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Bussels, S.P.M.; Alexander, G.; Gilby, E.; Marr, A.

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The Places of Early Modern Criticism

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GAVIN ALEXANDER, EMMA GILBY, AND
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The Wondrous Town Hall of Amsterdam

Laudatory Poems on the Impact of Art and Architecture

Stijn Bussels

In 1655 Amsterdam's new Town Hall was inaugurated.¹ To accompany the occasion, many writers published laudatory poems on the building. Everard Meijster, an eccentric squire from Amersfoort, wrote a laudatory poem in the form of a pastoral play in which the Olympian gods extensively praise the building as a pure wonder.² At the end of the play, the discussion ends abruptly when the sculpted reliefs in the Town Hall's tribunal (*Vierraad*), representing severe punishments from the Greek, Roman, and biblical past, bring Jupiter to utter despair. These decorations are so wonderful—at the same time horribly lifelike and startlingly beautiful—that he loses his common sense and starts to believe that Titans and other hellish creatures will storm Mount Olympus.

Jupiter's reaction to the decorations is extreme, but many of the other laudatory poems on the Town Hall describe a comparably disturbing combination of dismay and delight to portray the wondrous character of the building. The use of wonder in the poems builds on two traditions.³ First, there is the Graeco-Roman tradition of describing art and architecture that evokes wonder (the Greek *thaumaston* or Latin *admiratio*). These artworks and buildings can be fictitious, such as the Sun

Palace which Ovid describes as highly elevated (*sublimis*), or real, such as the Seven Wonders of the World, called *thamata* or *spectacula* in Greek and Latin, emphasizing their extraordinary visual impact. All these wonders inspired delight thanks to their magnificence (*megalo-prepia* or *magnificentia*), but also fear (*ekplexis* or *stupor*), that is a fear of losing control due to their sharp contrast with normal everyday life. Second, there is the theological tradition of the fear of God (*sacer horror*). This concept was appropriated from ancient religious literature dealing with contact with the divine power (*numen*) to refer to the sensation of respect mixed with fear and wonder felt in the presence of the Christian God. The contact with the divine power was believed to be unmediated, but was often related to reading the Bible, entering a church, looking at religious art, or witnessing religious festivities.⁴

This essay will look at how the seventeenth-century laudatory poems on the Town Hall bring these two traditions of wonder together to arrive at a better understanding of the overwhelming impact of art and architecture. The laudatory poems serve as places of criticism, in the sense that they are *loci* for observing how seventeenth-century criticism relied on the rich concept of wonder.

By concentrating on laudatory poems on the Amsterdam Town Hall, I will furthermore look at the young Dutch Republic as a place of criticism. The Republic has not often been considered in scholarship as a breeding ground for theoretical thought on art and architecture, but recent research on the early history of the sublime has shown that a century before Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, thinking about the impact of art and architecture had bloomed in the Netherlands thanks to the revival of ancient rhetorical and poetical thought, such as (pseudo-)Longinus' treatise *Peri hypsous*. Humanists from the Republic, with Daniel Heinsius and Franciscus Junius among the most prominent scholars, were forerunners in using this treatise to develop thinking about overwhelming art.⁵ They influenced many artists and writers, both in the Netherlands and in the rest of Europe, including painters such as Rubens and Van Dyck, and writers such as Racine, Corneille, Jonson, Milton, and Dryden.⁶ In what follows, I will not focus

¹ For a recent bibliographical overview, see Pieter Vlaardingertbroek, *Het paleis van de Republiek: Gechiedenis van het stadhuis van Amsterdam* (Zwolle: W Books, 2011); and for a thorough discussion in English: Katharine Fremantle, *The Baroque Town Hall of Amsterdam* (Utrecht: Hanting, Dekker & Gumbert, 1959).

² E.M. [Everard Meijster], *Heemlen Land-Spel. Of Godes Kout, De Amersfoortse Landdoozen. Bevatende den hypermetrischen Opstal van 't Nieuwe Stad-Huis* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1655).

³ For an introduction to the concept of wonder as used in the medieval and early-modern period, see Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park (eds.), *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998). For current and past work on the concepts of 'wonder', 'awe', and 'overwhelming emotions' in early modern literary theory going beyond the Dutch context, see among other publications: David Sletky's discussion of Montaigne in *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005); James I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity* (Cambridge: The English Renaissance (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988)); James V. Mirollo, 'The Platonic of the Marvelous', in *Wonders, Marvels and Monsters in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Peter B. Brown (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), pp. 24–44. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for making these suggestions.

⁴ The concept will be discussed more thoroughly later in this essay. Therefore, I restrict myself here to one reference: Ralph Delmonico and Annick Delmas, *Sacer Horror: The Construction and Experience of the Sublime in the Jesuit Festivities of the Early Seventeenth-Century Southern Netherlands*, in the special issue 'The Sublime and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art' of the *Journal of the History of Art* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2016), DOI: 10.1017/jah.2016.82.9.

