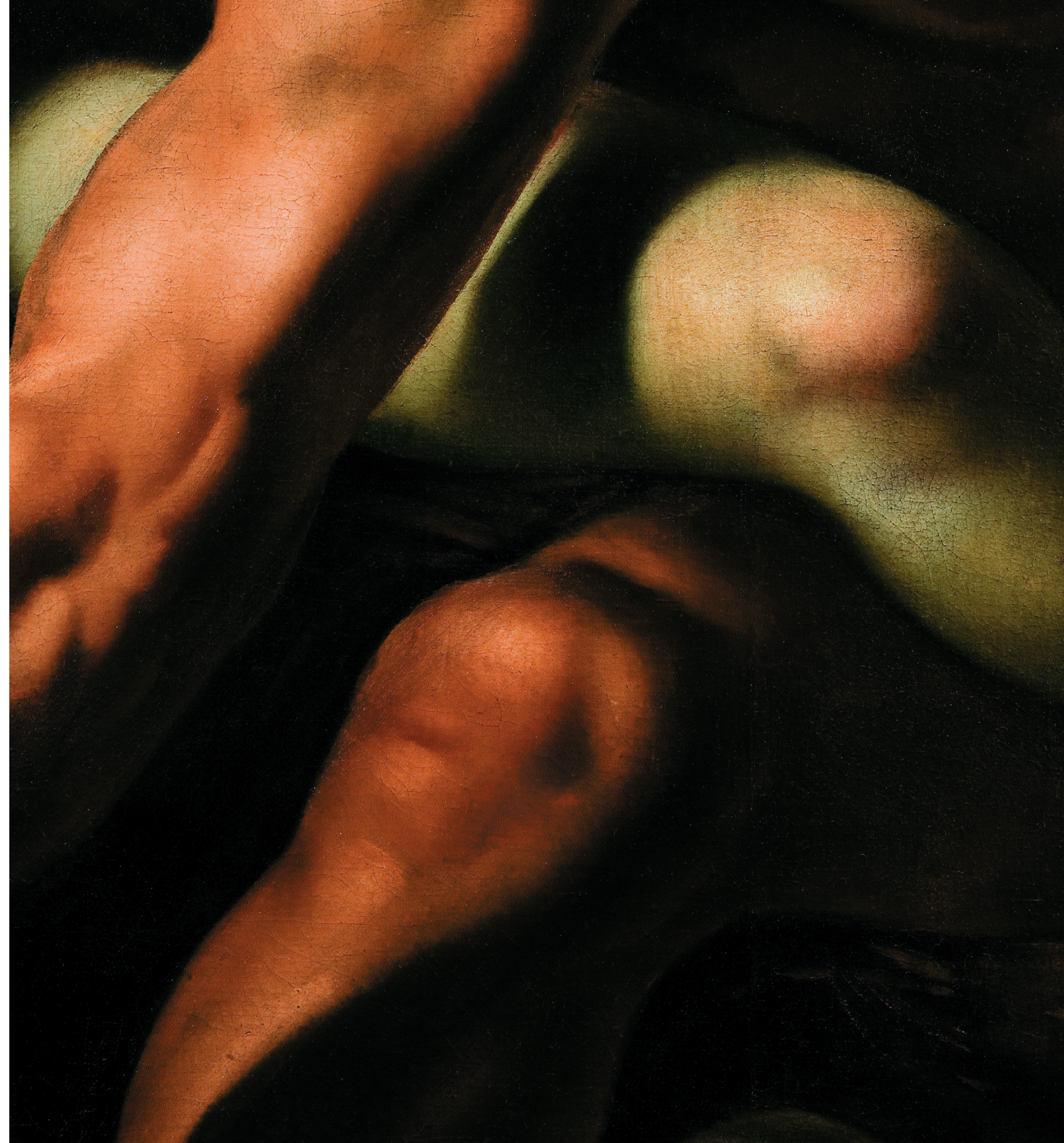
In *De animalibus*, Aristotle defined health in terms of a balance of the basic qualities: heat, coldness, wetness and dryness. Thus, bodily health would be displayed when the body as a whole (and each one of its parts) achieved and

maintained a suitable balance among its qualities<sup>13</sup>.

