

**Floris Jaspers (Borgerhout (Antwerp), 1889 – Antwerp, 1965)**

*Susanna and the Elders, c.1930*

Églomisé, 48.5 x 38.5 cm (unframed)

Signed lower left : *Jaspers*

In this églomisé from the early 1930s, Floris Jaspers takes up an erotic theme from the Bible which is typical of ancient art: Susanna and the Elders.

### Floris Jaspers



An important figure of the Antwerp avant-garde, Floris Jaspers, unlike his father, Emiel (1862-1918), and his brother, Oscar (1887-1979), was not a sculptor, except on rare occasions, but a painter. He trained at the Antwerp Academy (1900-1909), then at the Antwerp Higher Institute of Fine Arts (1909-1914), where he was a student of landscape painter Franz Courtens (1854-1943), who inspired his first landscapes and seascapes. At the same time, he studied music, which allowed him, in the company of his brother, to earn a living as a cellist in theaters and music halls in Antwerp.

Two artists marked the beginnings of Floris Jaspers. The first, Rik Wouters (1882-1916), whose work he discovered in 1914 at the exhibition of *L'Art contemporain / Kunst van Heden* (Contemporary Art), inspired his first Fauvist period until 1918. The second, poet and critic Paul Van Ostaijen (1896-1928), encouraged him until his death by dedicating several articles to him or by commissioning illustrations for his works. But Van Ostaijen above all introduced him to the international artistic avant-gardes. It was also around Van Ostaijen that, from 1917 on, a group of Antwerp artists came together: the Jaspers brothers, painter Paul Joosten (1889-1960) and designer Jos Léonard (1892-1957) formed the first Belgian modernist circle : *De bond zonder gezegeld papier* (The federation without stamped paper). In a desire for fusion and experimentation, Floris Jaspers explored at the beginning of the 1920s the possibilities offered by Cubism, Abstraction, Constructivism and Expressionism which he claimed to be a part of (he also used themes close to the painters of the Second School of Laethem-Saint-Martin). Following the example of German painter Heinrich Campendonk (1889-1957), whom Van Ostaijen

introduced to him, in 1923, Jaspers began to paint églomisés<sup>1</sup>, a technique that would run throughout his career, with the figure of the Harlequin as a recurring motif. Floris Jaspers also participated in the activities of various Belgian avant-garde magazines and circles (*Le Centaure*, *Sélection*) and maintained links with European modernist circles. In the years following the First World War, Floris Jaspers found himself at the heart of the Belgian and international avant-garde.

In the 1930s, Floris Jaspers' art calmed down. He then painted landscapes, seascapes and portraits. He also participated in the revival of monumental art with his tapestry cartoons for the universal exhibitions in Paris (1937) and New York (1938). He was then influenced by the art of Picasso at the end of the 1940s, while the 1950s were marked by his enthusiasm for Congo, which he discovered during three stays between 1951 and 1957. He then painted numerous friezes of stylized African women, which reached their peak with a 40-meter wall frieze for the Congo pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Brussels in 1958.

### *Susanna and the Elders*

In a setting evoking ancient times, a completely naked woman, with her arm raised holding a veil, occupies the center of the composition. She is surrounded by two elderly bearded men with suspicious looks. One of them tries to grab the young woman. In this églomisé with a gold background, Floris Jaspers describes the theme of Susanna and the Elders, one of the biblical<sup>2</sup> themes which developed in art since the Renaissance, with the aim of painting an erotic scene including a female nude (fig.1). The story took place in Babylon, where Susanna was a beautiful young woman married to an important man, Joachim. The latter often received visits from two wise old men who liked to spy on Susanna. One sunny day, Susanna decided to swim in her garden. She sent her two servants to get soap and oil while she undressed. The two old men then appeared. This is the moment represented by Jaspers. To achieve their ends, the two old men blackmailed Susanna, threatening to accuse her of adultery, which could condemn her to death. When Susanna refused, she was judged. At the trial the ruse was revealed and it was ultimately the two old men who were convicted. The story illustrates the opposition between concupiscence and innocence.

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<sup>1</sup> Paintings under glass therefore produced in a succession of layers opposite to the usual pictorial practice. This popular traditional technique was rediscovered in Murnau by Munich expressionist artists (Münter, Jawlensky, Kandinsky).

