Trading Values in Early Modern Antwerp

Waarde en waarden in vroegmodern Antwerpen

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An allegory of artistic choice in times of trouble
Pieter Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel*

Koenraad Jonckheere

**Introduction**

In the second half of the sixteenth century in the Low Countries, depictions of the Tower of Babel flourished. Composing an important subcategory of landscape paintings, the bulk of these canvases and panels have been interpreted as moralizing pictures – in other words, as allegories of or commentaries on the vice of hubris. This may come as no surprise. The story of the megalomaniacal tower project is told in chapter 11 of the book of Genesis. According to Genesis, little had happened on earth since the creation of the world. Adam and Eve had taken a bite of the apple, Cain had murdered Abel and God had flooded the earth because the people had turned to wrongdoing. Noah and the animals escaped the flood. Immediately after these well-known stories came the tale of the Tower of Babel. The Tower of Babel, in other words, is the first of many attempts by mankind to touch the divine by means of its creative talent, in this case architecture. No idols had yet been made. It was the building itself that was idolatrous: the first human attempt to challenge God’s creation. In early Judaic-Christian tradition, Nimrod, who was mentioned in chapter 10 of the book of Genesis as the son of Kus and who was said to be the ‘first mighty ruler on earth’, was credited with the idea of building the tower. This reading (or misreading) of the Bible was based on Flavius Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities*, book I, chapter 4. Nimrod, who became a kind of personification of the hubris associated with the blasphemous building project, appears in many a depiction of the subject from the late Middle Ages onwards (figs. 15–17). Pieter Bruegel’s (1525–1569) *Tower of Babel* from 1563 (fig. 10) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, on the other hand, has rarely been considered to be a depiction of hubris. On the contrary, it has given rise to a plethora of interpretations, ranging from a forthright comment on the political upheaval of his age to an intricate discussion on the state of the arts in the Low Countries in 1563. These analyses of Bruegel’s panel have focused on anything but the biblical theme. Contemporary politics in particular were considered to be a source of inspiration for the artist by several art historians. In this specific understanding of the visual narrative, Nimrod, standing in the foreground, is equated with Philip II, while the tower is considered to be an allegory of the king’s unbridled arrogance and ambition. Others, such as Margaret Carroll, have explained Bruegel’s iconography as a metaphor of Antwerp as a contemporary, religious Babylon. In doing so, Carroll built on Gibson’s idea that Bruegel showed the congruous cooperation of the Babylonian people before God
punished them by confounding their speech. The foregrounding of the harmonious building process (which was actually an old topos, as we will see) emphasized the lost unity of the Church, according to Gibson. Fundamental for this explanation is the idea that the harbor and the Brabantine town next to the tower are references to Antwerp. However, since there are no further, explicit clues linking Bruegel’s cityscape with the wealthy city on the river Scheldt, it is questionable whether this identification actually holds true. On the other hand, instead of straightforwardly identifying the city as Antwerp, it might be worthwhile to let the subtle references to the ‘capital of capitalism’ be what they are: subtle references, for it is precisely these refined hints that allow for an open discussion and a trade of values among beholders, as we will see. Suggestions often make a stronger case than forthright facts, since they create doubt and unsolvable questions. Woodall’s interesting description of analogies between mid-sixteenth-century Antwerp and Babel make absolutely clear how obvious yet intangible such iconographic hints were.

In yet another line of reasoning, the panel is considered to be a statement on antiquity and the vernacular. Crucial for the arguments raised in these studies is the premise that the tower is a reference to the Colosseum, visited by Bruegel around 1553 and known in the Netherlands through prints published by Hieronymus Cock (1518-1570) (fig. 1). Recently,
Stephanie Porras, who made a good argument for such an interpretation, also introduced the concept of *translatio* (as defined by Christopher Wood), arguing that Bruegel was commenting on a contemporary debate on local and Roman antiquities.\(^{10}\) James Bloom similarly emphasized the confusion of local and Roman antiquities and the vernacular, reading the painting’s narrative as a metaphor of a Babylonic confounding of the visual arts in the sixteenth century.\(^{11}\)

