The World Upside Down as a Political Motif

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The years between 1566 and 1585 were some of the most eventful in the history of the city of Antwerp. The Iconoclasm in 1566, the Wonder-jaar, can be regarded as the beginning of the Revolt against Spanish rule; the conquest of the city by Alessandro Farnese in 1585 delivered Antwerp into Spanish hands once and for all and signalled the end of its participation in the Revolt. In the intervening years, the Revolt was fought with intense physical violence of all kinds, but equally by means of propaganda – mainly on the rebels’ side. This propaganda war was waged with words – hundreds of pamphlets were published – but imagery, too, was employed in the struggle. The principal medium was the print, and the most important centre of print production was Antwerp. Most of these prints are politically-slanted allegories: almost always comprising an image and explanatory text. Allegories are usually generalizing in nature and so can be linked to an overall political situation, but by no means always to a specific event. Even the political standpoint, for or against Spain, which modern historians essentially take for granted, is not as clear-cut as it seems. This article concentrates on one example of this problem of interpretation. In 1578 and 1579 the Wierix family, renowned printmakers, printed four prints, numbered 1 to 4 in a later edition. The designer was the painter Marten van Cleve and the inventor and publisher was Willem de Haecht, who thus had overall responsibility for the publication. Two of them are animal allegories – The Sleeping Lion (De slapende leeu) (fig. 1) and The Greedy Wolf (Den ghierighen wolf) (fig. 2). Although these prints are numbered 2 and 3, they were probably published first, since they are dated 1578. In the year 1567, as the print shows, the Lion (the Netherlands) is asleep; in 1578 the greedy Wolf (the Spanish oppressor), which gorged itself on the Lion, has vomit; the Lion has awoken.

The two other prints, numbered 1 and 4, are in the form of a rebus. The World Upside Down (De verkeerde Werelt) (no. 1) deserves close analysis as it occupies a central place in this argument (fig. 3). The text, in Dutch, French and German, explains the rebus almost entirely: ‘Hypocrisy and Tyranny hold the world upside down! Fidelity and Love sleep, so Time teaches us’. The print depicts the text, as is usual in a rebus, in a combination of traditional personifications with homonyms in the form of pictograms that represent letters or words. On the extreme left is the personification of Hypocrisy or Dissimulation, portrayed...
as a semi-naked old woman with drooping breasts, snakes for hair and a sword at her waist, holding a scourge entwined with snakes in one hand and a rosary in the other. Beside her is the upside down globe with the year ‘1579’, (the reversed ‘6’ is an obvious mistake by the printmaker), which the helmeted Tyranny holds bound with ropes; he wears a helmet and holds a sword that is piercing a heart. The two clasped hands are a symbol of Fidelity. The duck (eend) simply means ‘and’ (ende). Love sleeps with her three children. The turf (graszode) is ‘so’ (soo). The semicircular ship’s housing on which Time sits – a ‘den’ – is a homonym for the definite article ‘den’. And Time, with the usual attributes of a scythe, an hourglass and wings, points to a book with ‘us’ (Ons) and a ladder (leer) with a ‘t’, giving ‘teaches us’ (ons leert). The plinth contains the names of Marten van Cleve, the draughtsman, and W. Haecht, the deviser and publisher, and a dial which begins at 1566 and ends at 1583, with the hand – a dagger with a skull – pointing to the year 1579, the date of the print. The background shows a country at war, with cities bombarding one another. The print numbered 4, Blind Shepherds (Blinde Herders), likewise dated 1579, is also a rebus. The text reads, ‘Behold blind shepherds, who lack God’s commandments / As through their folly wolves shear the sheep’ (fig. 4). Fig 3

ANTOINE WIERIX
AFTER WILLEM VAN HAECHT,
The World Upside Down, 1579.
Engraving, 207 x 322 mm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (inv. no. RP-P-OB-76.885).

The four prints, two dating from 1578 and two from 1579, were later numbered and sold as a single set in Antwerp. The general meaning is clear: the country is being exploited; it is in crisis, plagued by violence, and can only regain peace and mutual love by observing God’s commandments. The set has an unmistakable – if moderate – anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic connotation.