⁵ Cf. the special issue 'The Sublime in Early Modern Theories of Art and Literature', in Stijn Bussels, Bram Van Oostveldt, and Wieneke Jansen (eds.), *Lias: Journal of Early Modern Intellectual Culture and Its Sources*, 43.2 (2016), see the introduction and contributions of Colette Nativel and Wieneke Jansen.

⁶ Stijn Bussels, 'Theories of the Sublime in the Dutch Golden Age: Franciscus Junius and Hendrick Vondel & Petrus Witsen', in *History of European Ideas*, May 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2016.1161532>; and the special issue 'The Sublime and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art' (see n. 4). Cf. Thijl Weststeijn, *Art and Antiquity in the Netherlands and Britain: The Vermacular Arcadia of Franciscus Junius (1591–1677)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

on the use of the term 'sublime', nor on the dissemination of *Peri hypsion*, but by looking at the use of the concept of wonder I hope it becomes clear that the Republic was a most obvious place for the early reception of Longinus.⁷

Laudatory Poems on Art and Architecture

I will first look at the centuries-old use of wonder in descriptions of art and architecture. The history of these descriptions is only partially known and further research still needs to be done.⁸ With a rudimentary sketch I will show that the seventeenth-century laudatory poem on art and architecture relies on a rich tradition in which the wondrous splendour of artworks and buildings is emphasized.

The laudatory poem on art and architecture uses two narrative strategies that the ancients called *ekphrasis* and *periegesis*.⁹ *Ekphrasis* is a description of something, and while in the ancient world there were no restrictions on its subject, there were many *ekphrases* of works of art and architecture. *Periegesis* is a verbal guided tour of an area that very often focuses attention on large public and private buildings and their decorations, as well as monuments, temples, and their idols. These rhetorical strategies are found in several key genres of writing.

The very first recorded uses of these narrative strategies concern fictitious, often heavenly art and architecture. Homer's *ekphrases* of the shield of Achilles (*Iliad*, 18.438ff.) and the palace of Alcinous (*Odyssey*, 7.81ff.) are famous early examples. Latin poets took over this tradition and Ovid's description of the Sun Palace is a most influential highlight of the genre (*Metamorphoses* 2.1ff.). In the Middle Ages, heavenly artworks and buildings are described in chivalric romance, such as von

Scharfenberg's *Jüngere Titirel*, which contains a description of the Temple of the Grail. This tradition feeds into later descriptions of buildings such as Chaucer's House of Fame, Marot's Temple of Cupid, and Tasso's Palace of Armida.

An important element of these fictional descriptions is the expression of wonder in contrast to everyday life. Man is overwhelmed, stupefied, and made ecstatic by the exceptional splendour brought before his eyes. Moreover, these fictional descriptions of wondrous art and architecture often involve a certain morality, and are often linked with discussions of how to relate to that which is extremely high above us, which Ovid calls *sublimis*. The Roman poet discusses human reactions to the sublime Sun Palace by contrasting the morally negative *hubris* with the positive virtue *humilis*. Ovid learns that Phaethon's ecstasy, elicited by the Sun Palace, makes him haughty, which ultimately leads to his death.¹⁰

Another influential genre for our laudatory poems is that of the *laus urbium*, in which panegyric accompanies the *ekphrasis* and *periegesis*.¹¹ Ever since Herodotus' description of Babylon in *The Persian Wars* (1.178.2), cities have been highly praised for their extraordinariness, and claims made that no other city has the same richness or grandeur. Ancient examples stimulated the flourishing of the *laus urbium* in the early modern period, the best-known examples of which are Chrysoloras' description of Rome, Sachs' German city praises, and Guicciardini's laudations of Netherlandish cities. They started from the ancient love for praising cities: cities were deemed wonders thanks to flourishing commerce or exceptional magnitude. The *laudes urbium* of the early modern period do not give a neutral account of what can be seen in a city, but accentuate it as a marvel and relate this marvelousness to the competence of the city's municipality and the dynamic of its citizens. There are many examples of leaders paying poets to write a laudatory poem on their city. This makes it extremely difficult to see where wonder as an experience elicited by art and architecture stops, and where wonder as a propagandistic device to enforce the position of a patron begins.

Ekphrases of actual works of art and architecture constitute another influential genre that can hardly be overestimated. These include classical authors' praises of the Seven Wonders of the World.¹² Originally meant to point ancient travellers to actual destinations and what would be the ultimate highlights of their journeys around the world, by the early modern period the Wonders of the World had been lost or destroyed. But nevertheless, the idea of them still served as a fixed and

⁷ For the importance of the concept of wonder and the related concept of the marvelous in the seventeenth century, see Joy Kessell (ed.), *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art–Dartmouth College, 1991); R. J. W. Evans and Alexander Marr (eds), *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁸ J. Elmer, 'The Rhetoric of Buildings in the *De Aedificiis* of Procopius', in *Art and Text in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 33–57 (pp. 36–43); Paul Friedländer, 'Johannes von Gaza, Pseudo-Silvianus und Prokopios von Gaza: Kunstbeschreibungen jüdisch-antiker Zeit (Hildesheim: Olms, 1912)', pp. 1–104; Gilbert Kratz, *Das Architekturgedicht* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1988); Carole Newlands, 'Architectural Ekphrasis in *Transformations*', ed. Theodore D. Papangheli, Stephen J. Harrison, and Stavros Panagoulidis (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 55–78; Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Ruth Webb, The Aesthetics of Sacred Space: Narrative, Metaphor and Motion in Ekphrases of Church Buildings* (DOP 53 (1999), 59–74 (pp. 65–8).