However insightful and tempting these complex analyses of the iconography might be, the significance of Bruegel’s 1563 *Tower of Babel* is also much more straightforward, it being a comment on – or rather a question about – the role, necessity and nature of architectural edifices. In the end, the depiction of the Tower of Babel is the depiction of an ambitious building project more than anything else. Indeed, there are references to Roman and local antiquities, but they were linked to an iconography that was not value-free in the Netherlands in the 1560s, since the Babel metaphor was used frequently in religious discourse on art and architecture.\(^{12}\)

In this chapter I will first summarize the contemporary and widespread debate on man-made objects, in particular religious edifices, in order to argue that Bruegel linked his work to the discourse on local and Roman antiquity and the vernacular. In doing so, he phrased an allegorical question about the form, the nature and the desirability of art and architecture for religious purposes, a debate that was omnipresent in Antwerp in the second half of the sixteenth century. As such, Bruegel appears to have invited his audience to trade values between art, architecture and religion.\(^{13}\) Particularly in Bruegel’s 1565 *Tower of Babel* in Vienna, in which the artist blends the iconographical tradition with contemporary disputes, this ‘societal bidding’ is apparent. In other words, Bruegel’s visual syntax seems to be constructed in such a way that it invited people to exchange symbolic values on poignant contemporary debates.

**Babylon, Iconoclasm and a contemporary debate**

While the Tower of Babel might have been the first controversial attempt to build a gigantic skyscraper, it certainly was not the last. In the age of Reformation, the Mediaeval Romanesque and Gothic towers and campanile were considered to be Towers of Babel by many a Reformer: ‘the heretics [i.e., papists] shout that a Christian congregation is false if a stone temple with a long Babylonic Tower is absent’, according to the 166th of Petrus Bloccius’s *Two hundred heresies of the Catholic Church* (published in 1567).\(^{14}\) Bloccius (c. 1540–c. 1582) was a Brabantine theologian who had studied in Leuven and Bologna. In the 1550s he converted to Protestantism, and he positioned himself as an independent polemicist in the 1560s and ’70s. In his magnum opus, *Two hundred heresies*, Bloccius argued that ‘a nice field, wood or mountain is a more beautiful church than the popish murder-dens, which are dungeons’.\(^{15}\) ‘[A]s a man who enters a brothel would be slandered and ill-famed, comparably no one must go into a papist church’.\(^{16}\) To many a Reformer, it was far better to preach in the open air, as shown in paintings made around 1565–1566 by...
Lucas van Valckenborch (1535-1597) (fig. 2), Bruegel and so many others; it was better to baptize in the nearest river than in these papist ‘murder dens’. After all, St. John the Baptist did not preach in the temple. This notion was omnipresent. Another influential and reformatory text used the same idiom and metaphors to question the Catholic Church: ‘Christ was born in a woodshed and has no place in the guesthouse.’ Johannes Anastasias Veluanus (c. 1520-c. 1570), the author of the text, maintained that it was against the scriptures that the alleged heirs of St. Peter (the popes) claimed wealth, an empire even, as if they were meant to reign over worldly goods. Veluanus, like Bloccius, argued that churches in the first centuries A.D. were simple houses and stables. Only under the reign of Constantine had Christians started to build huge temples for prayer, Veluanus went on, but (St.) Augustine already considered these edifices ‘un-Godly’. According to Veluanus, these temples, which were devoted to saints in later ages, became iamerlicke moirtkuyl (dreadful murder dens), a metaphor based on Matthew 21:13. These comments, which stem from Calvin’s and other Reformers’ teachings, were common in the religious debates in the Netherlands in the 1560s. The Church of Christendom was supposed to be a spiritual edifice in which there was no place for wealth or ambition. The building was used as metaphor for the community and vice versa.

Bloccius and Veluanus were no lone rangers. In many a pamphlet and in several prints, the same idea was put forward, albeit in a less imperative
voice. The *Eglise de Christ* (fig. 3), for instance, is an etching that appeared around 1570, which shows a church being destroyed by popish villains. In the meantime, *les enfants de dieu* (the children of God) walk out of a temple on the right-hand side into the open field. The print shows the destruction of the Church, in an allegorical and in a literal sense. Both the building and the religious community of the Church are on the verge of collapse. Neither Christ nor his apostles were wealthy, Reformers of all confessions repeated time and again. Nor did He preach in majestic temples, for indeed, ‘Christ and his apostles preferred to preach in the open field or in the street, rather than in idolatrous temples’.

