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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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Propositions Eelco Nagelsmit

1. Pious anxiety over the wrath of God was one of the main motivations behind the massive surge of religious art patronage in the in the post-Revolt Southern Netherlands.
2. The Counter-Reformation was primarily a movement to change society: through the cultivation of piety, God was to be placated. Yet contemporaries conceived and perceived *change* not exclusively as a result of human actions, but also as sign of divine providence. In their eyes, God was the most important agent.
3. In the Spanish Netherlands, the city of Brussels was the primary platform for the nobility and administrative elite to promote their political-religious agendas, because the prestige and effluence of the “sacred court” (its natural princes, its piety, and e.g. its relics) offered these patrons an increased range of their efforts.
4. During the Counter-Reformation, legitimacy claims were the central means of strengthening the ties between the faithful and the Church, in response to a need for self-affirmation and historical justification in the context of the history of salvation. These claims were complemented by appeals to virtue, aiming to transform and unite individual believers with God. For propaganda to be effective it should be highly palatable.
5. Rather than rhetorical means of persuasive communication, Counter-Reformation artworks acted as interfaces between the believer and God: they were deemed instrumental in processes of negotiation and reconciliation with the divine. In this sense, and contrary to modern instrumental notions of art and religion (e.g. as means to promote status claims, representation, propaganda), works of art and architecture acted as agents of change. Since contemporaries attributed this power (agency) to artworks, we should also consider them as such, if we aim to study them in historical terms.
6. In the early modern period the making of art, or the cultivation of flowers, or the practice of natural sciences were no disinterested pastimes: instead, they all evinced of the same concern to achieve contact with the divine.
7. For Aristotle, there is less truth in history than in poetry (On Poetics): “poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry states more universal things whereas history states particular things”. According to Horace, “as is painting, so is poetry” (The Art of Poetry).
Practising art history involves studying this poetical truth: the “kinds of things that could happen” (*hoia an genoito*), or in other words the universal aims of a period.
8. Art historians should not only try to understand what contemporaries found beautiful, but also what they found good and why (*kalo-agathia*). Lack of attention for the latter aspect has often hampered the understanding of religious art, and especially that of the Counter Reformation. This has consequences for a correct interpretation of individual works of art, and for the canon.