

Edward Wouk

TRINITY FINE ART



Frans Floris  
*Susanna and the Elders*



**FRANS FLORIS**  
(Antwerp, 1517 – 1570)

*Susanna and the Elders*

Oil on panel, 154 x 181 cm (60<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 71<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in)  
Signed in monogram and dated: 1548 (or 7)/  $\text{FF}$

This recently discovered *Susanna and the Elders*, signed and dated 1548, belongs to a small group of surviving paintings that the Netherlandish artist Frans Floris de Vriendt completed shortly after returning to his native Antwerp from a long period of study in Italy. The painting testifies to Floris's interest in combining the lessons of his Italian travels with a traditionally Netherlandish approach to oil paint. Its subject – a dramatic biblical legend of an attack on a young woman's virtue – allowed Floris to display his skills at painting the female nude and constructing a compelling visual narrative. Such sensuous images appealed to Floris's early collectors who valued the distinctive mix of Italian form and Netherlandish technique in his work. Their patronage propelled Floris to fame as an international celebrity praised for his treatment of the body. At the centre of Floris's painting we see Susanna undressed and ready to bathe in a secluded pool. She stares toward the left, seemingly unaware of the older men hiding in the bushes behind her. The Apocryphal Book of Daniel recounts that Susanna was the beautiful wife of Joachim, a prominent member of the exiled Jewish community living in Babylon during the sixth century BCE.<sup>1</sup> Two elders who were accustomed to visiting Joachim's house became enamored of Susanna and conspired to seduce her by hiding in the garden where she bathed. They waited until her maids were gone before springing upon her and demanding that she submit to their desires. When she refused, they threatened to accuse her of having an adulterous affair with a young man – a crime punishable by death – but still Susanna would not acquiesce. She was

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Daniel*, ed. L. HARTMAN, trans. A. DI LELLA, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New Haven 2005, pp. 7-24.





brought to trial, convicted on the testimony of the two elders, and sentenced to death. But Daniel rescued her, coming forward to defend her against the false witness of the elders. Daniel had investigated the matter, asking each elder separately to name the tree under which they had seen her: one said it was an oak, the other a mastic. He thereby exposed their lie and proved Susanna's innocence. In the end, the elders, not Susanna, were put to death. There was a long history of representing Susanna's story in art. Earlier images emphasized her status as a paragon of purity and virtue.<sup>2</sup> During the

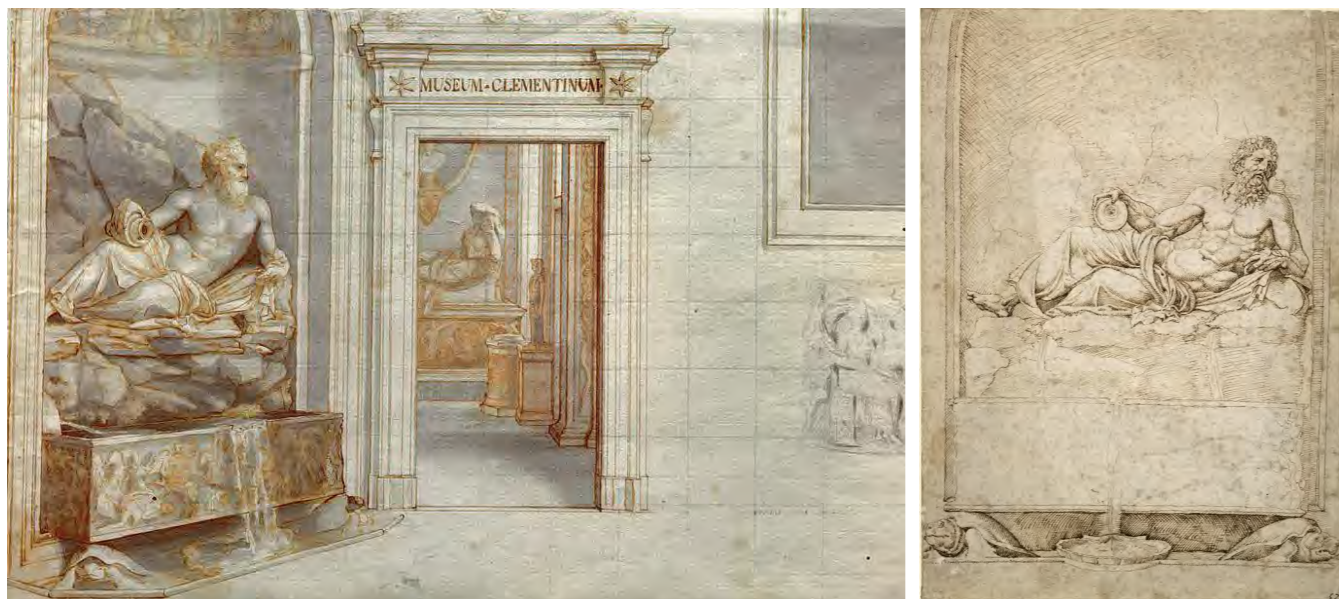
<sup>2</sup> D. CLANTON, *The good, the bold, and the beautiful: the story of Susanna and its Renaissance interpretations*, New York 2006, pp. 95-96.