⁹ Sandrine Dubé, 'Ekphrasis et épopée: la description antique comme parcours', in *Dire l'évidence: Philosophie et rhétorique antiques*, ed. Carlos Lévy and Laurent Pernot (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp. 157–78; J. Elmer, 'Genres of Ekphrasis', *Ramus*, 31 (2002), 1–18; Pausanias, *Travel and Memory* (Ruth Webb, 'Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre', *Word and Image*, 15 (1999), 7–18 (pp. 11–15).

¹⁰ For Ovid's use of the concepts *sublimis*, *hubris*, and *humilis* and their reception in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, see Busseles, 'Theories of the Sublime', esp. 5–11.

¹¹ Laurent Pernot, *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1993), vol. 1, 178–214.

¹² Peter A. Clayton and Martin J. Price (eds), *The Seven Wonders of the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

authoritative reference for extreme possibilities of the display of power in periods of political, economic, and cultural greatness.¹³ Relating new art and architecture to the ancient wonders involved a praise of their own time as a new Golden Age. As well as the Graeco-Roman tradition there are also biblical descriptions of real and wondrous buildings, the most influential being the description of the Temple of Solomon, which in the medieval and early modern periods underlies the design of many churches.¹⁴

These three closely related traditions—descriptions of fictitious art and architecture, the *laus urbium*, and descriptions of art and architecture in the real world—were extremely popular in the seventeenth century. This can be seen in Milton's fantastic Pandemonium, Grell's praise of Munich, Calderón's glorification of the Retiro Palace, and La Fontaine's tribute to Versailles. We may also place the country house poem in this context, which, influenced by ancient authors such as Pliny the Younger, flowered in England (and elsewhere) thanks to Jonson and Marvell.¹⁵ And also the *Descriptio templi*, which has important medieval predecessors in Eusebius, Paulus Silentiarius, and Suger of Saint Denis, but which only developed fully as a genre in the seventeenth century.¹⁶

Laudatory Poems on the Amsterdam Town Hall

During the Dutch Golden Age, this rich tradition of art and architectural descriptions provided many *topoi* and a fixed set of passions with which authors could think about the overwhelming impact of art and architecture. Thanks to the large quantity and exceptional quality of Dutch laudatory poems on art and architecture, of which Constantijn Huygens's country-house poem *Hofwijck* is one of the most famous examples, we can say they enjoyed a true Golden Age.¹⁷ Research has brought more than one hundred poems on the Amsterdam Town Hall to light, written from the 1640s, when the first plans for the building were made, up until

the end of the seventeenth century, with a surge around the inauguration of the building in 1655.¹⁸ The fact that several poems were written before the Town Hall was constructed indicates once more that the use of the concept of wonder does not have to originate from actual experiences, and can be used as propaganda to legitimate large socio-political projects.

The diversity of the laudatory poems on the Town Hall is considerable, ranging in size from the very first poem, a couplet by Mattheus Tensnagel in 1641,¹⁹ to Vondel's poem of 1,377 verses and Meyster's pastoral play (both composed in 1655).²⁰ Nevertheless, the poets did exercise a strong influence on each other. Meyster even mentions Vondel's poem explicitly in his own as an example to follow.²¹ Moreover, just like Vondel's poem, Meyster's poem was partly written as a legitimization of the high cost of the construction. Both put forward the idea that the building was a necessary visualization of the magnificence of the city and its government.

Huygens's Wonder

The prominent politician and poet Constantijn Huygens wrote one of the most famous poems on the Town Hall for the occasion of its inauguration:

Illustrious founders of world's eighth wonder,
Of so many stones above, as so much wood under,
Of so much costliness, so artfully made,
Of so much delightfulness, brought to so much benefit;
God, who gave you power and splendour with reason,
God gave you this building of reason and delight
To show who you are, and, as I include everything,
Prosperity will be eternally inside, and calamity eternally outside.
Even if it is devised that these marble walls
Of earth's extremity cannot endure,
And, should it become necessary that a ninth appears
To denote the descendant of the eighth wonder,

¹³ John Romer and Elizabeth Romer (eds), *The Seven Wonders of the World: A History of the Modern Imagination* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1995).

¹⁴ William James Hamilton and David Ralph Seely, *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

¹⁵ Recent bibliography in Anne M. Myers, *Literature and Architecture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), ch. 2.

¹⁶ Ulrich Schlegelmilch, *Descriptio templi: Architektur und Fest in der lateinischen Dichtung des konfessionellen Zeitalters* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2002).

