

Theatres of Preaching

The Baroque Pulpit in the Southern Netherlands

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Visitors to the churches and cathedrals of Belgium cannot help but be struck by the wealth of Baroque sculpture that these buildings hold. The works are often the equals of the sculpture one encounters in the churches of great centres such as Rome. Indeed, at least one Fleming, Frans (or François) Duquesnoy (1597-1643), himself just one of several distinguished sculptors in his family, rose to the heights of the Roman sculptural trade in the 1630s, shortly before his death. A statue of S. Susanna (1630-1633) by him is in the Roman church of S. Maria di Loreto in the Forum of Trajan and he carved one of the four statues for the crossing of St Peter's Basilica, St Andrew embracing his cross (1629-1633) (Fig. 1). This is a short introduction to a spectacular but often overlooked subset of the sculptor's art in Belgium — the pulpit.



PREACHING IN THE BAROQUE AND IDENTITY IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands underwent immense religious turmoil in the late sixteenth century. The repressive measures against reformers put in place by Philip II, King of Spain and ruler of the Spanish Netherlands, led to enormous dissatisfaction among the nobility of the Netherlands. In the wake of the burning of a Calvinist preacher at Antwerp in 1564, governor Margaret of Parma was forced to dilute Philip's policies. This led soon afterwards to a burgeoning of Protestant sentiment in the Netherlands, with large crowds of reform-minded individuals addressed by Anabaptists and Memmonites in hagenpreken (field sermons). The earliest of these took place in the 1560s on the Cloostervelt near Hondschoote and near in Boeschepe in 1562, both in French Flanders; the first on Dutch soil occurred near Dishoek in 1566. Scholar Larry Silver has seen in Pieter Breughel the Elder's *The preaching of St John the Baptist* (Fig. 2), which shows the figure of St John swamped by a vast crowd of people dressed in contemporary Netherlandish costume, a kind of record of these hagenpreken. Brueghel's *St John* was painted in 1566, just before the crowds inspired by the preaching of itinerant Reformers sacked churches in Steenvoorde, Antwerp and Gent, initiating the so-called *Beeldenstorm* (iconoclasm). Philip's savage response to this and to what he saw as the disastrous governorship of his half-sister Margaret was the 'Spanish Fury', led by Margaret's successor as governor, the brutal Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, third duke of Alba. Alba's campaign of terror led directly to the revolt of the Northern Netherlands in the Eighty Years' War and ultimately (although indirectly) produced a largely Protestant Netherlands and a largely Catholic Belgium.



Preaching, therefore, was at the heart of the struggle to national self-identity for the Netherlands and was, of course, a key weapon in the Reform arsenal. The danger of Reform preaching and the ineptitude of Catholic preaching were evident to the Catholic church hierarchy from at least as early as the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517), which concluded just as Luther was nailing the 95 Theses to the door of the court church of Wittenberg. Session 11 of the Council, held in 1516, actually specifically addressed the issue of poor Catholic preaching.

The Fathers of the Council noted that

preaching is of the first importance, very necessary and of great effect and utility in the church, so long as it is being exercised rightly, from genuine charity towards God and our neighbour, and according to the precepts and examples of the holy fathers, who contributed a great deal to the church by publicly professing such things at the time of the establishment and propagation of the faith

Referring to the kind of example that the sermonisers of the hagenpreken would soon be offering, the Fathers mentioned those who were

preaching many and various things contrary to the teachings and examples which we have mentioned, sometimes with scandal to the people

and went on to lay down strict guidelines — evidently ignored — about who could preach. In the turmoil of the Catholic Church's response to the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) repeatedly stressed the importance of preaching and the significance of the fact that all properly appointed members of the clergy accept it as a fundamental duty to the people of God.



After a very brief tenure as sole governor (1596-1598), Archduke Albert of Austria joined his wife, the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, as sovereign of the Hapsburg Netherlands (Fig. 3). The early part of their reigns was marked by the bitterness of the religious wars that had raged since the 1560s but, in 1609, they sealed the Twelve Years' Truce, enabling them — however briefly — to build a court in relative peace. Although this peace was marked by considerable religious toleration in their domains, they self-consciously embarked on a programme of re-Catholicisation. It was precisely in their period that the Jesuits, members of an order specifically dedicated to winning back Protestants to Catholicism, were permitted to establish themselves in centres including Antwerp. Preaching was to be at the heart of this work.