Renaissance, however, many artists shifted focus to portray a particular episode from her story: the dramatic moment in which two older assailants surprise the nude Susanna bathing in a garden.<sup>3</sup> Floris chose to depict a moment just before the climax of the story: Susanna has undressed and dismisses her two maids, unaware of the elders hiding in the bushes behind her. This narrative innovation lends poignancy to the image but also creates a sense of foreboding. As informed viewers we know what comes next. That knowledge heightens our own complicity

**Fig. 1:** Frans Floris, *The Judgment of Paris*, c. 1548, oil on panel, 120 x 159.5 cm, Kassel, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

<sup>3</sup> CLANTON, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-120; see also M. GARRARD, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*, Princeton 1989, pp. 184-203.



**Figs. 2,3:** Anton Raphael Mengs, *Study for the Ceiling of the Sala dei Papiri*, c. 1772, pen and brown ink with brown wash on gray, squared for transfer, 303 x 490 mm, Fermo, Biblioteca Civica Romolo Spezioli; Maarten van Heemskerck, *The River God "Arno" in The Vatican Belvedere*, 1532-36, Berlin, SMPK, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. 72964r

<sup>4</sup> M. DELCOR, *Le Livre de Daniel*, Paris 1971. According to W. R. REARICK, "Jacopo Bassano and Changing Religious Imagery in the Mid-Cinquecento," in S. BERTELLI and G. RAMAKUS, eds., *Essays Presented to Myron P. Gilmore*, Florence 1978, vol. 2, pp. 331-43, the 1560s witnessed a revival in moralizing Susanna images in response to the directives of the Council of Trent.

<sup>5</sup> Floris's drawing is recorded in a copy in the lost *Album Dansaert*; see P. BAUTIER and G. DANSART DE BAILLENCOURT, "Notes sur quelques dessins attribués à Frans Floris et son école," *Annales de la Société d'Archéologie de Bruxelles*, 25 (1911): pp. 319-33.

