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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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### **Citation**

Nagelsmit, E. D. (2014, October 7). *Venite et Videte: Art and Architecture in Brussels as Agents of Change during the Counter Reformation, c. 1609-1659*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/28993>

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



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**Title:** Venite & videte : art and architecture in Brussels as agents of change during the counter reformation, c. 1609-1659

**Issue Date:** 2014-10-07

## Conclusion

XLIV.

Victorielied op het ontset van Valencyn.<sup>827</sup> Victory song on the relief of Valenciennes  
(anno 1656)

[...]

Lof sijn hoocheyt, met prins de Condé:	Praise his highness, with the prince of Condé:
Caracen die oock verwon,	Caracena who also prevailed,
Prins de Ligne, en duc d'Aerschot mé.	Prince of Ligne, and duke of Aarschot as well
Wittenberg, Hennin, Trelon,	[counts of] Wittenberg, Hennin, Trelon
Vromen Hans Verkeest,	Pious Hans Verkest, <sup>828</sup>
Die daer vocht om 't meest,	Who fought to be the most,
En met eeren waeght sijn bloet.	And with honour ventured his blood.
Geeft dan Godt den Heer	Render then to God the Lord
Lof, prijs en al d'eer,	Laud, praise and all the honour,
Die het suer soo keert in soet!	Who thus turns the acid into sweetness!

“Render laud, praise, and all honour to God, who turns sour into sweet!” The Dutch saying “after sour will be sweet” is still used widely today, for instance by politicians when introducing painful measures. Probably deriving from the (Calvinist!) rimed version of Psalm 77<sup>829</sup>, it refers directly to the hope for better times after the wrath of God has been exercised: come and see!

For the noblemen of seventeenth century Brussels, who had put their trust in God during the siege of Valenciennes and distinguished themselves with their bravery and loyalty to Spain, such as the dukes of Aarschot-Arenberg and Bournonville, the rewards were abundant: Arenberg was appointed general and later governor<sup>830</sup>, Bournonville received the title of

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<sup>827</sup> J.F. Willems, ed., *Oude Vlaemsche Lieder* (Ghent: Gyselynck, 1848), 101–103.

<sup>828</sup> Hans (or Hendrik) Verkest, a farmer's son who was made Field Marshall-General (Maestro de campo) of the Spanish cavalry, died in the battle and was hailed as the hero of Valenciennes.

<sup>829</sup> *Statenvertaling*: “Zou God Zijn gena vergeten?/Nooit meer van ontferming weten?/Heeft Hij Zijn barmhartigheer/Door Zijn gramschap afgesneen?"/'k Zei daarna; “Dit krenkt mij 't leven,/Maar God zal verandering geven;/d'Allerhoogste maakt het goed;/Na het zure geeft Hij 't zoet.”

<sup>830</sup> Philippe-François d'Arenberg acquired much honour at the Battle of Valenciennes; as one of the first to break through the French lines, he was shot through his hat. In gratitude of his service he was promoted by Philip IV to general on 17 August 1656. In 1660 he was nominated *ca* general of the Flemish navy, and in 1663 grand bailiff and governor and general of Hai. “Philippe-François d'Arenberg,” *Biographie Nationale* 1 (1866): 406–9.

prince.<sup>831</sup> Four years earlier, as we have seen, the duke of Arenberg had donated eight altarpieces for the Brussels Capuchin church, and in celebration of the victory his uncle Father Carolus now staged another magnificent procession with the eight Roman martyrs. Always keen to promote the honour of his family and his order, Carolus went to great lengths to make sure that the Capuchin procession of thanksgiving outshone all others.<sup>832</sup> It illustrates once more to what extent the relics of the saints were seen as active agents in imploring divine protection and it shows, together with the poem cited above, how closely aristocratic and military honour were conceived in relation to piety.

The city of Brussels differed from other cities in the Southern Netherlands, in the sense that it offered a unique platform for patrons to exhibit their piety in the context of a sacred court, under the auspices of the pious and divinely ordained Habsburg rulers, who represented and performed the heavenly order on earth. The frequent interference of the Infante Isabella in matters of the regular orders evinces a strong concern for keeping up this image, not in the last place in order to implore celestial benediction.

All three case studies show how religious and political motives did not just align but were virtually identical during the period of the Counterreformation. In this society individuals and groups tried to pursue their interests unscrupulously and often strongly resisted change. The continuous intrigues of the clergy show just how difficult it was for the ecclesiastical authorities to maintain discipline, let alone achieve reform, or any change for the better. Yet the belief in the power of visual imagery and architecture to transform the viewer was immense. Not only and primarily by triumphantly proclaiming doctrinal truth, but through playing on the viewer's awareness of his/her (humble) position in relation to a divine prototype, and within the temporal frame of the history of salvation: by pointing out legitimacy claims (in response to an underlying crisis of legitimacy) and by appealing to virtue (thus transcending religious divide). Artworks were not only intended to promote change in behavior, but also to

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<sup>831</sup> Alexandre II de Bournonville received the title of prince, dd. 12 September 1656 by Philip IV as reward for his role in defending Valenciennes. Alphonse Wauters, *Histoire des environs de Bruxelles, ou description historique des localités qui formaient autrefois l'annexion de cette ville* (Brussels: Vanderauwera, 1851), 119.