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel.

Floris Jaspers drew inspiration several times from the major themes of art history. In the field of the nude, we therefore find representations of Adam and Eve or Venus, in the latter case inspired by the famous Venus of Urbino by Titian (fig.2). This interest of Jaspers in eroticism even extends to the representation of more daring scenes (fig.3). This *églomisé* takes up a similar theme that Jaspers had already treated in a painting from 1925 (fig.4). One also notices the presence of the golden sun, which is a recurring motif of the artist. The association between brown tones and a golden background is typical of *églomisé* from the early 1930s<sup>3</sup>. We can also find a range of colors close to our scene in the tapestry projects that Jaspers created for the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1937 (fig.5).

### Illustrations

In the text: photograph of Floris Jaspers.



Fig.1 : Jan Massys, *Susanna and the Elders*, Antwerp, Phoebus Fondation.

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<sup>3</sup> According to : FREDERICQ, Floris Jaspers, *Achterglasschilderijen – Peintures sous-verre*, p.162.

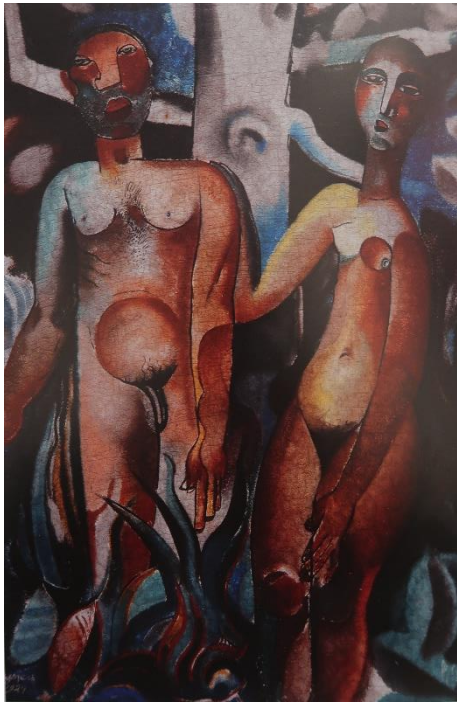


Fig.2 : Floris Jaspers, *Adam and Eve*, 1924, églomisé / *Venus*, 1938, églomisé.

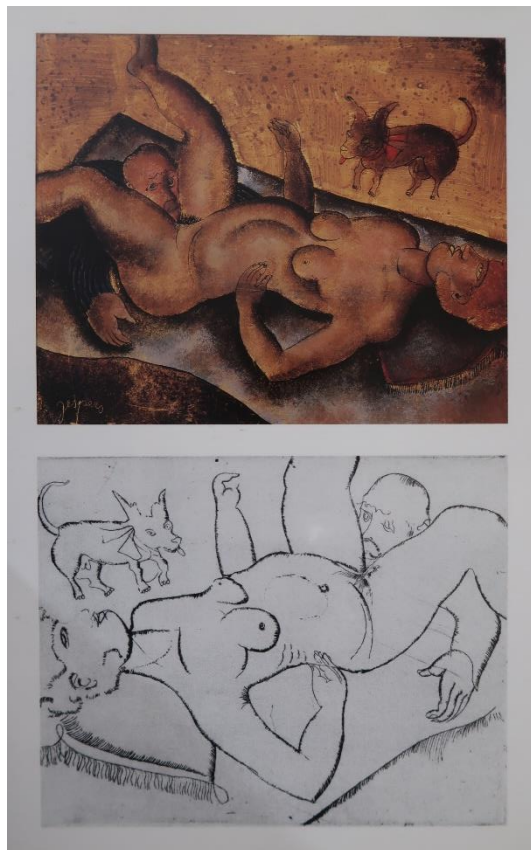


Fig.3 : Floris Jaspers, Erotic scenes.



Fig.4 : Floris Jaspers, *The Jewish Bride*, 1926, églomisé.



Fig.5 : Floris Jaspers, Tapestry projects for the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1937.

Resources used

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Iconography :

*Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Le guide des collections d'art ancien et d'art moderne*, Bruxelles, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, 1996.

Susanna and the Elders, in : Wikipedia.