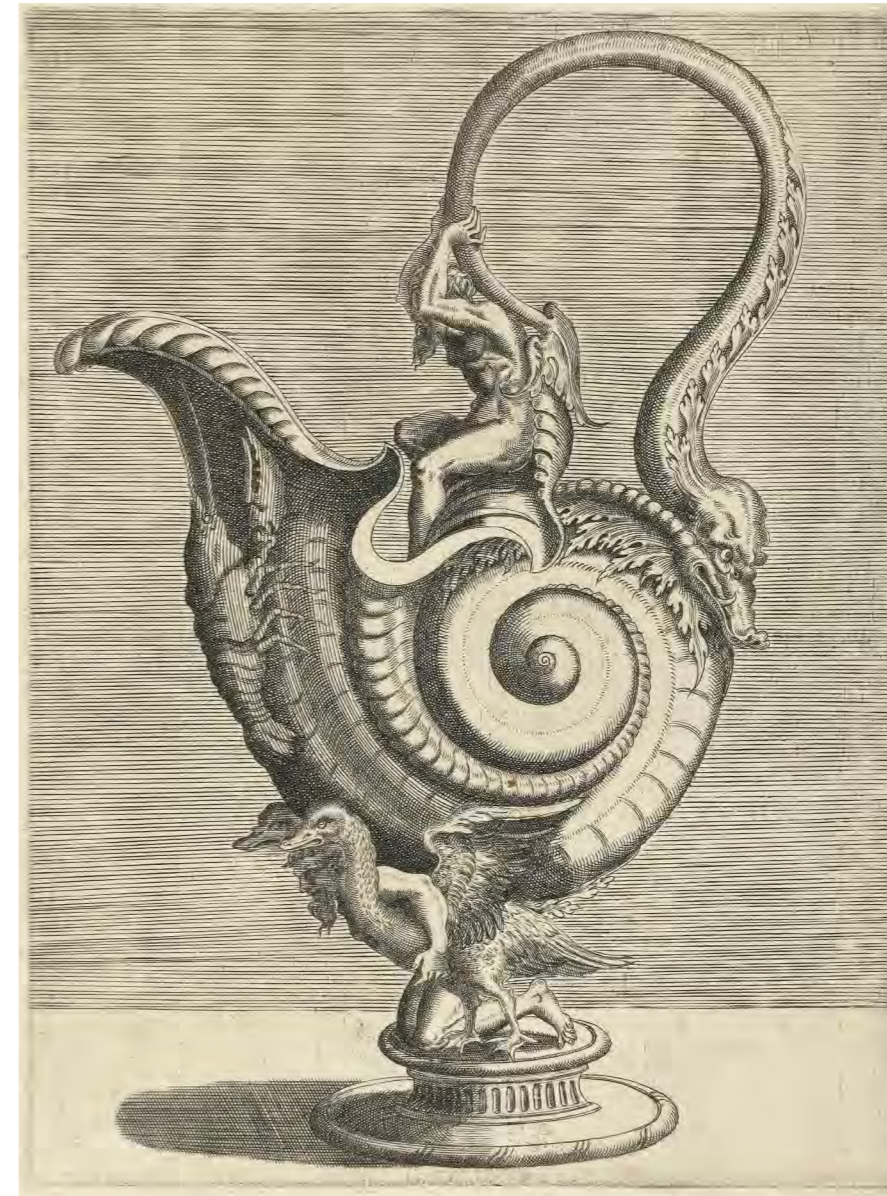
<sup>6</sup> See E. WOUK, *Frans Floris: Imagining a Northern Renaissance*, Leiden 2018, pp. 93-94.

in the story, as we too admire the vulnerable and exposed figure before us. The story of Susanna had circulated in multiple versions until 1547, just one year before this work was completed, when the Council of Trent decreed that the text should form the thirteenth chapter of the Apocryphal Book of Daniel.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not Floris was aware of the theological debates surrounding this text, he was unusually attentive to the details of the story in his composition. The oak leaves in the background recall the two types of tree mentioned in the Book of Daniel, and the exquisite ducks reflected while swimming calmly in the pond remind us that Susanna frequented this quiet spot and had no apparent reason to suspect this bath would be unlike any other. Floris represents Susanna's garden as an Italian garden court filled with allusions to his recent studies of antiquities and Renaissance art. At right, water pours out of a Roman sarcophagus, now converted into a fountain set on feet in the shape of tortoises. This structure supports a statue of the reclining river god "Arno" (or "Nile"), which Floris had drawn in the Cortile delle Statue of the Vatican Belvedere Rome.<sup>5</sup> Floris was evidently fascinated by this sculptural group, which he also included in another painting of approximately the same date as *Susanna and the Elders* – the *Judgment of Paris* now in Kassel (fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> Although the river god statue and sarcophagus were both antique in origin, they had only recently been brought together to create this arresting ensemble, which combined ancient elements with modern restorations and additions.<sup>7</sup> Michelangelo played an important role in this project. He provided an unusual knotted design for the figure's beard, which had broken off, and had the statue placed before a background of *cipollaccio*, or greenish-yellow marble cut in rough shapes in imitation of natural rocks, which Giorgio





Vasari described in the second edition of his *Lives of the Artists* (1568).<sup>8</sup> A drawing by the Dutch artist Maarten van Heemskerck (fig. 3), produced in the 1530s, just a decade before Floris traveled to Rome,<sup>9</sup> and a later pen and wash study by Anton Raphael Mengs (fig. 2) reveal how this sculptural grouping had been transformed into a fountain.<sup>10</sup> Water flowed out of the god's overturned vase, down the folds of the garment covering his legs, and into the sarcophagus



<sup>7</sup> R. RUBINSTEIN, "The statue of the river god Tigris or Arno," in M. WINNER, B. ANDREAE, and C. PIETRANGELI, eds., *Il Cortile delle Statue: Der Satuenhof des Belvedere im Vatican, Akten des internationale Kongresses zu Ehren von Richard Krautheimer*, ed., Mainz 1998, pp. 275–85. While other scholars believe the statue was brought to the Cortile del Belvedere under Leo X, Rubinstein argues that the statue was installed in that location during the papacy of Clement VII (Giuliano de' Medici), between 1523 and 1534

<sup>8</sup> RUBINSTEIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 277, 281–82.