¹⁷ Research on the laudatory poem in the Dutch Republic is not extensive. For Huygens's country house poem, see Willemien de Vries, *The Country Estate Immortalized: Constantijn Huygens's Hofwijck* (Washington, DC: Dunbarton Oaks, 1990). Gregor Weber, *Der Lobtopos des 'lebenden' Bildes* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1991) (starting with a long laudatory poem on painting by Jan Vos from 1654). Eddy Verhaan, *De woonplaats van de faam* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2011), concentrates on the *laudes urbium* in the seventeenth-century Republic.

¹⁸ This research is primarily done in the PhD project of Laura Plezier as part of the ERC starting grant 'Elevated Minds. The Sublime in the Public Arts in Seventeenth-Century Paris and Amsterdam', grant Cf. Stijn Bussels, 'Meer te verwonderen, als immer te doorgronden. Het Amsterdamse stadhuus, een overweldigende burgerspiegel', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 126.2 (2013), 234–48; and Marijke Spies, 'Minerva's commentaar', *Gedichten rond het Amsterdamse stadhuus, De zeventiende eeuw*, 9.1 (1993), 15–33.

¹⁹ Mattheus Gansneb Tensnagel, 'Op het toekomende Raedhuys', in *Verscheide Nederlandsche gedichten* (Amsterdam: Lodewijk Spilbeut, 1648), p. 225.

²⁰ Joost van den Vondel, *Inwyding van 't stadhuis te Amsterdam*, ed. Saskia Albrecht, Otto de Roijter, and Marijke Spies (Muidersburg: Countinhou, 1982).

²¹ Meyster, 75.

God, your fathers' God, God, your children's father,
 God so near to you, let Him be even nearer to those children,
 So that the city's prosperity can build and own a house
 Which surpasses the actual one, like the latter surpassed the previous.²²

First, Huygens defines the wonder of the Town Hall through its outward appearance.

The building is the eighth Wonder of the World thanks to its enormous size, its skillfulness, and artistry. Then, Huygens places this wonder in a historical perspective. Just as most of the ancient wonders are gone, so this eighth wonder could also disappear. Fortunately, as the actual Town Hall is a clear sign of God's favour for Amsterdam and her leaders, if the eighth should disappear, a ninth wonder would appear in Amsterdam soon after and thus God's favour of the city would be confirmed once again.

Huygens relates the Town Hall to two historiographical traditions: teleology and the concept of cyclic rise and fall. For centuries, architectural descriptions had been dominated by reference to the Wonders of the World. These wonders were often presented as transitory. Thus, wondrous architecture functioned as a means to ponder the passage of time: that even the greatest cultures inevitably perish and leave only ruins behind. Huygens reworks this trope by imbuing it with God's grace to conquer all misfortune. In this way he relates the concept and tradition of wonder to the Town Hall, but sees the architectural wonder only as a wonder of the second order. He encourages his audience to consider this wonder as a visual indication of a far greater wonder, namely God's benevolence. Everyone observing the magnificence, art, and skill displayed in the building has to relate this to the highest degree of wonder, God. Thus, wondrous architecture can bring the spectator close to God and His providence.

The ingenious way in which Huygens elevates the magnificence of the Town Hall to a divine level illustrates how thoroughly Dutch poets from the Golden Age dealt with a long tradition of art and architectural descriptions. Moreover, thanks to the rich information available regarding its distribution, Huygens's poem also illustrates how these Dutch laudatory poems had a broad reach over many years.²³

²² 'Doorlichte Stichteren van 's Werelds Achtste wonder, | Van soo veel Steens om hoogh op soo veel Houw van onder, | Van soo veel konstelicks soo konstelick verwocht, | Van soo veel heerlickheits tot soo veel nuts gebrocht | God, die U Macht en Pracht met Reden gaf te voeghen, | God ge' u in 't Gebouw met Onheil ewigh wijt. | 't 's oock soo voorspruck, dat dese Marmer-muren | Des Aerdrijcks uyterste niet hebben te verduren, | En, werdt het noodigh dat het Niegende verschijnt | Om 't Achtste Wonderwercks naemalich te zijn, | God, uwer Vaetren God, god uwer Kind'ren Vader, | God soo nae by U, zij die Kind'ren soo veel nader, | Dat iare Welvaert noch een Hujs bouw' en besitt' | Daer bij dit Nieuw staet als vol. 6, 106. Translation is mine.

²³ Stijn Busseels and Laura Plezier, 'Amsterdam sterlik verbonden met God. Het loflicht op het Amsterdamse stadhuis van Constantijn Huygens', *Spiegel der Letteren*, 59:2-3 (2017), 261-90.

At the inauguration of the Town Hall, Huygens offered his poem to the burgomasters. It was recited and distributed through a single-sheet print. Two years later, a friend of Huygens recited the poem for the re-appointment of burgomaster Huydecooper, who had been a great supporter of the new Town Hall. In this period, the burgomasters also commissioned a calligraphic version of the poem to be hung, richly framed, in their chamber. In 1666, the municipality bought a black marble plate engraved with the poem (Figure 9). The plate still hangs in the Town Hall, now the Royal Palace Amsterdam. Moreover, the poem was published several times in verse collections throughout the seventeenth century. The wide distribution of Huygens's poem is maybe not representative of all of the laudatory poems on the Town Hall, but it is not entirely exceptional either, as many of them were distributed as single-sheet prints, recited at festivities, and afterwards published in collections of poems.