A THEATRE OF PREACHING: THE ART OF THE PULPIT

Although the Jesuit-led preaching revolution was underway from at least the start of the seventeenth century in the Hapsburg Netherlands, the most spectacular examples of the art of the pulpit are from at least a century later, in the first few decades of the eighteenth century. The delay appears to be attributable at least in part to the time it took for the lessons of Bernini's Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (1651) to sink into the culture of sculpture in the Netherlands. Frans Duquesnoy had worked directly in the orbit of Bernini, but had died in Livorno without ever returning to his native land. His style and, more importantly, his drawings, many based on real experience of Roman sculpture, passed to his brother Hiëronymus II Duquesnoy (1612-1654). Hiëronymus, too, had worked at Rome, but returned to the Netherlands and became, with sculptors such as Artus I Quellinus (1609-1668) and Rombout Pauwels (1625-1692), a member of what is perhaps the most distinguished generation of sculpture the

Netherlands has ever seen. The sculptors of the four pulpits discussed briefly below were the heirs of these Rome-trained sculptors.



Architecturally speaking, the pulpits discussed here consist of three main parts. The most important is the 'basket' or vasca in which the preacher stands in order to deliver the sermon. Located above the vasca is a soundboard for reflecting and amplifying the preacher's voice. The superstructure of the vasca and soundboard is located on top of a plinth. Bernini's Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (Fig. 4) provided a critical model for the designers of these early-eighteenth century artists in two major ways. First, pulpits need not have all three of these elements — there are pulpits that are not elevated on a plinth, as well as those that lack a soundboard, although most at least intimate the presence of a vasca. Eighteenth-century designers routinely opted for the plinth. In doing this, they cast an eye on Bernini's fountain, the structure of which is that of an obelisk (comparable to the vasca) mounted on an elaborate figured plinth. Secondly, having opted for a plinth, the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi provided an example of how one could make the plinth interesting in its own right as well as integral to the 'programme' of the whole artwork.

Pulpit carving was something of an industry in the southern Netherlands at the start of the eighteenth century, and several sculptors are known principally through their pulpit production. Theodoor Verhaegen (discussed below), for example, executed pulpits for the Norbertine church of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Leliëndaal (1723), Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Hanswijk (1743-46), Sint-Jans (1736-1741), all at Mechelen, and Sint-Laurentius at Lokeren (1736). It is also clear that pulpit design was a joint effort. The pulpit at Onze-Lieve-Vrouw at Brugge called on the services of a painter-designer and no fewer than four carvers, while that at Sint-Walburga (formerly Sint-Donaas) at Brugge was carved by Artus II Quellinus to an iconographical programme conceived by the Jesuit priest and architect Willem Hesius (1601-90). It seems likely that the most elaborate of pulpits were typically joint efforts, calling on a designer (most likely a draughtsman or graphic artist) who produced drawings based on the theological programme of a priest-

advisor, and who probably supervised the work of one or more sculptors.

Sint-Jans, Mechelen

The pulpit of Sint-Jans in Mechelen (1736) presents a characteristic example. Unassuming from the outside, this former church of the Groote Raad, the highest court of the Netherlands, is a monument to the genius of Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759). Verhaegen's work is widely represented in Mechelen, his native city, but one of his most spectacular works is the confessional he created in 1736 for the church of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ten Hemelopneming in Ninove. His work mainly dates from the 1730s and 1740s but, as a student of Michiel van de Voort (or Vervoort) (1667-1737), he also worked on the pulpit by van de Voort now located in Sint-Rombouts (Mechelen) in 1723 (discussed below). Verhaegen carved the pulpit and churchwardens' stalls in Sint-Janskerk and also provided the design for the organ case, although it was executed in 1784 by Pieter Valckx. The programme of the Sint-Janskerk pulpit is announced in the inscription carved into the cartouche located above the soundboard: 'Mÿne Schaepe hooren mÿne Stem', a quotation of John 10:27, 'My sheep listen to my voice'. This quotation of the words of Christ is highly fitting to a pulpit, but it probably also intimates a coded rebuke to Protestants. Christ is among the Jews in the Temple on the Feast of the Dedication when he utters these words in John's Gospel, and there seems little doubt that contemporary Catholic audiences would have recognised themselves in the sheep who heard Christ's voice and the Protestants in those Jews who refused to hear Christ's message and would not receive the eternal life promised by them. Christ is imaged directly in the plinth level of this pulpit, standing among four other figures — three men, two older and one younger and perhaps apostles, and a woman, who tenderly embraces a child and whose half-bared breast probably marks her as an allegorical figure of Charity. Weaving among the human figures are four sheep, to one of which Christ points (Fig. 5). The group is standing on an outcrop tufted with plants. The vasca is effortlessly hoisted aloft by a ring of cherubs in an act of pure Baroque illusionism. The sides of the vasca are decorated with bas-reliefs, an art form in which Verhaegen excelled as the numerous other examples in Sint-Janskerk show. The front medallion of the vasca shows the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist, recalling the dedication of the church, while the ones at the sides show allegorical figures. The complex curvilinear soundboard, capped by a finial reminiscent of that atop Bernini's baldachin in St Peter's in Rome, is also held aloft by a little cloud of cherubs (Fig. 6). The Holy Spirit appears on the soundboard in a burst of rays, signifying the light of divine illumination pouring into the preacher. Particularly stunning are the carved drape at the rear of the pulpit and the rich Rococo rinceaux of the balustrade of the access staircase (Fig. 7). Verhaegen's pulpit is a virtuosic work of carving in which fertile visual invention and theological meaning blend effortlessly.



