

years later Vasari writes in a well known letter that 'there is not a cobbler's house without a German landscape'.¹⁵ Even if we make allowance for the exaggeration contained in this passage, its importance remains considerable. To Max J. Friedländer it seemed that, while the development of landscape painting in Antwerp was amenable to historical analysis, the sudden appearance of landscape paintings and etchings in the Danube region (Fig. 147) must cause the historian to admit defeat.¹⁶ But if, as this evidence suggests, the development of landscape painting followed a demand that existed in Southern markets, the simultaneous appearance of such works in widely separated areas would no longer look so mysterious. There are, indeed, various indications that this demand was the gift presented by the Renaissance South to the Gothic North.

The first condition for such a demand arising is, of course, a more or less consciously aesthetic attitude towards paintings and prints, and this attitude, which prizes works of art for the sake of their artistic achievement rather than for their function and subject matter, is surely a product of the Italian Renaissance. Fifty years ago, at least, this statement would have been a commonplace. Today the reaction against too facile an acceptance of this very view has led us to insist so much on the religious and symbolic significance of Renaissance art that the balance must perhaps once more be restored. When the same Federigo Gonzaga who bought the Flemish 'landscapes on fire' tried to obtain a work by Michelangelo he told his agent, as any collector would:

And should he by any chance ask you what subject we want, tell him that we desire and long for nothing but a work by his genius, that this alone is our particular and foremost intention and that we do not think of any one material rather than of another, nor have at heart one subject rather than another, if only we can have an example of his unique art.¹⁷

Such a radical change in the very concept of art could not and did not develop overnight. We find many traces of it in those sixteenth-century texts which allow us to follow the emergence of the idea of art as an autonomous sphere of human activity. In this atmosphere of art collecting and connoisseurship Flemish art is soon accorded a special place.¹⁸ The very leaders of Renaissance fashion in fifteenth-century Florence were the keenest buyers of Flemish tapestries and paintings,¹⁹ and it is to Facius, a Neapolitan humanist, that we owe the first appreciation of the great Northern masters.

The ground was thus well prepared in Italy for a demand for Northern paintings, to be admired not for their subject matter but for other qualities. And yet it might never have been sufficient to make Northern artists abandon subject matter altogether, had it not been for the fact that Italian artistic theory put the idea of landscape painting on the map.

In Alberti's *Ten Books on Architecture*, written, it is believed, about 1450 and