**Fig. 4:** Balthazar van den Bos after Cornelis Floris, *Vase in the form of a Cochlea*, 1548, engraving, 224 x 167 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet



before cascading into the pool beneath. Both Van Heemskerck's and Mengs's drawings show that the flowing water—while creating pleasant sounds that added to the sensory appeal of this composite of nature and art—also served to obscure the iconography of the sarcophagus and may have caused damaged to its relief. Possibly on account of this, Van Heemskerck left the front of the sarcophagus blank in his study. By contrast, Mengs, who would later acquire a cast head

**Fig. 5:** Balthazar van den Bos after Cornelis Floris, *Title Page for a series of Twenty Ornament Prints*, published by Hieronymus Cock in 1548, engraving, 232 x 180 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet

<sup>9</sup> C. HÜLSEN and H. EGGER, *Die römischen Skizzenbücher von Martin van Heemskerck im Königlichen Kupferstichkabinett zu Berlin*, 2 vols., Berlin 1913-1916, vol. 1, 62r.

<sup>10</sup> C. LAZZARO, "River gods: personifying nature in sixteenth-century Italy," *Renaissance Studies* 25 (2011), pp. 70-94, this ref. pp. 73-74.

<sup>11</sup> A. NEGRETE PLANO, *Anton Raphael Mengs y la Antigüedad*, Madrid 2013, pp.142-43, no. 15.

<sup>12</sup> See A. RUMPF, *Die Meerwesen auf den Antiken Sarkophagreliefs* (*Die Antikensarkophagreliefs*, V.1; Berlin 1939), pp.19-36.



**Fig. 6:** Frans Floris, *Torso of Athena in Chiton, Female Torso, Erinyes*, c. 1545, pen and brown ink with brown wash, 207 x 294 mm, Basel, Kunstmuseum, inv. U.IV.21 (Sketchbook fol. 4r)

<sup>13</sup> RUBINSTEIN, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

<sup>14</sup> Illustrated in WOUK, *op. cit.*, p. 186, fig. 5.18 and pp. 102-03, fig. 3.25, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Basel, Kunstmuseum, inv. U.IV.21 (Sketchbook fol. 4r). See C. VAN DE VELDE, "A Roman Sketchbook of Frans Floris," *Master Drawings* 7 (1969), pp. 255-86, 312-26, this ref. 265, pl. 2a.

of the river god, attempted to transcribe as much of the form as was legible.<sup>11</sup> Floris took a different approach to both of these artists. In the Kassel painting and *Susanna and the Elders* Floris shortened the basin and extracted legible forms from its frieze, which, as he clearly understood, depicted an aquatic scene. With a stylized representation of water at its base, the sarcophagus relief represented hovering Eros figures among a group of Nereids, or sea nymphs, and ichthyocentaurs – hybrid creatures with the upper bodies of a man, the lower front bodies of a horse, and the tail of a fish.<sup>12</sup> On the actual sarcophagus, which has long since been detached from the river god, these animated bodies probably flanked a central shield, or clypeus, possibly with an image of an emperor, upheld by two ichthyocentaurs as if floating above the sea. Floris may have been unable to decipher this form completely – possibly because of the damage caused by flowing water. Instead, he creatively if inaccurately reinterpreted

its round form as the edge of another overturned vessel, like the one held by the river god above, with an abundance of water flowing from its mouth. In the Kassel painting Floris removed the statue group from its niche and placed it in an outdoor setting, retaining the rocky backdrop of mottled stone which he integrated into a natural setting. At the same time, he enlivened the ancient marble