Considering these laudatory poems as *places of criticism* we should note that they are different—in terms of distribution—to art theory *stricto sensu*. Whereas laudatory poems enjoyed great acclaim during civic festivities and as published works, publications of works of art theory were fewer in number and less widely distributed. They were distributed amongst those art lovers and artists who could afford to buy or had the connections to borrow the often extensive (and expensive) treatises. Art theory was also disseminated to those who were invited to the select parties of the artistic guilds and other artistic circles, in which art theory was presented and discussed orally.

Sacer Horror and Megaloprepeia

In his poem, Huygens does not deal with wonder as a passion that the building evokes, but relates wonder to characteristics of the building. The step to the wonder of the spectators, however, is not very big, as the reader of the poem is encouraged to go further than his/her mere observation and come to an understanding of God's grace. In another poem on the Town Hall, Huygens concentrates on the Carrara marble floor in the huge central hall (*Burgerzaal*) that depicts two globes and a part of the firmament (Figure 10). He describes how the ideal visitor is elevated from all everyday worries, floating in the highest regions.²⁴ Huygens ends this second poem with a clear warning: This imagining of elevation is a preview of heaven, which only belongs to the elect of God. Here, Huygens expresses a belief that is completely in line with the official doctrine of the

²⁴ Quoted in *Inwijdinge*, p. 154.



Figure 9. Elias Nooki, Engraved Stone with Huygens's Laudatory Poem, 1660, black marble, 100 × 90 cm, Amsterdam Museum KA 10259.

Gerreformeerde Kerk (Reformed Church): man can do nothing more than trust in God's grace, even if he is deeply aware of his sinfulness.²⁵

Many of the other laudatory poems also deal with the subject of God. They not only treat of His grace, but also His punishments. These poems connect with the centuries-old tradition of the *sacer horror*, the all-encompassing sensation of having contact with the highest force (*numen*), which cannot be rationally

²⁵ www.kb.nl/themas/nederlandse-poezie/dichters-uit-het-verleden/constantijn-huygens-1596-1687/de-godsdienst-van-huygens (consulted 25 August 2017).



Figure 10. Marble floor of the Citizens Hall.

Source: Stichting Koninklijk Paleis Amsterdam.

Photo: Erik and Petra Heemerg.

comprehended and which, paradoxically, both attracts and repels due to its magnificence. In the seventeenth-century Republic, writers from all religious groups, from the strict Calvinists to the underground Catholics, dealt with the concept.²⁶ One example is found in the Calvinist preacher Petrus Wittenwongel,

²⁶ For a recent study on the importance of the concept of *sacer horror* in the seventeenth-century Low Countries, see Dekoninck and Delfosse, 'Sacer Horror'. Their essay relies on Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige* of 1917.

who devotes an extensive chapter of his influential *Christelieke Huys-Houdinge* to the *Vreze Gods* (fear of God), in which he defines this sensation as so much more than just anxiety. He describes it as a combination of the contrasting passions of awe and anxiety, of delight and consternation.²⁷

In the Dutch laudatory poems on the Town Hall, this theological tradition of thinking about God's overwhelming magnificence meets the concept of wonder as found in descriptions of art and architecture. I will first briefly discuss how Dutch art theory used the concept of *sacer horror* as a starting point to construct the ideal reaction in the spectator of art or architecture. When in *De pictura veterum* of 1637 Franciscus Junius gathers a multitude of ancient concepts and statements to discuss painting and sculpture, he begins with a discussion of God as the supreme artist. God's creation, nature, inspires total awe; as Junius describes it, nature is 'all those things that above and about the earth doe terrifie the heart of man'. But he immediately adds that man is deeply attracted by 'all such wonders of God' (1.1.1).²⁸

Junius goes deeper into the paradoxical feeling of being terrified and attracted at the same time with the help of (pseudo-)Longinus' concept of *megalo-prepaeia* (magnificence). True magnificence can only be admired and occurs time and again in our thoughts:

...It is worth our labour to observe out of *Longinus* an infallible marke of true magnificence. 'That is great indeed,' sayth he, 'which doth still returne into our thoughts, which we can hardly or rather not at all put out of our minde, but the memorie of it sticketh close in us and will not rubbed out.'

(3.1.15, quoting Longinus' *Peri hypsous* 7.3)

The artist can bring his audience to extreme wonder, as he can express in his work the most vigorous forces that provoke delight and frenzy, ardour and fright. Junius also places the sublime experience of *megalo-prepaeia* next to an aesthetic gaze. As the ideal spectator may not be entirely swept away by magnificence, they also need to evaluate and respond to the artistry and skill on display. The ideal spectator—the one who has *intelligens judicium* ('intelligent judgement') and *eruditus oculus* ('learned eyes') at his/her disposal (1.5.3)—has to combine awe with a careful assessment of the artwork.