An illustration in the *Discours oft corte enarratie, op die beroovinghe der catholycker kercken* (fig. 4), a translation of Claude des Sainctes’s *Discours sur le saccagement des églises catholiques par les hérétiques anciens et nouveaux calvinistes* (1562) published in Dutch in 1567, foregrounds the same iconographic themes. Here, too, a church and the Church are under attack. In the distance, a ‘Babylonic’ tower is falling down. Yet another example of the destruction of The Church/a church is to be found in Richard Verstegen’s (1550-1640) famous account of the cruelties (fig. 5) of his age. It shows the Iconoclasm of 1566 – but in this portrayal, together with the images of Christ, the Virgin and the Saints, the church itself is
being smashed. Again, the architectural edifice is part of the problem. Not only are the popish idols under attack, but the church is too. It is being demolished as if it were an idol.

All these examples built on iconographic formats, developed in the Low Countries in the 1520s by such artists as Bernard van Orley, a convicted Lutheran, to whom the invention of a drawing entitled *Allegory on the vices of the Catholic Church* in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, is attributed (fig. 6). In the background, the Church is embattled, both as an institution and as an idolatrous building.²⁴

Yet another print, published in the early 1580s (fig. 7), again shows a building. It reminds us of Philips Galle’s (1537-1612) famous engraving after Bruegel of the good shepherd (1565).²⁵ A ruin of a poor man’s sheep shed is

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again being plundered by popish rogues, while Christ as the good shepherd is leaving it. The metaphor questioned religious greed and unbridled ambition. It was a strong allegory, and it was used and copied in many prints and paintings (fig. 8). No wonder that Bloccius’s 80th heresy was that ‘the heretics [i.e., papists] turn their temples into stables and barns, for all kinds of animals are to be found in them’. Possibly, it was this line of reasoning and this kind of imagery that led Cornelis van Dalem (1530-1573), one of the most prominent Protestant painters of the second half of the sixteenth century in Antwerp, to depict his Landscape with a church ruin (fig. 9). While the painting can be read as, for instance, a comment on poverty, it is not too hard to imagine Van Dalem’s work also being a remark on the decline of the Catholic Church (both as a

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6 Bernard van Orley, Allegory on the vices of the Catholic Church, c. 1527, pen in brown on black chalk, 41.7 x 77.7 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet (photo: Rijksmuseum).
Artist unknown, Tafereel oft Proef-steen wie op dese werelt na God leven (...), c. 1560-1580, engraving, 490 mm x 400 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet (photo: Rijksmuseum).
community and as a building) – and as an allegory on the new branches of the Christian faith that grew out of an old, dead trunk (a metaphor based on Josiah 11:1). After all, the imagery of Van Dalem’s painting clearly refers to imagery that was used in satirical prints and thus was distributed in large quantities throughout the Netherlands, particularly in Antwerp.

Bloccius’s claim that ‘the heretics [i.e., papists] shout that a Christian congregation is false if a stone temple with a long Babylonic Tower is absent’ also helps to explain the popularity of the Tower of Babel, in particular in Pieter Bruegel’s version from 1563 (fig. 10). While many in recent decades have studied this panel extensively, as mentioned, part of its message has been overlooked.

‘God does not live in temples made by human hands’

Bloccius, of course, was not the only one to condemn and abandon the idea of a majestic church as the ‘house of God’. He was not the first, nor the last, to raise the issue of architecture. It was an old and widespread criticism of Roman Catholicism, disseminated in the sixteenth century
Cornelis van Dalem, *Landscape with a church ruin*, 1564, oil on panel, 103 x 127.5 cm, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek (photo: Alte Pinakothek).

Throughout northern Europe by John Calvin (1509-1564), amongst others. Moreover, the critique was almost as old as the Church itself and posed fundamental questions to many a believer: what is the status of man-made objects (including architecture) and what role are these to play in religion? Bloccius’s and Veluanus’s remarks, in other words, summarize one of the most common and old critiques of (Catholic) devotional practices.