and turned its head so that the river god appears to be watching the scene unfolding before him.<sup>13</sup> In *Susanna and the Elders*, Floris further modified the statue's form, adding a female figure resembling Susanna who appears caught in the river god's embrace as she reaches across him, possibly trying to touch the water. Far from an innocuous detail, the unusual addition of the woman to the classical sculpture provides commentary on the subject of the picture, which revolves around the elders' attempt to entrap Susanna. Another statue – possibly of a male figure, fully dressed in a flowing gown – appears in a niche set against the house in the distance. The house, with its arched portico and tiled roof, closely resembles the Italianate villas appearing in the backgrounds of Floris's early paintings, including his *Banquet of the Gods* (Antwerp, Royal Museum), and his monumental woodcut of the *Hunts*. In

that print, a similar house serves as a backdrop for a dramatic frieze of men in antique-style dress hunting a bear and two bulls.<sup>14</sup> The two maids attending to Susanna wear a type of Roman dress that Floris creatively reimagined from his study of ancient marbles. Their long chiton-like garments, belts, and sashes recall Floris's sketch of a statue of *Nike* appearing on one of the pages of his Roman Sketchbook now in Basel (fig. 6).<sup>15</sup> One maid has already left and walks into the distance, toward the open door of the house. She turns her head over her shoulder in a dynamic torsion as she peers backwards, possibly looking toward the other maid, who tarries while Susanna gives her the key to her chamber. Both the door carelessly left open and the consignment of the key might be read symbolically,



suggesting a lack of caution as the unsuspecting heroine lets down her guard. The maid in the foreground holds a large gold and silver vessel, which appears to be antique but is actually a modern, imaginative composite. It corresponds to an engraving (fig. 4) designed by Frans Floris's brother Cornelis Floris and published in 1548 – the same year this painting was completed.<sup>16</sup> The pitcher – with a scorpion supporting its mouth, griffins at its base, and a muscular satyr clinging to its handle – was one of a series of twenty such fanciful vessels, each engraved by Balthasar van den Bos from Cornelis Floris's designs. The print series counts among the earliest designs to be published by the Antwerp

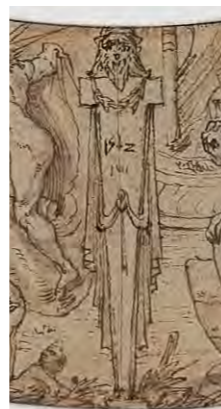
<sup>16</sup> A. HUYSMANS, *Cornelis Floris, 1514-1575: beeldhouwer, architect, ontwerper*, Brussels 1996, p. 258, no. P.1, fig. 134. Series of 21 engravings; impressions recorded in Amsterdam, see I.M. DE GROOT and M. DE JONG, *Ornamentprenten in het Rijksprentenkabinet*, Amsterdam 1988, nos. 79.1-79.21, this print no. 16.

**Fig. 7:** Frans Floris, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1565, oil on panel, 148 x 208 cm, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, Ferroni Collection

<sup>17</sup> HUYSMANS, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>18</sup> B.W. MEIJER, "Frans Floris: een addendum," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 38 (1987), pp. 226-36.

<sup>19</sup> M. SMEYERS and C. VAN VLIEDEN, *Merken Opmerken: Typologie en method. Merk-en meestertekns op kunstwerken in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en hit Prinsbisdom Luik*, Leuven 1990. The markings appear on the two planks of the four-plank panel. Similar markings appear on numerous panels from the Floris workshop, including his *Crucifixion* altarpiece commissioned for the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft, recently examined in E. WOUK, "Der Flügelaltar des Frans Floris mit der Kreuzigung für die Neue Kirche in Delft, heute in Arnstadt" in M. SLADCEK, ed., *Arnstädter Oberkirche: Klosterkirche, Stadtkirche, Residenzkirche*, Petersburg 2018, pp.173-81.



**Figs. 8,9:** Frans Floris, *Mercury Ascending With Phaeton and Phaeton Falling / Aeneas Departing*, 1547, pen and brown ink with brown wash, 80 x 230 mm, Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art, Gift of Herbert DuPuy, 23.12.21, with detail

<sup>20</sup> E. KRIS and O. KURZ, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, trans. A. LAING (1934; London 1979), pp. 61-71.