The discussion of such layered observations which combine ancient theoretical and Christian theological traditions is also a feature of many of the laudations on the Town Hall, but in relying on the ancient traditions of the descriptions of art and architecture, the poets are far more concrete than Junius, and unlike Junius' purely theoretical approach, they discuss specific responses to specific works of

art. They present spectators—from the abstract figure of the citizen to the Olympian gods—standing in total wonder before the magnificence of the Town Hall and its decorations. By discussing two poems—one by Vondel and one by Meyster—I will show how the expressions of wonder in the laudatory poems on the Town Hall can be related to the long tradition of thinking about wondrous art and architecture and to the theological tradition of *sacer horror*.

Vondel's Ideal Citizen

As mentioned previously, Vondel wrote a long poem for the inauguration of the Town Hall. To endorse the necessity of the costly building, the poet takes his readers on two tours through it. First, he walks through the building discussing the purpose of every room and explaining how the burghers can put these rooms to use. Then he repeats his tour, but looking at the building's decorations and explaining how they give a lesson in citizenship. Next, he moves on to a discussion of the practical utility of the building and the proliferation of exemplary citizenship. The poet legitimizes the Town Hall by showing how it presents Amsterdam in an exceptional position. The building is a tour de force and with it Amsterdam not only surpasses the most famous cities, such as Venice and Rome, but even approaches legendary, mythological, and divine enterprises. Once again the ancient Wonders of the World are invoked. When Vondel reaches the tribunal, for example, he expresses the belief that Chersiphon, the legendary architect of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, has come to help (l. 972).

Vondel deals with the impact of the wondrous tribunal most clearly in his discussion of Van Campen's painting of the Last Judgment there.²⁹ He describes how the painting *verschrickt* (terrifies) and *ontstelt* (dismays), as well as *verquickt* (freshens) (ll. 1086–7). Vondel also uses the trope of *sacer horror* to spread a political message as he relates the overwhelming bas-reliefs depicting ancient and biblical jurisdiction to the impact of the Last Judgment. First, he praises the works of art for their exceptional beauty and richness as *beeltcraet* (image-jewel[s]) (l. 1063), and then he discusses how they legitimize and reinforce the crucial tasks of the burgo-masters and aldermen: the judgement over life and death. The reliefs inspire fear by depicting severe punishment, but they also compel admiration because of the security of being optimally protected. Vondel's ideal spectator not only feels aesthetic joy in the tribunal, they also experience a moral delight that eventually everyone gets what they deserve. In this way Vondel uses the fear of God to explain the importance and authority of the Town Hall and the municipality.

²⁷ Buscel, 'Theories of the Sublime', pp. 8–10.

²⁸ I use Junius's own English translation *De pictura veterum*, according to the English translation (1630), ed. Keith Aldrich, Philipp Fehl, and Rensselaer Fehl (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁹ Although Van Campen painted this work especially for the tribunal, it would never hang there. This was most probably due to the fierce fight between Van Campen and the municipality. Eymert-Jan Gossens, *The Palace of Amsterdam: Treasure Wrought by Chisel and Brush* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2010), p. 19.

Besides the Wonders of the World and the fear of God, Vondel follows another centuries-old custom contrasting the wondrous building with everyday life. He is explicit that the building is more closely related to heaven than to earth and urges visitors to approach it with the utmost respect. Vondel's poem starts with a description of everyday life: a farmer is harvesting his grain and Amsterdam has its annual fair. Then the poet focuses on the exceptional bustle for the impending inauguration of the Town Hall. Vondel does not anticipate what the actual ceremony will contain, but elevates it to a metaphysical level: the crowd will witness a true wonder (see Figure 11 for a contemporary analogue). In the future tense, Vondel describes how, during its inauguration, the Town Hall will be like a

bride sitting enthroned in the centre of the macrocosm while the stars are dancing around her (ll. 20–4):

While every element will rejoice in happiness,
The heaven skips, and all chains of stars
Dance in circles, hand in hand, around our Town Hall,
The Bride, around whom all is dancing, and who, so proud and rich,
Sits down while shining on her most beautiful day.²⁰

The heavenly allure of the Town Hall is certainly not restricted to the day of the inauguration alone. Vondel reconfirms the metaphysical character of the building in his discussion of the carillon. First he cheers the bells for their splendid sounds, but quickly he turns to their heavenly character. Their music produces an extraordinary calm and harmony under the *burgerwandelaren* (walking burghers, l. 513).