The environment in which these prints were made is clear: it was that of the Antwerp chambers of rhetoric. The chamber known as De Violieren was the most prominent; it had united with the Guild of St Luke as far back as 1480
and consequently numbered both literary talents and artists among its members. The heyday of the rhetoricians in Antwerp came in the sixteenth century, culminating in the famous rhetoric competition, the Landjuweel, of 1561. It lasted a full month and drew chambers of rhetoric from all the towns in Brabant. The rhetoricians were the eloquent representatives of the social and religious revival, and so the authorities kept a very close eye on them. The arrival of the Duke of Alva meant the end of the rhetoricians’ public activities, and many of their members fled abroad. It was not until the Twelve Years’ Truce that there was a revival.10

The pivotal figure in De Violieren was Willem van Haecht (1527-before 1612); he was a member from 1552 and the factor after 1558, the poet of De Violieren.11 He was a learned polymath, the focal point of an extended network of artists, engravers and men of letters. He also published prints, which he had printed by the Wierix family and others, and sold ‘in Antwerp at the St Janspoort’.12 He was known as a moderate, peace-loving man, a Lutheran and a supporter of William of Orange. He was not only a writer and a poet, but also an inventor and a deviser of pictorial images, which he got Marten van Cleve (1527-81?), the painter of peasant scenes, and others to draw as designs for prints.13 Van Cleve and the Wierixes were also Martinists or Lutherans.

In 1578 and 1579 the political situation was greatly polarized in Antwerp, too. In fact the Calvinists were increasingly gaining control, in spite of the signing of the religions treaties on 29 August 1578 and 12 June 1579, when the right of the three religions, the Catholics, the Lutherans and the Calvinists, to exist was confirmed.14 In this context the publication of prints with an anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic message is no more than sound sense.

It appears, however, that the rebus The World Upside Down, with an
entirely different political meaning, had been incorporated five years previously in a painted landscape—unsigned, but without doubt by Jacob Grimmer (1525/26-after 1592) (fig. 5).\(^5\)

The same rebus is painted in the foreground in a different form from that in the print, but possibly still by Marten van Cleve, who we know provided the figures for Grimmer on occasion (fig. 6).\(^6\) The content of the rebus is much like that of the print, but there are a number of important differences. The dial, for example, begins in 1565 (not in 1566) and runs through to 1575 (not 1585), while the dagger points to 1574 (not 1579). The painting therefore has to be dated to 1574. Furthermore the rosary in the hand of Hypocrisy—an anti-Catholic symbol—is replaced by an apple of discord, which changes the personification to that of Envy or Invidia.\(^7\) Of less importance is the fact that ‘Ons leert’ is not depicted with the ‘ladder – leer’ play on words, but by the alphabet.

Jacob Grimmer is known as an innovator of landscape art, something demonstrated in this painting by the choice of a slightly elevated vantage point, while large trees, painted in great detail, act as a repoussoir. Curving paths in lighter or darker brown, green and yellowy pink shades lend depth to the hilly landscape, which runs into a river on the left. The rebus forms part of the landscape and is included in it. Hypocrisy enters the scene from behind a hill, but the symbolism is unrelated to what is taking place in the landscape. There we see the horrors of war: this puts the painting into a specific historical context. On the far right a woman and a child beg for mercy for the man who is being hanged on a tree by a helmeted soldier; two likewise helmeted soldiers on horseback and a third look on. Another
victim is already hanging from a tree on the left of the scene. Confusion and violence reign in the background. Farmhouses are being plundered on the right. In the centre people loot a village church and haul the bell from the tower, probably with the intention of melting it down for guns.18 Further to the left the priest in ceremonial garb is captured by soldiers and taken, with the parish banners, to a waiting boat; others carry the gold reliquary. Sacks of looted goods lie ready for transport. On the river there is a sailing boat, probably a fishing craft, carrying refugees who are being fired upon by soldiers from another boat. A village is also being besieged on the other bank of the river. In the distance lies a walled town.

The scene of soldiers plundering and murdering – a far from unfamiliar subject in the late sixteenth century – was certainly not painted from life, but without doubt it refers to military operations that took place to the north and east of Antwerp with great frequency.19 There were dozens of attacks ashore by marauding bands of Sea Beggars from Vlissingen – in rebel hands since 1572 – on villages and small towns on the coasts of Zeeland and Northwest Flanders in the period between 1572 and 1576; two comprehensive studies chart these raids in detail.20 The Sea Beggars, sometimes numbering as many as three hundred men, terrorized the populations of the coastal villages. They set fire to churches, took the priests hostage and stole anything that took their fancy: money, goods and livestock. On occasion the priest was murdered. There has been much speculation about the aim of these forays. It is possible that the Sea Beggars' organized looting in the sea polder areas was an attempt to conquer Zeeland and perhaps Flanders, too, once and for all. When their efforts failed they called a halt to their activities at the end of 1576: William of Orange started negotiations that led to the Pacification of Ghent in October 1576.