Galen, in his turn, elaborated the basic Hippocratic principle. According to him the Four Humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile) are made up by mixing the Four Elements (*Air, Fire, Water and Earth*). Each of the Elements bears the qualities and properties of the natural bodies. The primary system used was to link the Elements to the contrasting pairs of hot-cold and wet-dry. In Galen's period, a canonical determination had been reached according to which the man of science was able to classify all



L. Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia*, 1574





the various properties of living beings on the basis of the qualities hot, cold, wet and dry. Thus the four Elements are combinations of these contrasting properties.

*Water* is the combination of cold and wet; *Fire* of hot and dry; *Air* of hot and wet; *Earth* of cold and dry. This mixture could also be verified in food, medicine and the overall environmental factor, which conditioned the health and ill-health of the body. The Humours, which make up the organic structures of each organ, of each body and of each individual, consist precisely of this mixture or *krâsis*. The balance (*eukrasia*) or imbalance (*dyskrasia*) of this mixture was to mark the

Air	Fire	Water	Earth
hot and wet	hot and dry	cold and wet	cold and dry
Blood	Yellow bile	Phlegm	Black bile
Sanguine	Choleric	Phlegmatic	Melancholic

Scheme of the combination of Elements/Humours

separation between what was normal and what was pathological. Galen classified illnesses into three principal groups: those that imply a break in those parts of the body where they are to be found (wounds, fractures, broken blood vessels); those arising from an imbalance of the humours (*dyskrasia*) totally affecting the whole of the body (fevers); and those that imply pathological tumescence (inflammation, tumours)<sup>14</sup>.

Western medieval medical theory and practice originated from Arabic medical texts translated into Latin, in which the Aristotelian doctrine had already been developed and integrated into Galen's doctrinal system with practical medical implications. The quantative and qualitative

balance of the body as a whole, and of each of its parts, was to receive the name of *complexio*, or more precisely expressed the *equalis complexio* — Galen's *eukrasia* — the balanced complexion, so as to distinguish it from the *inequalis complexio* — Galen's *dyskrasia* — the imbalanced form. The latter indicated the presence of an illness because the above-mentioned balance had been broken. The *medicus* (whether *physician* or *cirurgicus*) was the person who was qualified to diagnose the body's state of health, identified on the basis of the *complexio*<sup>15</sup>. The world of the Elements and the qualities required a certain level of abstraction

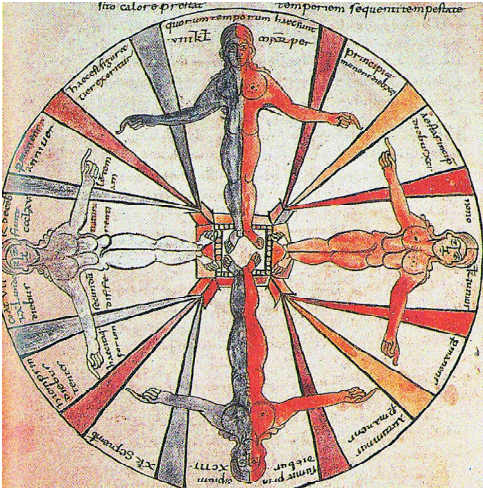
and is not particular close to the physician's specific field of activity. As a result health is also defined in terms of the humours, although always in accordance with the doctrine of balance. The need to possess practical, visible criteria led the physicians to interpret the concept of health in terms of the humour blood and of the two qualities that it possessed that are most obvious to the senses, namely heat and wetness<sup>16</sup>.