Meyster's Gods in Ecstasy

Besides Huygens's presentation of the Town Hall as God's wonder and Vondel's discussion of the overwhelming impact of the wondrous building on the viewer as an ideal burgher, there is a third way to portray wonder. This way relies on giving descriptions of fictitious reactions of complete awe in order to construct ideal reactions of spectators of art and architecture. By emphasizing how certain personages are totally overwhelmed by the Town Hall, the poets urge the actual visitor to stand in full admiration of the artistry of the building. So here, the prime focus is on the artistic rather than the societal impact, thus showing strong parallels with Junius's discussion of the spectator of art. A key example among the Town Hall poems is Meyster's *Hemels Land-Spel* (Heavenly Pastoral Play).²¹

In this play, the gods gather in Amersfoort to discuss the Town Hall, but quickly they notice that they need help with their descriptions, as they do not succeed in capturing the wondrous building in words. Jupiter sends Mercury to get the most prominent artists and architects from history: Vitruvius and Apelles, Michelangelo, Raphael and Scamozzi, and Holbein and Van Heemskerck. In the meantime, the Olympians laud Amersfoort for its pleasing beauty, restfulness,



Figure 11. Jurriaan Pool, *Medal for the Inauguration of the Town Hall, 1655*, Teylers Museum, Haarlem. Like Vondel in his *Inwyding*, Pool transforms the inauguration into a metaphysical event, with Amphion playing the lyre with which he once had built the walls around Thebes's citadel and Mercury flying above the wondrous building. Reproduced by kind permission of the Teylers Museum.

²⁰ 'Terwijl elk element van blyschap juichen zal, | De hemel huppelen, en alle sterren tronsen | In 't ronde, als hant aen hant, rontom ons Raethuis dansen. | De Bruid, daer 't al om dans, en die, zoo fier en ryck, | Op haeren schoonsten dagh en 't kussen, zit te pryck.' All translations from the *Inwyding* are mine.

²¹ Junius could have influenced Meyster via his *De pictura veterum* that was published in his own Dutch translation in 1642. Moreover, Junius often visited Alethea Arundel, the librarian in Amersfoort, so the internationally respected art theoretician was frequenting the town at the same time as Meyster was writing his *Heavenly Pastoral Play* there.

purity, and simplicity. This stands in contrast to what follows: the description of the Town Hall by the famous artists and architects. These individuals try to capture in words how they are completely overwhelmed by the building. They have to admit that the Town Hall has turned them completely upside down. The difference between the feelings for Amersfoort and the Town Hall resembles the contrast that Edmund Burke will make a century later between the beautiful and the sublime.³² Meyster's personages, however, do not use the word 'sublime', but the Dutch word 'wonder'.

By defining the Town Hall as a wonder, Meyster follows Huygens and Vondel and makes a connection with the long tradition of the Seven Wonders of the World. He too presents the building as an emulation of these wonders, but does not substantiate this by relating the building to God's benevolence like Huygens, or to the extraordinary power of Amsterdam and her municipality like Vondel, but by highlighting its exceptional artistic achievements. Meyster instructs us, 'wonder at the measure of art'.³³ Here, art points at the skill of the artist (the ancient concept of *techné/ars*), as well as *prael pracht* (splendour), so technical genius and astounding beauty transform the building into a marvel never seen before.

In the *Hemels Land-Spel* the use of the Dutch word 'wonder' is not restricted to references to the Seven Wonders of the World alone, but once again makes an explicit reference to *sacer horror*. This use is not related to the biblical God as in Vondel's poem, but to Jupiter:

Like Jupiter with his Thunder
Not to frighten, but to bring wonder.
Wonder is his [i.e. Jacob van Campen's] objective,
More as one could imagine.³⁴

Here, wonder is presented as the superlative of fright, just as *sacer horror* is much more than just anxiety.³⁵ Meyster appropriates the theological concept to laud the architect of the Town Hall. Thus he deviates from Huygens who cast the wonder of the Town Hall as eventually leading back to God's grace. Meyster tears the overwhelming magnificence of the building loose from God by concentrating on its art

³² For recent literature showing the extent to which 'wonder' is a precursor of the eighteenth-century concept of the sublime, see Emily Dunster-Winkler, 'Romanticism as Modern Re-Enchantment: Burke, Kant, and Emerson on Religious Taste', *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiesgeschichte*, 22 (2015), 1–22; Nathan Stormer, 'Looking in Wonder: Prenatal Sublimity and the Commonplace "Life"', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33 (2008), 647–73; and Michael Funk Deckard, 'Burke and Kant on Fear of God and the Sublime', *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*, 68 (2007), 3–25.

³³ 'wonder op de maat van kunst.' Meyster, p. 22. All translations from the *Land-spel* are mine.

³⁴ 'Glijck Jupijn met zijn Donder, | Tot schrick niet wonder
almen zou verwonderd'.

and skilfulness. He clarifies this most explicitly in the last scene of the *Hemels Land-Spel* where the legendary artists discuss the decorations of the tribunal.

Apelles says to Jupiter that he has to be 'not speech-less, nor deaf, but absorbed and charmed | By the baffling beauty', a reaction that in this period became more and more related to the expression of *je ne sais quoi* (or in Dutch *ick en wete niet wat*).³⁶ The beauty of the decorations in the tribunal have to overwhelm the spectator, but without completely paralyzing him/her. In order to define that difference Michelangelo comes forward. He points out the beautiful marble of which the central reliefs are made, as well as the artfulness with which they are sculpted. Furthermore, he expresses belief in the living presence of the scenes, that is to say he thinks that he witnesses the scenes straightforwardly and not in representation. While observing the monstrous faces of Medusa and the Fury Erinyes (Figure 12), he starts to believe that they 'wanted to trample [us] | and tear



Figure 12. Medusa Head in the Tribunal of the Town Hall.