<sup>21</sup> WOUK, *Frans Floris*, op. cit., pp. 25-27.

publishing house of Hieronymus Cock. His name appears prominently, along with that of Cornelis Floris, on the elaborate title page of the series (fig. 5), framed with one of the grotesque designs for which Cornelis soon became famous.<sup>17</sup> Floris placed his signature and the date – originally 1547, but visibly changed to 1548 (fig. 10) – on the shaft of a herm supporting the rose briar where the elders lurk. Floris used this device in a cycle of drawings, possibly made as designs for the edge of a plate, depicting mythological scenes, including *Mercury Ascending with Phaeton and Phaeton Falling* (figs. 8,9), with herms separating the narrative spaces, each bearing the date 154(?). The final date has been read as a 2 or more probably as a 7 (fig. 9), making this multi-part drawing and *Susanna and the Elders* roughly contemporary and situating both works in the productive years of Floris's early career.<sup>18</sup> Although we know little about the structure of the artist's workshop at this point, the materials

of *Susanna and the Elders* are consistent with those Floris used in his early work. The oak panel support consists of four horizontal planks of oak marked on the reverse with three X-shaped joiners' marks – two large X marks and one smaller one – typical of panels prepared in Antwerp during this period.<sup>19</sup> In *Susanna and the Elders* Floris further alluded to his authorship by placing a large black fly on the leg of the reclining river god statue. This small bug, which appears as if hovering on the surface of the picture, alludes to ancient stories about artists who were so skillful that viewers of their works attempted to brush away such creatures, only to realize that the painter had outwitted them.<sup>20</sup> Floris added similar illusionistic devices to other early works, including *Fall of the Rebel Angels*, in which a small bee – symbol of industry – appears to hover on the thigh of one of the life-size demons placed close to eye level.<sup>21</sup> There are numerous references to paintings of *Susanna and the Elders* by Frans

Floris in early modern sources, but only two are known to have survived.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the present work, another *Susanna and the Elders* by Floris, datable to around 1560, belongs to the Ferroni collection of the Uffizi (fig. 7).<sup>23</sup> That painting, which may reflect Floris's knowledge of one of Tintoretto's famous depictions of the subject made just a few years earlier, presents a stark contrast to the artist's earlier version. Floris represents Susanna's luminous body crouched forward. Her posture derives from an ancient sculpture – the crouching Venus – which was long associated with modesty.<sup>24</sup> Aware of her onlookers, the heroine of Floris's later painting attempts to conceal her nudity from the two elders lurking immediately behind her. She is startled by their advance and stares directly out of the picture to confront the beholder, who stands in a position similar to that of the voyeuristic elders gazing at the unattainable body. Her vulnerability is underscored by the isolation of her opalescent flesh against the dark background. These pictorial devices serve to heighten the moral implications of looking at Susanna while at the same time bringing the subject's erotic charge dramatically to the fore. Comparing these two works reveals Floris's rapid development as an artist as well as his evolving understanding of the psychological complexities of this biblical narrative. The later version of *Susanna and the Elders* presents a more cohesive composition but also a darker vision of Susanna's situation, underscoring her innocence as well as her anguish.

<sup>22</sup> Versions are recorded in the collection of the widow Maria van Rommerswael, Dordrecht, 1674; at a sale in Amsterdam of 3 October 1708, and in 1775 sale of the collection of Charles Gambarini in London. A copy of the Florence painting is now in Sibiu. All of these are listed in C. VAN DE VELDE, *Frans Floris (1519/20-1570): Leven en Werken*, 2 vols., Brussels 1975, vol. 1, pp. 299-301.

<sup>23</sup> Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, Ferroni Collection; see WOUK, *Frans Floris*, op. cit., pp. 450-53.



**Fig. 10:** Frans Floris, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail of the signature

<sup>24</sup> The sculpture is now in Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 287; see P. PRAY BOBER and R. RUBINSTEIN, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 2010, pp. 67-68, no. 18. The statue was widely known in the Renaissance from an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi (Bartsch XIV, no. 313). See also F. HASKELL and N. PENNY, *Taste and the Antique*, London 1981, pp. 321-23, no. 86.

**TRINITY FINE ART**

15 Old Bond Street London W1S 4AX

telephone +44 (0)20 74934916

[info@trinityfineart.com](mailto:info@trinityfineart.com)

[www.trinityfineart.com](http://www.trinityfineart.com)