The German alchemist and physician Paracelsus (1493-1541) had been an especially vocal opponent of Galenic theory, though with limited following. It was with the publication of Francis Bacon's *The Profiencie and Advancement of Learning* (1605) and René Descartes' *Discourse*

*on Method* (1637), that experimentation and the empirical method changed the way physicians approached diseases. Only from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, after roughly two millennia, humoural theory began to lose favour<sup>17</sup>. In his analyses of the painting in the second room of the Novitiate infirmary Bailey interprets the representation of *The battle of The Four Elements and The Four Humours* as an illustration of the theory of Humours, the key principle of medieval and Early Modern medicine<sup>18</sup>.

However the remarkable fact that the four personifications in the Novitiate infirmary painting — as in Finson's painting — are locked in combat is overlooked as a meaningful factor for further interpretation in his analyses. The representation of the *Moral Causes of Maladies* in the first room and the *Natural Causes of Maladies* in the second room, points to the fact that the Jesuits followed Galen's theory, admitting that bodily health depends on the inner balance or *complexio*

of the body as much as on its physical, social and moral surroundings. Galenism stated that six things — the ambient air; motion and rest; sleep and waking; things taken in; things excreted and retained; affections of the soul like anger, grief, furore, fear and envy<sup>19</sup> — acted in a constant and inevitably way upon the body in such a manner that they were able to alter the balance of the qualities and the Humours. Not so much their presence, but their adequate control was necessary for the preservation of health. Any alteration to them (not only in qualitative terms,



In Isidore of Seville, *De natura rerum*, Manuscript, 9<sup>th</sup> century

but even more so in quantative ones) would, as a matter of course, lead to illness<sup>20</sup>. Thus the core task of the physician and the patient for being and staying healthy is maintaining the balance of the Elements and the Humours; the *equalis complexio* or *eukrasia*. In order to maintain the *eukrasia* and to avoid sickness, the inner balance had to react against these external influences, since they could cause a deficiency or an excess in the Humours or qualities.

The Society of Jesus had a general concern for physical health. Diseases and their cures were a major occupation of even the earliest Jesuits. Although they saw disease as having natural causes, they also shared a common belief that God had created sickness as a punishment for sin, and that the faithful could accept their diseases as a test and a purgation designed to perplex God's enemies<sup>21</sup>.

*The allegory of Faith and The battle of The Four Elements and The Four Humours* in the second room of the infirmary

seem to be linked up with this idea of redemption through malady as further scenes of illness and redemption from the Old and New Testaments in the frescoes of the same room prove. In the infirmary sick men were taken care of with the purpose of healing them. According to contemporary theory and practice this meant that starting from a state of illness — with an inner imbalance or *dyskrasia* — the patient and the physician strove together to regain the inner balance or *eukrasia*. This idea is expressed in one of the inscriptions present in the second room of



the Novitiate infirmary. Taken from St Augustine's commentary on Psalm 102 is stated: MAGNI SUNT DOLORES TUI, SED MAIOR MEDICUS TUUS (Your pain is great, but your Doctor is greater)<sup>22</sup>. The process to restore to health can be seen as a struggle to regain the inner balance, which was broken due to the external factors of every day life. Thus the depiction in the second infirmary room of the *Natural Causes of Maladies* together with the scene of *The battle of The Four Elements and The Four Humours* could be an illustration of the healing process to win back the *eukrasia*. The idea of a healthy body depending on the equilibrium of the Four Elements can be found in medieval and renaissance medical treatises.

The popular scientific encyclopaedia *De proprietatibus rerum* (1242-1247) written by Bartholomaeus Anglicus focuses on the Elements, the Qualities and the Humours of the human body.

At the beginning of this treatise *On the properties of things*, a nude human figure is lying motionless midst the flames of *Fire*, the grass and trees of *Earth*, the waves of *Water* and the sky of *Air* (fig. 3). It illustrates the ideal inner state of balance in a sound human body<sup>23</sup>.

As Galen stated the four humours are made up of the mixture of the Four Elements, being healthy

is keeping the Elements, and thus the Humours, in balance. In the painting by Finson the four figures can be identified as the Four Elements, and thus, following Galen, as the Four Humours. The fight between *Fire*, *Water*, *Air* and *Earth* painted by Finson, is still undecided. The Four Elements seem equally strong and occupy the same quantative space in a well equilibrated composition.