The first problem with buildings – and certainly ambitious buildings – for religious purposes was the interference (or supposed interference) between the physical and the spiritual. As Carlos Eire, Helmut Feld, Giuseppe Scavizzi and several others have aptly demonstrated in recent decades, all parties actually agreed on the fact that the ultimate truth – i.e., God in Christianity – lay beyond the realm of the physical world. However, the different factions substantially disagreed on the role art and architecture played in this discussion. According to Calvin, art and architecture created the impression that the spiritual could be or could be made tangible, while Catholics argued that it was but a means to get in touch with the spiritual, just like the Bible (as an object). The focus of this whole discussion lay on the depiction of God himself, but extended to all that was made by human hands. Of course, images of all sorts, and certainly the ones placed on altars, were the most problematic man-made objects – but at times, religious buildings were hardly less controversial, as Bloccius’s text makes absolutely clear; he repeatedly fulminated, ‘God does not live in temples made by human hands!’ Of course, this is a simplification of a very complex and old theological debate. However, it is important to realize that the polemists and preachers of the different factions at the time communicated precisely these straightforward arguments, making abstraction of all the nuances.

Thus, like in all previous iconoclastic eras in Christianity, the focus of the debates of the 1560s lay, to a large extent, on two core problems: the
first was the ‘made by human hands’ notion and the second was the materiality, the physicality of all that was used for religious purposes: religious vessels, imagery, books and obviously the church buildings. While Karlstadt von Bodenstein in the early sixteenth century only condemned the idols placed in the ‘house of God’ (Matthew 21:13), half a century later Bloccius and his contemporaries, as we have seen, discredited the buildings as also being idolatrous: ‘for the temples were houses first; only afterwards they built high towers with improper materials’. Or, as Calvin said in his commentaries on the book of Psalms, ‘God does not dwell in temples made by hands.’

As briefly mentioned, these comments on the use of man-made objects or structures for religious purposes were definitely not new in the sixteenth century. In two recent interesting studies on Iconoclasm, Alain Besançon and Thomas Noble even make a link between Platonic art theories on the one hand and the Byzantine and Carolingian image theories on the other. David Freedberg, in turn, showed that these disputations from the eighth and ninth centuries found their way into the sixteenth-century theological discussions on art in the Low Countries. The wave of Iconoclasm that struck Byzantium in that era urged theologians to formulate complex theories of imagery and its use, pro and contra. One of the common
denominators of the whole debate was the status of ‘art’ and architecture since, in the end, they were all man-made objects consisting of mere stone and wood. Divinity, after all, was un-representable, un-evocable even, and it was certainly impossible to create it with human hands out of dead materials. Not even the most talented sculptor, painter or architect was able to equate God’s creation, according to the critics. Iconophile writers, such as St. John of Damascus (676-749), opposed this critique by arguing,

You see that the law and everything it commanded and all our own practices are meant to sanctify the work of our hands, leading us through matter to the invisible God. Now the law and its ordinances were a shadow of the image that was to come, that is, our true worship, which itself is the image of the good things yet to happen. These good things are the heavenly Jerusalem not fashioned with hands, or corruptible manner (...).

In other words, although corrupted by nature, art and architecture are a means to get in touch with the divine.

The *Libri Carolini* (c. 793), composed by Theodulf of Orléans (c. 750/760-821) and other theologians on the initiative of Charlemagne and as a response to writers such as St. John of Damascus and the Acta of the second council of Nicaea, picked up the discourse on the status and use of imagery and – to some extent – church architecture in Christianity. The Church in the West, in that era, was not particularly fond of imagery for devotional use and quite radically declined the new Byzantine image-theology. One of the most important arguments to resist the use of painting and sculpture within the Church was, again, the fact that they were but man-made objects in plain stone or wood. Comparably, Theodulf argued that the famous metaphor ‘house of God’ (Matthew 21:13) was to be understood in a purely spiritual sense, rather than literal. According to the same line of reasoning, the church is also a man-made object in plain stone or wood. Theodulf, to make his point, referred to Rome as the new Babylon, an idea he had picked up from St. Augustine. In the 1500s, Rome as the new Babylon would become a common comparison again.