Onze-Lieve-Vrouw, Brugge

The pulpit of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw in Brugge has a particularly complex history. The gift of Thérèse van Volden (died 1742), widow of the burgomaster of the Brugse Vrije, Frans van Caloen (1650-1707), the design of the pulpit was provided by Jan Antoon Garemijn (1712-1799) but actually executed by Jan Clauwaert, Pieter van Wallegghem (1697-1776), Jan van Hecke (1699-1777) and Philippe Scherlaecken (1690-1771). Garemijn was an influential painter in his native Brugge, by the time of the carving of the pulpit (1739-1743) entering the most significant part of his career. He would ultimately succeed his teacher Matthias de Visch as head of the Brugge Academy of Fine Arts. Much sought after as a painter of religious panels, some of his Watteau-inspired paintings can be seen in Sint-Annakerk in Brugge. Much less is known of the four sculptors, the work of whom can be seen in isolated monuments in the southern Netherlands. Van Wallegghem and van Hecke, for example, worked together on the pulpit (van Hecke) and communion rail (van Wallegghem) in the church of Sint-Amandus in Wingene, south of Brugge, in the 1730s. Their work there was quite simple and gives little indication of the masterpieces they would produce for Onze-Lieve-Vrouw. The figure of Religion sitting on the globe of the world, carved by van Hecke, forms the plinth of this pulpit (Fig. 8). She holds an open book inscribed with words drawn from Proverbs (8:5-6): 'Learn prudence, simple ones, and hear: for I am about to speak of great things, and my lips will be opened, that they might speak right things.' The four sides of the vasca are decorated with bas-reliefs separated by cherubs holding books with the opening words of each Gospel. Facing the congregation is a scene of the Sermon on the Mount, reminding congregants of the function of the pulpit. The lateral scenes show the Transfiguration and Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman. At the rear is a relief of the Good Shepherd (Fig. 9). Angels and cherubs hoist the soundboard to heaven while the Holy Spirit descends on the preacher in a burst of rays. Medallions of the Four Latin Church Fathers encircle the soundboard. The figure of Truth, carved by van Wallegghem, sits on top of the soundboard, pointing upwards to a monumental burst of rays, in which the triangular symbol of the Holy Trinity and the word 'Veritas' ('Truth') are surrounded by a cloud of cherub heads (Fig. 10). The programme of the pulpit is clearly 'Truth revealed in Faith'. On an even grander scale than Verhaegen's Mechelen pulpit, the pulpit of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw is a kind of symphony of Catholic triumphalism in which symbolism, meaning, illusionism and virtuosic carving combine.



Sint-Baafskerk, Gent

Among the last of the great Baroque and Rococo pulpits is that executed by Laurent Delvaux (1696-1778) for Sint-Baafskerk in Gent, a work commissioned by the chapter of the cathedral from the artist in 1741. The pulpit represents a legacy of the funds left by the visionary seventh bishop of Gent, Antonius Triest. Triest invested heavily in Sint-Baafskerk after his translation from Brugge in 1622, purchasing altarpieces from Rubens and Van Dyck. He is commemorated in a splendid funerary monument by Hiëronymus II Duquesnoy in the chancel of Sint-Baafskerk. His investment in his cathedral continued after his death, and his 'sponsorship' of the pulpit is recognised with a medallion bust on the rear of the vasca. The chapter's choice fell on Laurent Delvaux, a student of Antwerp sculptor Pierre-Denis Plumier (1688-1721), himself the creator of a magnificent pulpit (1721) now located at the Kapellekerk in Brussels. Between 1717 and 1733, Delvaux was active abroad, in England and Rome. His Roman sojourn included an intense study of the works of Frans Duquesnoy and of ancient statuary; indeed, a major focus of style is a cool incipient Neo-Classicism that is evident in the figures of the angels that flank the Sint-Baafkerk's pulpit and in his many statues copied from or inspired by Classical models. Delvaux's bozzetti (models) in terracotta have fortunately survived for sections of the pulpit, and can be seen in the Museum of Fine Arts in Gent. They reveal that the realisation of his design even at the stage of the generation of the models was highly detailed, and the bozzetti are important works of art in their own right.