The reports and rumours about these aggressive raids also reached Antwerp and were certainly known about in the circle of the Violiers. The famous chronicle about the troubles in the city between 1565 and 1574 written by Godevaert van Haecht (1546-89), Willem van Haecht's nephew and, like him, a Lutheran,21 mentions them several times. One example is the raid on Eeklo in East Flanders at the end of June. ‘Around three hundred soldiers from Zeeland, known as Beggars, arrived in the village of Eeklo in Flanders, where they looted the church of its silverware and took the priest, the mayor and the bailiff in captivity to their ships, as a result of which as many as three hundred people were...
driven from the village, because they did not want to submit to the papacy'.

The painter Jacob Grimmer moved in the same circles in Antwerp as Willem van Haecht, the deviser of the rebus.\(^2\) He became a member of De Violieren in 1546, and a year later a member of the Guild of St Luke. Van Mander praised him as a landscape painter, but he was also ‘devoted to rhetoric and a very good character in the drama’.\(^3\) Grimmer was a Lutheran too. Evidently he was familiar with Van Haecht’s invention of the World Upside Down rebus, which may have already been put into a drawing by Martin van Cleve in 1574, but would only see the light as a print five years later, with some small but significant changes. The painting of 1574, with its realistic depiction of raids by Calvinist Sea Beggars in combination with the allegorical warning against the horrific violence, was directed not so much against Calvinism, but against the merciless activities of the Sea Beggars. Five years later in a very different political environment, it was possible to use the same rebus, with only minor changes, in the propaganda war against the Spanish tyranny. The rebus had a generally pacific intent, which could be used in various political situations.\(^4\) This was in line with the Lutheran philosophy of life. Further research may show whether other allegorical prints, now automatically regarded as anti-Spanish, might be interpreted differently.

**NOTES**

1. For Wouter, who conceived the exhibition *Art before the Iconoclasm*, this contribution on the art that followed it.
5. For anti-Spanish animal symbolism see Horst op. cit. (note 2), figs 88-91, p. 224, and note 11.
7. ‘Gheveijtsheijt, met Tijrannij, hout de weereel verkeert; / Trouw, ende Liefde sleyt, soo den Tij, ons leert.’
8. The print is mentioned in passing and interpreted as a complaint against Spanish tyranny in C.W.M. Hazelzet-van der Linden, *Verkeerde wereld, exempla contraria in de Nederlandse beeldende kunst*, Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit thesis) 2004, pp. 43 and 298.
9. ‘Schout blinde herders, die Gods wet onteieren / Want deur haer sotheijt wolven de schaepen scheren.’
11. For the Antwerp chambers of rhetoric in the sixteenth century see Anne-Laure van Bruaene, *Om beters welle. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke

For Willem van Haecht and his family see J. van Roey, ‘Het Antwerpse geslacht Van Haecht (Verhaecht); taferelenmakers, schilders, kunsthandelaars’ in: Miscellanea Joseph Duwerger, Bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis der Nederlanden, 1, Gent 1968, pp. 216-30, and Nationaal biografisch woordenboek, t. Brussels 1964, cols. 879-91.


14 In 1585 the population of Antwerp was approximately 55-60% Catholic, approximately 25-30% Calvinist, approximately 15% Lutheran and approximately 2% Anabaptist, see J. Andriessen, ‘De katholieken te Antwerpen 1577-85’ in: Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis, 70 (1987), p. 61.

15 Oil on panel, 94.5 x 123.8 cm; private collection, Amsterdam; sale Christie’s Amsterdam, 6 May 1996, lot no. 100, as ‘An allegory and illustration of the effects of Spanish policy in the Netherlands, 1565-1575’. See also Reine de Bertier de Sauvigny, Jacob et Abel Grimmer, catalogue raisonne. Brussels 1991, pp. 61 and 63, no. xv and pl. 6. Mentioned in David Kunzle, From Criminal to Courtier; the Soldier in Netherlandish Art 1550-1672, Leiden 2002, p. 183.


17 Cesare Ripa, Iconologia or Uytbeeldinght des verstandes, Soest 1671 (repr. ed. 1644), pp. 164-65 (Geveinstheyt in the slicker hand a Pater noster) and pp. 350-51 (Invidia Nijdigheyt). It is not certain whether the round fruit is an apple. If it is a pomegranate this woman may represent Hypocrisy; however, the anti-Catholic connotation has been dropped, Horst op. cit. (note 2), pp. 202 and 207.

18 Rob van Roosbroeck (ed.), De kroniek of Godevaert van Haecht, over de troebelen van 1565 tot 1574 te Antwerpen en elders, Antwerp 1929, ii, p. 201 (25 July 1572): ‘verlieten sy (de Geuzen) seer subytelck Aerdenborch nemende allen den roof met haer oock de clocken uyt den toren om gescut af te gieten’.


21 Van Roey op. cit. (note 9), pp. 220-23; he worked with his uncle Willem and the Wierixes.