3. In Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, 1242-1247, Brussels, Royal Library

Starting from the decoration in the second room of the Novitiate infirmary and its proposed meaning, Finson's painting could be seen as the Elements/Humours struggling against each other to keep or break the *equalis complexio* or *eukrasia* of a healthy body. With the identification and the rare specific interpretation of Finson's painting as a fight between the Elements/Humours to maintain or upset the balance and thus the healthy state of the body, we do not mean to pretend that Finson saw the representation in the infirmary of S. Andrea al

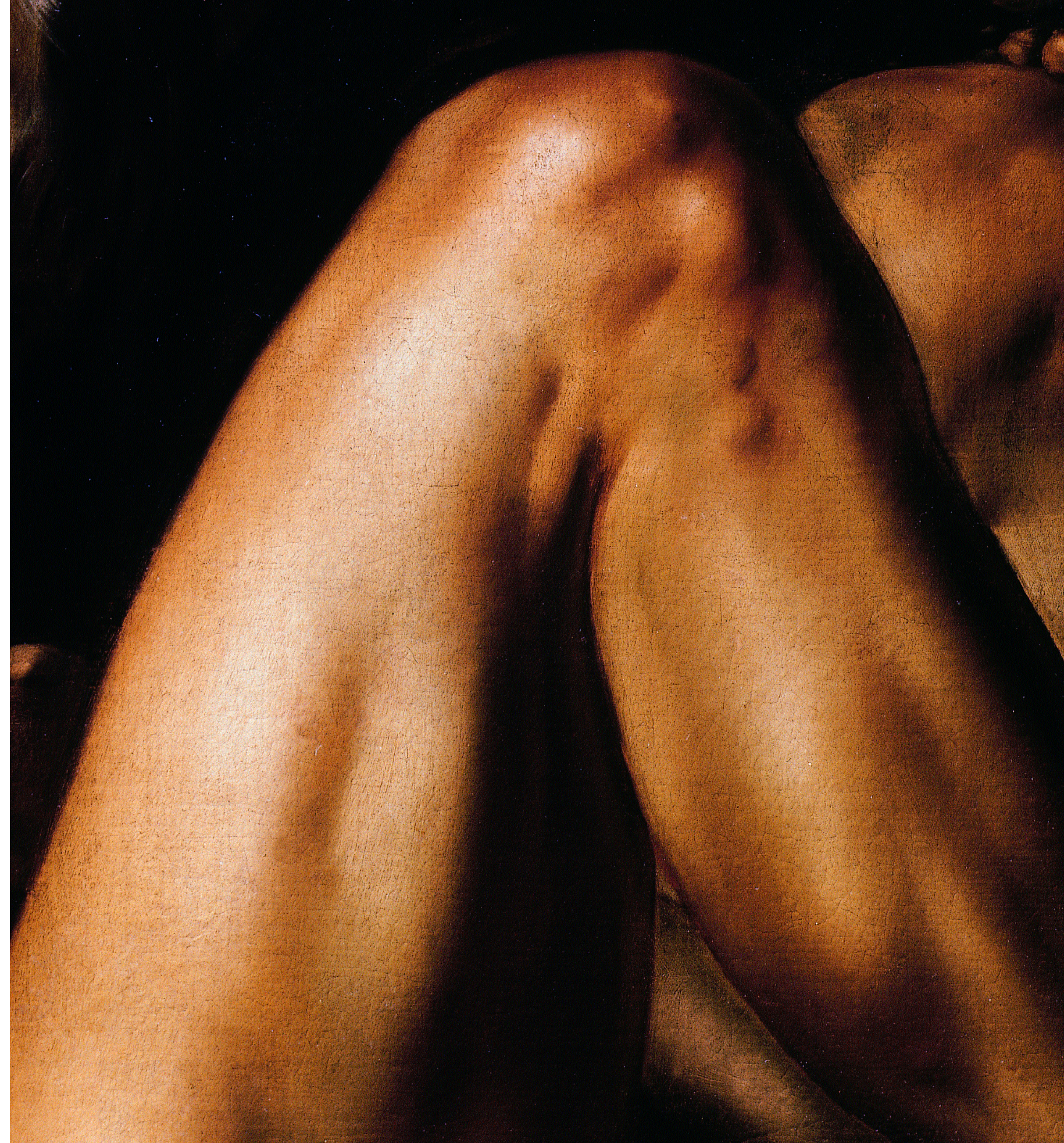
Quirinale and knew the philosophy behind it. But the idea of *eukrasia* as equilibrium of the Elements and the Humours was a concept that over centuries enjoyed wide popular appeal and was familiar not only to intellectuals and physicians but also to laymen and normal people, since it was the very basis of all medical thought in those days.