The plinth level of the Sint-Baafskerk pulpit centres on two protagonists. A young female figure dressed in a gown bearing the image of a sun on her breast represents the figure of Truth; she is shown in accordance with the guidelines laid out in the influential symbol book, the *Iconologia* of Cesare Ripa (first published 1593). The open book she carries urges, in the words of Ephesians 5:14, 'get up, you who sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ will illuminate you'. Blowing a bronzen trumpet, a cherub awakes the other main figure of this group, that of Time, struggling to tear off a heavy drape (Fig. 11). Delvaux unquestionably knew Bernini's comparable sculpture *Truth unveiled by Time* (1646-1652). The three bas-reliefs of the vasca represent The conversion of St Bavo by St Amand, The Holy Family and The conversion of Saul. The bas-relief of The Holy Family is particularly accomplished, feigning the soft effects of a pastel. The vasca itself is held up by an enormous tree trunk that breaks into two mighty branches that hold up the soundboard, decorated with the customary dove of the Holy Spirit (Fig. 12). Clusters of gilt apples crowd the tree and one of them, held in the mouth of a serpent, is playfully snatched away by a cherub (Fig. 13). Two further cherubs labour to hoist up the Cross Triumphant. Delvaux has carefully orchestrated powerfully conceived in-the-round figural sculptures with delicate bas-relief, an impressively realised tree, splashes of gold and sections of dark oak in this pulpit. The programme appears to be based on the theme of 'The Triumph of Truth' as Truth wins out over Time in the figural group, St Bavo and Saul turn to Christ in the bas-reliefs and the Cross asserts its supremacy over the Tree of Knowledge.





Sint-Romboutskathedraal, Mechelen

What must surely be the most elaborate southern Netherlandish pulpit, that currently located in Sint-Rombouts in Mechlen, is the work of sculptor Michiel van de Voort (1667-1737) with assistance from his student Theodoor Verhaegen. Van de Voort originally carved this pulpit in 1723 for Lucas Fayd'herbe's church of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Leliëndaal, also in Mechelen. At the time of the occupation of the French Revolutionary government, this pulpit and many other treasures of the church were sold off. Fortunately the pulpit was purchased for Sint-Romboutskathedraal and placed there in 1809.

Initially trained in his native Antwerp, van de Voort was among the many sculptors to travel to Italy, a trip he made between 1690 and 1693. The majority of his work was for ecclesiastical patrons, and Sint-Romboutskathedraal itself holds further examples of his work, the funerary monuments to Archbishop Hubertus Guilielmus de Precipiano (1709) and his brother General Prosper Ambrosius de Precipiano (1709). The latter is a coolly Classical memorial obelisk-type monument, with the deceased represented in relief on a shield held by a figure of Victory. Hubertus Guilielmus' monument is of a type that had become particularly common among late Baroque chancel tombs, with two allegorical figures flanking a representation of the deceased. Van de Voort's monument is again restrained and detached in emotional tone, and his rendering of the deceased shows the same unflinching commitment to realistic presentation of facial features that marks the work of Algardi, one of Bernini's great rivals.



Very little in van de Voort's output prepares one for the Baroque extravagance of his Mechelen pulpit, perhaps with the exception of the pulpit he executed in 1713 for the cathedral of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ten Hemel Opgenomen (Antwerp) which, with its numerous perching birds and access staircase made from entangled oak branches, reveals the same deep investment in the depiction of animals and plants. The Mechelen pulpit is organised around the conversion of Norbert of Xanten, reflecting its original location in a Norbertine church. Norbert's Vita relates that around 1112 the saint, a chaplain of Emperor Henry V, was travelling on horseback towards Vreden in a storm. A lightning bolt struck the ground before his horse, opening a chasm in ground and