In the literature on the image debates in the Low Countries, architecture was left out of the discussion, while it was strongly intertwined with the religious discourse on art since early Christianity. Generally, the arguments were articulated in complex Latin texts, but certainly in the second half of the sixteenth century the arguments were published in the vernacular too, turning it into a societal debate. Moreover, the crux of the matter was – it will be clear – simple. First, all that is made by human hands is physical and thus not spiritual, as Calvinists, such as Bloccius, would argue. Therefore man-made objects could not constitute the ultimate reality, which is spiritual and divine. Second, since human hands made these objects, they were corrupt by nature. Man, after all, is full of sin. The church – the building, that is – which had become the most ambitious, human attempt to evoke the divine on earth in the late Middle Ages (a literal effort to build the ‘house of God’), was troublesome as a consequence. Many a Protestant, including Bloccius,
considered churches to be idolatrous and blasphemous. It may therefore come as no surprise that in the age of Iconoclasm in the Netherlands, satirical and other prints depicting the destruction of the Church buildings were published and many Reformers questioned the form and function of the existing churches, both in a literal and in an allegorical sense.

Thus, while both Protestant church architecture and the use of imagery in devotional practice has been the focus of much research in recent years, part of the problem seems to have been ignored. Indeed, iconolatry was highly problematic in the second half of the sixteenth century in the Low Countries, but hardly less troublesome were the buildings themselves, since these were all manufactured objects used for religious purposes. This ‘architectural idolatry’, as one could call it, has been overlooked in recent studies. The cleansing of the church went further than the destruction of idols, as one can read in contemporary descriptions. Rarely were the buildings themselves actually destroyed, but they did provoke many a discussion. In the end, the ambition of the Reformers was to return to the origins of Christianity. Majestic temples, with their ‘Babylonic’ towers, were not to be part of this. They were not mentioned in the Bible nor did the first Christians use them, as Bloccius, Veluanus and other claimed in unison. The Church was supposed to be a ‘spiritual’ construct, not an idolatrous edifice.

The Tower of Babel

Since the early Renaissance, artists in northern Europe were well aware of the discussions on materiality and the ‘made by human hands’ concept, as argued elsewhere. Jean Fouquet’s famous miniature of the construction of Salomon’s temple in Jerusalem (fig. 11) – represented as a Gothic cathedral – already clearly emphasized the manual labor invested in these buildings, and a manuscript picture Bible in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France without hesitation links the manufacturing of the Babylonian tower to idolatry, as Michael Camille observed. Maarten van Heemskerck’s famous Seven wonders of the world print series, too, is a significant example of the importance attached to the awareness of the ‘humanity’ and physicality of buildings and objects. Van Heemskerck drew the designs around 1570. They were engraved by Galle and published in 1572 (fig. 12). In the series, Van Heemskerck systematically emphasizes the materials of the objects and in doing so stressed the fact that these pagan ‘idols’ and temples were man-made artifacts. Moreover, he foregrounded the Artes Mechanicae needed for the constructions rather than the Artes Liberales. Given the ambition of artists, certainly Romanists, to uplift painting to a liberal art, this choice seems peculiar. In the context of the religious debates of the 1560s and ’70s, however, the iconography does make sense. Van Heemskerck simply shows what these pagan edifices were: impressive man-made stone objects. He anticipated religious criticism for this work.

In another print made after a design by Van Heemskerck, the connection between the Tower of Babel and idolatry is visualized even more strongly. In the series De loop des werelds (The course of the world),
nine triumphal chariots are depicted. The series, which appeared in 1564, is based on the chariots used in the Antwerp Besnijdenisprocessie (Circumcision procession) of 1561 and allegorically depicts various types of human behavior, ranging from war to peace. The third print shows Superbia or pride (fig. 13), which is a result of Opulentia (Wealth) and leads to Invidia (Envy). In the print, pride is visually linked to the iconolatry of antiquity and the Tower of Babel. The hubris of building a Babylonic edifice was thus equated with the erection of a monumental idol on a pedestal.

The interest in materials and manufacturing, as displayed in Van Heemskerck’s prints, are a fine example of what I am about to say about Bruegel’s 1563 Tower of Babel, for the visual narrative of this rare iconography is based on the same principles. Particularly in Antwerp, where throughout the sixteenth century the kerkfabriek of Our Lady’s Church (which had become a Cathedral in 1559) had the ambition to build an even bigger church, and the focus on the manufacturing was significant. On the 1565 Virgilius Bononiensis map of Antwerp, the unfinished choir is still discernible. Antwerp’s main church, in other words, was a work in progress at the time.