## Notes

1. Z.Z. Filipczak ed., *Hot Dry Men, Cold Wet Women, The Theory of Humours in Western European Art 1575-1700*, exh. cat., Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock Arkansas, and The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida 1997-1998, p. 10, cat. nr. 1-2 *Fire* and *Water*.
2. *Landscape with Allegories of the Four Elements*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
3. *Paradise*, Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.
4. Reproduced in H.E.C. Mazur, "Goltzius' sketches for Muller's *Seven Days of Creation* and Matham's *Four Elements*", *Oud Holland* 102/2 (1988), fig. 5.
5. Sotheby's, New York, 2002-01-25, lot nr. 141, col. III.
6. Z.Z. Filipczak ed., *Hot Dry Men, Cold Wet Women, The Theory of Humours in Western European Art 1575-1700*, op. cit., pp. 17, 22-23.
7. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, see E. McGrath, "Rubens Arch of the Mint", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), p. 195.
8. Based on *La peinture spirituelle* by L. Richeôme, Lyon 1611, taken from G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, Toronto 2003, p. 80.
9. For elaborate analyses of the whole cycle see G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit., pp. 38-106. All facts regarding the Novitiate of S. Andrea al Quirinale and its paintings are based on this text.
10. G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit., p. 76. For the description of the Novitiate Infirmary see G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit., pp. 74-106.
11. On the chronology and authorship of the Novitiate decorations see G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit., pp. 44-48.
12. Hippocrates, *The Nature of Man*, 3-4 cited in Z.Z. Filipczak, *Hot Dry Men, Cold Wet Women, The Theory of Humours in Western European Art 1575-1700*, op. cit., p. 15.
13. L. García-Ballester, *Artifex factivus sanitas: health and medical care in medieval Latin Galenism*, in L. García-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism, Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, Cornwall 2002, pp. VI 130-131.
14. L. García-Ballester, *Galen's medical works in the context of his biography*, in L. García-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism, Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, op. cit., pp. I 36-37.
15. L. García-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism, Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, op. cit., pp. VI 130-131.
16. L. García-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism, Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, op. cit., p. VI 132.
17. Z.Z. Filipczak ed., *Hot Dry Men, Cold Wet Women, The Theory of Humours in Western European Art 1575-1700*, op. cit., p. 15.
18. G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit., p. 80. For the description of Room Two see Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit., pp. 80-83.



19. L. García-Ballester, *Soul and Body, disease of the soul and disease of the body in Galen's medical thought*, in L. García-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism, Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, op. cit, p. III 147.
20. L. García-Ballester, *On the origin of the "six non-natural things" in Galen*, in L. García-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism, Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, op.cit., p. IV 105.
21. A.L. Martin, *Plague? Jesuit Accounts of Epidemic Disease in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, ST Louis 1996, pp. XII-XIII.
22. St Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Enarrationes in Psalmos III*, Brussels 1956, Ps. 103:4. Cited in G.A. Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque, Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, op. cit, p. 80.
23. Royal Library, Brussels, Roy. 9094, fol. 45r, reproduced in M. Stoffers, *De middeleeuwse ideeënwereld 1000-1300*, Heerlen-Hilversum 1994, p. 395.







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