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## **Venite et Videte: Art and Architecture in Brussels as Agents of Change during the Counter Reformation, c. 1609-1659**

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## Summary

Whenever we enter one of Belgium's many old churches we are being overwhelmed by grandiose baroque altarpieces, sculptures, and lavish architectural decorations in gold and marble. Most of these artworks originated in the first half of the seventeenth century, a period when the Southern Low Countries had hardly recovered from the religious crisis of the sixteenth century and were plagued by war, famine and disease. From a modern day perspective it seems hard to understand why people, under these circumstances, would spend so much effort and resources on something as "useless" and "superfluous" as art and architecture. However, the function of art and the place of religion in society in the Southern Netherlands during the Counter-Reformation were altogether different from our modern world.

It is a commonplace to say that the post-Revolt Southern Netherlands witnessed an overwhelming Catholic revival, and almost a cliché to explain this revival by pointing at the efforts of state and church in bringing back the religiously confused population to Catholicism. Art and architecture, as well as other visual media, are often attributed a central role in such a process of persuasion. Recent historical studies, however, have emphasized the intense fear of God that held Early Modern society in its grip, leading to a revision of the traditional view of the Counter Reformation as a top-down process. This revision has important implications for the history of art, as it challenges us to reconsider the notion of religious art and architecture during the Counter Reformation as rhetorical "propaganda".

In the present dissertation I approach the religious art patronage in the Catholic South from a perspective informed by recent developments in ethnography and anthropology. I propose to redefine the "baroque piety" of religious patronage that generated works of art and architecture not as a strategy to persuade (in a rhetorical way), but to negotiate with the divine in a continuous process of reconciliation, aiming to regain divine grace. Put in anthropological terms, works of art served as ritual interfaces to enter into negotiation with the divine. This negotiation with God took place within networks of social relations (nexuses) in which art and architecture functioned as agents of change (A. Gell 1998).

I will develop this thesis in a series of case studies of religious art patronage in the Habsburg court city of Brussels by analysing the "art nexus"

in which artworks were embedded and establishing the various types of agency implied in them, thus reconstructing the original function of artworks in their historical context. The thesis is divided thematically in three chapters, based on the traditional catholic distinction between three types of devotion, as established in the decree of the 25<sup>th</sup> session of the Council of Trent (1563). Like the Tridentine decree, which does not deal primarily with art but with how believers can establish contact with the divine, my thesis takes the devotional categories of saints, relics, and images as the point of departure for an investigation of case studies which are selected on the basis of their function as marker of change or transformation (according to contemporaries).

The introduction illustrates how people in seventeenth century Belgium experienced a situation of crisis, as in the case of the Siege of Valenciennes in 1656, and how they tried to influence the course of events through religious actions, which include the use of artworks. It perfectly illustrates the way art was made and functioned as a way to sway the divine.

The first chapter focuses on “the intercession and invocation of saints”, examining the foundation of the Brussels Minim convent on the site of a former brothel (1621). The result of a complex exchange of interests between the monks, the city Magistrate, and the court, this event was propagated with a moralizing rhetoric of change, tapping into the widespread fears of the wrath of God over the sin of promiscuity. By invoking the Virgin Mary as patron, the various agents involved in the foundation hoped to muster support for a process of urban renewal. Because of lack of sufficient funding, however, the architectural project of a new church did not materialize as planned. Nonetheless, two cults were promoted at the monastery, each directed at a particular audience: that of the Holy Guardian Angel and of the Virgin of Loreto and her Holy House, replicating the sacred original in great detail. The case offers insights into how the monks and their patrons propagated the reform of sexual morals through the cult of saints and for what purpose.

The second chapter deals with “the legitimate use of images”. It examines the altar of the confraternity of St. Dorothea in the Carmelite church (1640), which was decorated in the middle of winter by temporarily transforming it with a multitude of flowers, alluding to the Saint’s miracle of having summoned flowers from heaven just before her martyrdom. I investigate how ornamenting the altar by means of innovative horticultural

techniques, through an international network of horticultural experts, was used to astonish the viewer as with a miracle, while calling forth the divine mission of the conquest of Nature by Man's ingenuity and so restoring the ideal of Eternal Spring. Moreover, by manipulating Art's greatest rival Nature, the altar was a part of Counter-Reformation preoccupations with the nature of religious art and illusion. The case makes clear that the spectacle (and the specific agency of flowers) not only highlighted the saint's conversion narrative and the patronage of its donor in various ways, but also implicitly addressed the doubts and concerns about religious images that had arisen during the reformation.

In the third chapter I discuss the "honour paid to relics". Thanks to the close ties of the Capuchin monk Carolus van Arenberg to the Holy See, the order obtained eight complete bodies of Early Christian martyrs from the Roman catacombs. While the relics were being transported to the Netherlands, a fitting new church was built (funded by the Arenberg family), to be promoted as "mausoleum" for these relics (1652). After a procession of *translatio*, they were displayed in an elaborate artistic setting, which nonetheless aimed to highlight the order's love of poverty. The case illustrates the various roles of this new cult and the art and architecture of the church in the political contexts of the court, the rivalries between the orders, and the emergence of Jansenism.

The in-depth examination of these three cases will show that studying the function of religious art and architecture in terms of agency reveals much about the complex processes of societal transformation and celestial reconciliation in which they played a central role.