Source: Stichting Koninklijk Paleis Amsterdam.

Photo: Erik and Petra Hesmerg.

³⁶ 'niet sprake-loos, noch doof, maer op, en ingenomen | Door't onbegrijpelijk schoon.' Meyster, p. 78.

[us] up alive; we are still trembling. | if we think of it, methinks, they still follow us'.³⁷ Thus Michelangelo acts as an art connoisseur, but he is able to get strongly emotionally involved as well. The fear that the sculptures in the tribunal elicit is no normal anxiety. That fear is defined by the paradoxical combination of fright and normal anxiety. So here the concept of *sacer horror* turns into a non-joy, repulsion and attraction. More particularly, an ideal is created, while religious means to praise a work of art. More particularly, an ideal is created, while Michelangelo has experienced the *sacer horror* he has not been completely paralyzed by it.

Jupiter, who has listened to Apelles and Michelangelo, does not get the point. His reaction shows an all-encompassing panic. The father of the gods becomes too much involved with the fiction and, rather than experiencing wonder, is totally paralyzed by the idea that Medusa and Erinyes will storm Mount Olympus with the Titans and other hellish creatures. Thus, the *Hemels Land-Spel* ends in complete confusion. Earlier in the play, Meyster promotes his own medium as an excellent means to avoid such misjudgement. He has the artists refer to previous laudatory poems on the Town Hall as a most welcome aid to correctly dealing with all wonders in and outside the building: 'Oh, *van de Vondel*, come you *Asseling* [Thomas Asselijn], you *Bos* [Jan Vos], | You smart wits, loosen your tongues, | And help us with your wit to describe all spiritness'.³⁸ In doing so, Meyster presents the literary genre of the laudatory poem and gives three famous examples on the Town Hall as a means to help spectators avoid getting paralyzed, and to deal correctly with the decorations by striking the golden mean between an aesthetic gaze and a living-presence response. For Meyster, it is thanks to the extreme wit of authors such as Vondel that visitors of the Town Hall could prepare themselves to react properly to all the marvels of the building. By first reading about the Town Hall they avoid the risk of getting too overwhelmed in the moment. Excellent poetry can help visitors to remember that architects, sculptors, and painters were at work and thus preserve a certain distance that enables them to feel fright and joy without the risk of, like Jupiter, becoming too strongly involved in the representation.

Conclusion

In the young Dutch Republic, many writers paid attention in their literature to the impact of art and architecture. This attention often relied on a theological tradition of discussing the magnificence of God. Junius, for example, starts his

De pictura veterum with a discussion of how God's magnificence, visible through nature, can terrify and delight and how this combination of contrasting passions corresponds with the impact of art. Further, in his art theory he gives art's magnificence a deeper theoretical basis by using Longinus' concept of *megalopreopia*. Thus, classical and Christian thought merge in discussing the overwhelming passions art can elicit.

In the Dutch Golden Age we find this interest not only in art theory *stricto sensu*; other media were put to use for thinking about the impact of art and architecture as well. More particularly, laudatory poems can be taken into consideration as prominent places of criticism, since they build on a rich tradition of thought on wonder, were widely distributed, and had extraordinary socio-political importance. In the case of the laudatory poems on the Amsterdam Town Hall, the emphasis on the wondrous aspect of the building and its decorations can be related to the legitimization of the enormous project, and ultimately, of the burgomasters' position. This close political involvement certainly does not exclude the fact that the poets thought about the impact of art and architecture in a most profound way.

The poems of Huygens, Vondel, and Meyster praising the Amsterdam Town Hall indicate that in the literary genre of the laudatory poem too, theological thought inspired the thinking about the impact of the building. This theological tradition was linked with thinking about wondrous art that started in ancient Greek descriptions of art and architecture. Huygens sees the magnificence of the Town Hall as an index for God's eternal benevolence for Amsterdam, but also relies on the idea of the Seven Wonders of the World to develop his thoughts on the impact of the building. Vondel relates the overwhelming decorations in the tribunal to the theological concept of *sacer horror*, thus suggesting that the burgomasters and aldermen in their function as judges elicit an impact that is comparable to feeling contact with God. However, the poet also relies on ancient models of description that contrast wondrous art and architecture with everyday reality. Finally, Meyster deals with the overwhelming effect of the decorations in the tribunal and constructs an ideal spectator who correctly responds to the breath-taking likeness of the bas-reliefs by combining an evaluation of artistry with a living-presence response.

³⁷ 'Ievens' hadden willen | Verscheuren en vertreuen; wy staen schier noch en trillen, | Als wy'r gedenken aen, my dunkt, gy volgen noch: Meyster, p. 78.

³⁸ 'Ha van de Vondel, komt, gy Asseling, gy Bos, | Gy schrand're geesten komt, maect uwe tongen los, | En helpt ons met u Geest die overvloedig is, ...'