Indeed, from manuscript illuminations of the late Middle Ages to the depictions of the theme in the sixteenth century, what was foregrounded was the building process: man molding the stones. In other words, the paintings are not solely about the architectural edifice, but to a great extent are about its manufacture as well. The stereotypical iconography of the Tower of Babel questions man’s ambition to build, to make, to construct. The book of hours by the Bedford Master (fig. 14), Gerard Horenbout’s Grimani Breviary (fig. 15) or the miniature in Du cas des nobles hommes et femmes in Glasgow (fig. 16) may serve as cases in point.
Moreover, the one thing that is actually brand new in Bruegel's iconography is the fact that the tower is carved from a rock (fig. 10). Prior to Bruegel, it seems that the tower was always depicted as being built from the ground up with stone blocks. This iconographic feature – which was stressed by Bruegel, since he did depict it in the center of the painting – makes quite a difference in the context of the mid-sixteenth-century debate on art and architecture as summarized above. By using this iconographic novelty, Bruegel adds another dimension to traditional allusions to ‘made by human hands’, which were ever-present in the sixteenth-century image debates and in the depictions of Babylonic edifices, such as Bruegel’s Tower and Van Heemskerck’s Wonders of the World. The idolatrous tower is carved from rock, by which it completely becomes a sculpted idol, made of mere stone. In other words, not only did Bruegel foreground the traditional human activity (made by human hands), but he also stressed the materiality of the object (mere stone). As demonstrated above and on other occasions, precisely the human molding of the material object was proof of the ungodliness of objects and edifices in the age of Iconoclasm, far more than their actual shape. ‘One cannot turn stone or wood into something holy’, to quote Bloccius again.

That was precisely the distinction drawn between Catholic and Calvinist views on church buildings (or temples, as they were called). For Calvinists,


the church was mainly a ‘body of people, rather than a physical structure’. The building itself was merely a place to assemble. For Catholics, the church was a sacred space. Protestants would ask, how could a human edifice be turned into a sacred ‘object’?

Thus, with the insertion of the rock, another reference was made to the contemporary debate sketched above. Moreover, it was a reference to the hubris associated with art and architecture since antiquity. Art and architecture, in the end, challenged God’s creation.

The innovation proved to be successful in the following decades, for painters like Lucas van Valckenborch and Joos de Momper (1564-1635) built on Bruegel’s example. Stepping into his footsteps, they foregrounded the rock out of which the building was carved, and
occasionally added a church or an idol, completely turning the edifice into an idolatrous object. Hendrik III van Cleve (fig. 17) even went so far as to introduce a servant presenting Nimrod with a piece of cloth depicting the tower. The kneeling workman strongly echoes the St. Veronica topos (fig. 18). He is thus presenting an idolatrous image to the king, instead of the Vera Icon.\textsuperscript{64} Hans Belting showed how this particular image served as an important 'icon' since late antiquity precisely because it was ‘not made by human hands’.

Incidentally, the idea of ‘idolatry’ was strongly reinforced by Bruegel through the ‘idolatrous’ behavior of the workmen in the foreground of his work. This was an iconographic rarity as well, if not a novelty. In the above-named examples of the iconography (figs. 14, 15 and 16) Nimrod
visits the yard while the workmen build on. In Bruegel’s version, the workers stop and fall on their knees for their sovereign. They do not work for God. They venerate their monarch. Again, within the context of the image debates of the 1560s and ’70s, this makes a remarkable difference. The physical veneration of persons and objects was the ultimate proof (to Protestants) of their idolatrous nature. This physical veneration itself was considered to be blasphemous. According to Reformed polemicians and theologians, one was expected to bow or kneel for God alone. Physically showing respect to man-made, material objects was utterly ridiculous. In the arguments for and against proskynesis and other kinds of physical worship, activists and theologians, particularly Catholics, systematically compared the veneration of images to the respect one was to show (or not) to his or her king. Again, this was an ancient discussion; one already finds the comparison in the writings of the iconophile St. John of Damascus. It constantly reoccurred in the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth century it was picked up in the discussions between the prominent theologians Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486-1541), Hiéronymus Emser (1478-1527) and Johannes Eck (1486-1543). Other polemicians in northern Europe, including the ones in the Netherlands in
the 1560s, followed suit. Martinus Duncanus (1506-1590), Francois Richardot (1507-1574), Renatus Benedictus (1521-1608), Petrus Blocci,us, Johannes Anastasius Veluanus, Johannes Molanus (1533-1585) and others all devoted many paragraphs or chapters to the issue.