<sup>832</sup> Callaey d'Anvers, *La vie religieuse et familiale en Belgique au XVIIe siècle*, 291–293.

enter into negotiation with the divine. These were two sides of the same medal. The motto of the Minim Mathieu Martin's *Triomphe de la Verité*: "consolation des catholiques, confusion des hérétiques" is telling, as it expresses both hope and fear: also many Catholics were confused, and in need of consolation. After iconoclasm, the attribution of agency to artworks was no longer self-evident. One way of countering the Protestant critique on the cult of saints and the veneration of relics and images was by redirecting attention toward metaphorical rather than physical idols.

Thus, in chapter I we encountered the protecting Virgin Mary as a patron of change, taking the place of the false idol Venus. The Minims offered models of vanquishing the idols of the World in order to preclude sins and heresy, and thus aimed to repel the Wrath of God. This fear of divine anger partly motivated and generated the patronage of art and architecture, which was intended to intervene in society, as well as in heaven. With the flower festival in chapter II, Jan Baptist Masius taught his contemporaries that instead of worshiping the false idol Flora (i.e. money and speculation), the members of the confraternity followed the example of the stoical St Dorothea and Theophilus, the cynic-turned-saint. For them, the divine wrath had already been executed in the form of the tulip crash (and perhaps the death of their children), and was to be answered by piety. Chapter III showed how Carolus van Arenberg did all he could to safeguard his religion, promote the honour of his family, enforce the rule of his order, in spite of great difficulties and resistance. For him, the wrath of God manifested itself in the loss of royal favour of his family. Only after he obtained the Roman relics, the necessary momentum was achieved to put his mother's great legacy to use, and intervene in the sacred landscape of Brussels in order to implore grace.

The diversity of sources on which this study is based invites to reflect on the ways in which artworks may be properly contextualized. A thick description of the historical situation in which they were meant to function is necessarily limited in scope and bound to the availability of sources. Yet again, in each case this contextual approach through the lens of the art nexus resulted in unexpected, "collateral" findings, which would not have been made if traditional methods had been applied, since they do not put equal emphasis on the various actors in their mutual social relations.

The manuscript archival sources of wills, donations, pious foundations, and authorizations, which formed the basis of chapter I provided a revealing glimpse into the intentions and expectations of individual patrons. The complementary government ordinances showed the anxieties of contemporaries and the way society tried to deal with them. The sermons and catechisms by the monks threw light on the rhetoric they used to compel their audiences and influence their behaviour. The propagandistic chorography by Sanderus highlighted the good intentions of the monks, their patrons, and the beneficial influence of the Minim foundation on its surroundings, as well as the miraculous effects believers could expect from their devotion. And last but not least, images and descriptions of prints, paintings, and buildings helped to gain insight into the imaginary conceits and spatial settings of the artistic and architectural interventions. Together they provide a comprehensive image of their transformative agency. In the process, we discovered the existence of what was probably a donation by a supremely prominent patron: the prince of Condé, and identified the depicted figures as his children.

In light of the ambiguity of the Minims' seemingly contradictory intentions, the Santa Casa replica was the most effective instrument of change: it displayed no art, just the mere miracle of the Incarnation. Its spatial mobility and formal reproducibility mobilized piety through the agency of space. The resulting sanctification promised an antidote to the wrath of God. Looking at this situation in terms of agency reveals more complex historical realities and processes than an approach in terms of rhetoric or propaganda would. Within the nexus of social relations, the monks found a place where they could be indemnified from the social and spatial context and at the same time act as agents in it. Thus, approaching the historical sources from the perspective of agency helps to elucidate, rather than flatten and simplify historical processes of change.

In chapter II the vicissitudes of the Carmelite order and the description of the church and feast by Sanderus provided the point of departure for an examination of the intended reception of the altar decorations, which are put vividly before the eyes by means of prints, drawings, and paintings. We rediscovered a ricordo of a lost altarpiece in a private collection, and managed to connect it to an international network of horticultural proto-science within the republic of letters, as well as to contemporary historical events like the

tulip crash, and to the parallel patronage of *converso* patricians in Antwerp. By contextualizing the textual and visual sources with related sources like inventories, pamphlets, plays, confraternity books and contemporary publications on horticulture, as well as documentation about the patron, it became possible to reframe and reinterpret his patronage as a particularly rich and layered example of the multiple functions of art in the context of devotion and pious behaviour.