causing Norbert's horse to throw him off. Norbert heard a voice censuring his worldly way of life. Deeply repenting, Norbert eventually became a fierce ecclesiastical reformer, forming the Canons Regular of Prémonté in 1120. The plinth level of this pulpit is carved into an enormous rock cropping, shattered by the impact of the lightning bolt. Norbert's horse has reared and is screaming in fright; Norbert himself has been tossed to the ground (Fig. 14). If we follow the line of Norbert's outstretched arm, we see the object of his vision revealed in the vasca level of the pulpit — Christ crucified. All of the pulpits examined in this essay have included an image of the cross in the vasca level of the pulpit, but this is the only one in this group in which the crucifix forms a critically integrated part of the iconography. Arranged around the vasca are the standing figure of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the Cross, her veil blown wildly by the storm that has engulfed Norbert, St Mary Magdalene, hair unbound, and St John, sunk in grief (Fig. 15). Windblown trees flail at the rock outcropping and harbour a representation of Adam and Eve reaching for the forbidden fruit. The pelican piercing its breast to feed its young and a clutch of bursting pomegranates remind viewers of the overflowing love of Christ towards the faithful (Fig. 16). There are innumerable visual delights — a little cherub, standing in for van de Voort himself, is still hammering away on unfinished work at the rear of the pulpit; the entrance gate to the vasca is carved as a farm gate (Fig. 17); a tiny snail blithely crawls its way toward the Crucifixion scene (Fig. 18). While perhaps lacking a co-ordinating theological narrative, van de Voort's pulpit is a tour de force of dramatic conception and carving.





Further reading

The art of the southern Netherlandish pulpit appears not to have been treated at length as a discrete subject before. Flemish sculpture has been erratically treated, notwithstanding its great achievements. Good introductions to Flemish Baroque sculpture can be found in the following:

H. Gerson and E.H. Ter Kuile, *Art and Architecture in Belgium 1600 to 1800*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960, Chapter 3

Hans Vlieghe, *Flemish Art and Architecture 1585-1700*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, Chapter 11

Images:

Feature Image Laurent Delvaux (1696-1778), *A cherub snatches an apple from a serpent* (1741), Marble, Oak, Gent: Sint-Baafskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 1 Frans Duquesnoy (1597-1643), *St Andrew* (1629-1633), Marble, Vatican City: Basilica di S. Pietro in Vaticano, Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 2 Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525-1569), *The preaching of St John* (1566), Oil on wood, Budapest: Szépművészeti Múzeum, Public domain via World Gallery of Art

Fig. 3 Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622), Archdukes Albert and Isabella, Oil on oak panel, 60 x 42 cm (each), Bruges: Groeninge Museum, Public domain via World Gallery of Art

Fig. 4 Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (1651), Travertine, granite, Rome: Piazza Navona, Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 5 Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Christ pointing to a sheep (1736), Oak, Mechelen: Sint-Janskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 6 Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Soundboard of the Sint-Jans pulpit (1736), Oak, Mechelen: Sint-Janskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 7 Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Access staircase of the Sint-Jans pulpit (1736), Oak, Mechelen: Sint-Janskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 8 Jan Antoon Garemijn (1712-1799) and Jan van Hecke (1699-1777), Religion (1739-1743), Oak, Brugge: Onze-Lieve-Vrouwkerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 9 Jan Antoon Garemijn (1712-1799), Jan Clauwaert, Pieter van Wallegghem (1697-1776), Jan van Hecke (1699-1777) and Philippe Scherlaecken (1690-1771), The Good Shepherd (1739-1743), Oak, Brugge: Onze-Lieve-Vrouwkerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 10 Jan Antoon Garemijn (1712-1799), Jan Clauwaert, Pieter van Wallegghem (1697-1776), Jan van Hecke (1699-1777) and Philippe Scherlaecken (1690-1771), Pulpit of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwkerk (1739-1743), Oak, Brugge: Onze-Lieve-Vrouwkerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 11 Laurent Delvaux (1696-1778), Truth and Time (1741), Marble, Oak, Gent: Sint-Baafskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 12 Laurent Delvaux (1696-1778), Soundboard of the Sint-Baafskerk pulpit (1741), Marble, Oak, Gent: Sint-Baafskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 13 Laurent Delvaux (1696-1778), A cherub snatches an apple from a serpent (1741), Marble, Oak, Gent: Sint-Baafskerk, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 14 Michiel van de Voort (1667-1737) and Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Conversion of St Norbert (1723), Oak, Mechlen: Sint-Romboutskathedraal, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 15 Michiel van de Voort (1667-1737) and Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), The Virgin Mary, St John and the Crucified Christ (1723), Oak, Mechlen: Sint-Romboutskathedraal, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 16 Michiel van de Voort (1667-1737) and Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Pelican feeding its young (1723), Oak, Mechlen: Sint-Romboutskathedraal, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 17 Michiel van de Voort (1667-1737) and Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Access staircase of the Sint-Rombouts pulpit (1723), Oak, Mechlen: Sint-Romboutskathedraal, © John Weretka, 2015

Fig. 18 Michiel van de Voort (1667-1737) and Theodoor Verhaegen (1700-1759), Snail (1723), Oak, Mechlen: Sint-Romboutskathedraal, © John Weretka, 2015

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