However, the graving of the rock and the kneeling of the workmen are not the only features that link the iconography to contemporary debates. The tower is a combination of a Colosseum-like structure with a generic Romanesque architecture – the kind of architecture that one can find in many places north of the Alps, for instance at Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy or closer to Brussels in Tournai. Moreover, in many a painting in the Northern Renaissance, one finds this kind of architecture, featuring strong abutments and blind arcades with double windows and oculi as well. In the back of the central panel of Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*, for instance, or on the left wing of Quentin Matsys’s (1466-1530) *Kinship-triptych* (fig. 19), a similar kind of generic Romanesque architecture is depicted.

![Image of Memling, St Veronica, oil on panel, 32 × 24 cm, Washington, National Gallery of Art (photo: National Gallery of Art).]
Bruegel thus blended an iconic edifice of antiquity with an ancient but northern vernacular idiom. Paraphrasing and slightly modifying Matt Kavaler's concept of the 'Renaissance Gothic,' one could argue that in the *Tower of Babel*, Pieter Bruegel constructed a 'Romanesque Renaissance.'

He constructed a tower out of local antiquities to resemble the Colosseum, Rome's most impressive relic of antiquity. It thus refers to building history north and south of the Alps. The tower is not an antique structure in a Brabantine town, as for instance Margret Carroll maintained. It is an explicitly local edifice modeled after an antique prototype. Wittily, Bruegel even introduced a Romanesque alternative for the 'classical orders' as pilasters on the abutments (fig. 10). In doing so, he subtly referred to the remarks his master Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502-1550) made in his influential Serlio-translation. For, in these *Generale reglen der architectvren* (General rules of architecture), Coecke indeed acknowledged that 'therefore some take samples from the Ancients and others from our [architecture]. One is also allowed to blend the boorish [boerse] manner with the Doric, the Ionic and sometimes the Corinthian.'

Thus, besides subtle references to contemporary debates on iconolatry, Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* of 1563 also included some references to humanist issues. What did they have in common? Plenty of studies in recent years (including this volume) have demonstrated that sixteenth-century artists did not take the Italian Renaissance and its reception of antiquity for granted. Bruegel in particular has been promoted as a painter who questioned the alleged supremacy of the Florentine-Roman *maniera* by proposing a more local reading of antiquity, guided by an Erasmian and rhetorician's focus on the vernacular. Yet, as has become clear, Jan Gossaert (1478-1532), Michiel Coxie (1499-1592), Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574), Lambert Lombard (1505-1566), Willem Key (c. 1515-1568) and others made analogous enquiries into the nature of art, albeit in a different idiom. However, Bruegel was one of the few in Antwerp whose style and subject matter was not only considered to be an artistic choice but a political or religious statement as well. Or, as Manfred Sellink (following Walter Gibson and David Freedberg) wrote in his recent monograph on Pieter Bruegel the Elder, many scholars seem to have been preoccupied with his religious and political affiliations. According to Sellink (and I agree), 'Art and cultural historians have been remarkably eager in the last century to interpret a relatively small number of paintings as representing a diversity of opinions on the part of the painter: both for and against Spanish authorities, both for and against the Catholic Church or some combination thereof.' Indeed, many sources and arguments were used and introduced into the discussion, but bizarrely, Bruegel's art was rarely linked to a discussion that was, without doubt, fundamental for him and his fellow painters, namely the *Bilderfrage* of the 1550s and 1560s. These image debates, which eventually lead to the *Beeldenstorm*, the repression under Alva and the Revolt, were vital for artists since they interrogated the legitimacy of art in general and religious art in particular. For most artists in sixteenth-century Antwerp — including Bruegel — the debates and the Iconoclasm challenged their core business, their income and their future. It is highly improbable that artists were not interested in the matter. The
question therefore is not if the artists were aware of the controversies and its implications. The question is whether they implemented in their art some of the arguments raised by the different factions. Moreover, did they take a stance? If not, the observation that Bruegel scholarship is preoccupied with his religious and political affiliations (undoubtedly stemming from Van Mander’s comments on his life⁸⁰) is actually proof of Bruegel’s aims: highlighting possibilities. Bruegel’s oeuvre differs from the oeuvres of his Antwerp contemporaries discussed above, in that he explicitly linked the question of antiquity to religious issues.⁸¹ The moral questions that he raises refer to both humanist concerns and religious turmoil. Did he conceive them as inextricable?