As I hope to have shown, collecting art or flowers was no disinterested hobby; religious patronage even less so. The miraculous flowers indicated the reward for unshakable faith: paradise and Eternal Spring. Less durable, but more salient than the paintings by De Crayer, this agency of the altar was exerted especially by the flowers and oranges, through sensory wonder, as the eyewitness account of Sanderus indicates. Instead of being a delightfully seductive, yet “deceptive and treacherous” illusion, as Protestant critics accused painting of being, these flowers were miraculous but nonetheless real. The other possible functions and agencies of the altar, relating to the particular concerns of the monks, the confraternity, and the patron, are not in opposition with this; on the contrary, considering the altar as the centre of different art nexuses shows their mutual coherence and contingency. Following Alfred Gell, we may look at the altar as a collection of “man-traps”, by which different types of viewers are caught according to their specific characteristics or pattern of behaviour.

Finally, the case of chapter III used the well-documented history of the Capuchin order and the political agenda of the patron as entry into the complex of architectural and artistic interventions that took place in the context of the translation of relics from Rome to Brussels. We rediscovered altarpieces and other paintings from a lost church, established their place in it, and reconstructed and reinterpreted their function in it, while relating this function to the international political agendas of the patron. The combination of visual and textual sources all pointed at the concern to provide credible and tangible proof of the validity of the newly instituted cult, to frame it in existing models of sainthood, while exemplifying the necessity of staying true to the order’s ideals of poverty and humility.

The building and artworks reflected primarily one concern: *to invoke* the intercession of the saints, *by honouring* their relics, *through the legitimate use* of images. Thus, it shows how the cult of saints, the

veneration of relics and images were fully intertwined. Just like the sacred measurements of the Loreto chapel, the historical “facts” of text and image found on the martyrs’ tombs not only legitimized the cult, but functioned as “relics” in and of themselves. Artworks depicting these histories legitimized the relics, while the relics legitimized the use of art. At the same time the depicted confessors (officially canonized) legitimized the martyrs, and the martyrs legitimized the confessors, which legitimized the monks and ultimately the Arenberg family. Finally, the overtly displayed poverty of the capuchins legitimized the use art and architecture for these purposes.

As magnificent as some of the art of the Counter Reformation may be, it rarely aimed to convert viewers by means of visual beauty. Instead, my research suggests that the merits of Counter-Reformation art and architecture as conceived by those who commissioned and used these works of art, lay outside the artistic domain. The primary concern of patrons, in light of which we may also see aesthetic qualities, was art’s agency of change. Although it is impossible to measure this change, the agency-perspective has challenged us to look anew at the art of the Counter Reformation, and reconsider its function in historical terms. The artworks and buildings in this thesis ran parallel to, yet defied the canon, reshifting the focus to a different role of art, as part of a larger system of pious behaviour in which aesthetic values are taking a less central place.

As I hope to have shown in this thesis, the religious performances that were staged in Counter Reformation Brussels are more than just curious reminiscences of a distant past, and their interest to us goes well beyond that of local history. The way people tried to influence their fate through these acts of faith can teach us a lot about the human fears, hopes and aspirations that are still very much alive in today’s society. The people of seventeenth century Brussels seem to have been confident that their religious patronage had the desired effect, if not in the present, then at least *sub specie aeternitatis*, as this poem by the Italian physician Jean André Moniglia who visited Brussels in 1668 indicates:<sup>833</sup>

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<sup>833</sup> Battistini, “Le voyage en Belgique du comte Alexandre Segni de Florence en 1666,” 95.

Di quivi ci partimmo addirittura  
nel convento de' Padri Gesuiti  
fatto con nobilissima struttura.

From thence we departed straight on  
into the convent of the Jesuits  
built as a most noble structure.

La Chiesa è maestosa, e son guarniti  
gl'altari riccamente ed in cantina  
han vini di più sorte e saporiti.

The church is majestic, and adorned  
richly are the altars and in the cellar  
they have a wide variety of tasty wines.

Ne i chiostrì per delizia si cammina  
in osservar pitture e nelle scuole  
spiegano all'uso lor buona dottrina.

In the cloisters to delight we walk  
looking at paintings and in the schools  
they explain to use their good doctrine.

Mentre il Rettor con placide parole  
meco venia trattando ivi discerno  
vago giardino esposto ai rai del sole.

While the Rector with calm words  
bids me welcome, there I discern a  
fair garden exposed to the rays of the sun.

Mi rassembrò benchè di mezzo inverno  
pien di fior, pien di fronde e pien di frutto  
di bella primavera onore eterno.

To me it looks to be though mid-winter  
full of flowers, of leaves and of fruit  
of beautiful springtime's eternal honour.

Ed ancorch'il paese sia destrutto  
Per loro è delizioso, in conclusione,  
Gli buoni Padri stanno ben per tutto.

And even though the country is destroyed  
For them it is delicious, in conclusion,  
The good Fathers are well provided.

Aby Warburg's motto, adapted from Goethe's *Faust*, goes: "Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern, Athen – Oraibi – alles Vettern" (It is an old story: Athens, Oraibi, all are cousins); the primitive Hopi and classical Greece are kindred. As the serpent ritual is a danced causality, the representative of spring is a representative of the causality of sacred history. Those who do not believe it are invited to come and see.