Indeed, as we have seen, the visual narrative in Bruegel’s 1563 Tower of Babel was a blend of local and Roman antiquities combined with manifest references to age-old arguments forwarded in debates on idolatry and Iconoclasm. Shining through is the exegetical interpretation of hubris. The iconography of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s 1563 Tower of Babel thus blends three of the most prominent discussions of the second half of the sixteenth century in Antwerp, at least for artists: disputes on Roman and local antiquities, on the Bildерfrage and on the hubris inherent to (religious) art, the colossal shape of the tower being an extrapolation of it.⁸² The artist, after all, creates a mimesis of God’s creation and from time to time tries to emulate it.

In the history of sixteenth-century Netherlandish art, and Antwerp art in particular, these topics have only been studied separately, but they were actually closely entangled. The Tower of Babel, whilst hinting at a discourse on iconolatry, is not purely antique or ‘vernacular’ nor Reformed or Catholic. The artifact is a blend of conflicting yet entangled traditions: a Babylonic confusion of different (visual) narratives and related image theologies. As such it can be read as an allegory of artistic choice in times of trouble.

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19 Quentin Matsys, Saint Anna triptych (detail), oil on panel, 219.5 x 91.5 cm (left wing), Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, detail of the left wing (photo: Lukas – Art in Flanders).
Conclusion

In his *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, St. Augustine at a certain point talks about the conversion of ‘those people whose intellect was trained by questions on the major issues’. He considers them to be the real scholars and argues that they require special attention, at least if one would want to convert them. Intellectually they tend to be vain, he wrote. The plain and dense text in the Bible might even bore them. For that reason, it is important to challenge them with complex allegorical exegeses.

The chance that Bruegel actually knew of St. Augustine’s remarks is rather small, I believe, but that is not the point I am trying to make. Bruegel, living in a rhetorician’s culture in which the *quaestio* or question played a seminal role, seems to have formulated an allegorical question rather than a clear-cut political or religious stance, actually quite in line with Augustine’s suggestions. He brilliantly entwined a myriad of associative qualities in the visual narrative, hinting at divergent but entangled controversial issues. He refrained from taking a position, though. Instead, Bruegel made sure that the iconography appealed to a beholder who was primed by contemporary debates on the nature of Babylonic towers, religious edifices and multifaceted antiquity. Thus, instead of explicitly visualizing judgments on the political and religious turmoil of his age, as Bruegel literature so often maintains, Bruegel more likely phrased *quaestiones disputatae* in a humanist, a rhetorician’s and, more broadly, an academic tradition. As such, the *Tower of Babel* served as the ultimate incentive for humanist discourse, since it posed the initial question; in this case a question on the relation between architecture, idolatry and Roman and local antiquity. That is, an allegorical question about the choices that he and his fellow Antwerp painters had to make in an age of fierce debates on the nature and validity of art and architecture. The subtle blend of suggestive references to contemporary debates in the Netherlands, particularly in the city of Antwerp, invited the beholders to partake in the discourse. In sum: while the object itself did not trade values, it invited – or, more accurately, obliged – people to do so... and it still does.

Notes

1. E.g., the explanation of the several examples of the Tower of Babel by various 16th-century landscape painters in: cat. Lille 2012-2013, esp. 310-317; Weiner 1985.
4. The literature on Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* is vast. In this chapter, I will only refer to recent literature which is specifically concerned with interpreting the painting.
12. Similar discussions took place in England until deep into the 17th century. See Morel 2011.
13. On the debates in Antwerp, see Jonckheere 2012. Plenty of studies in recent years have demonstrated that Bruegel’s works served as ignitions of social discourse, e.g. Gibson 2006; Kaveler 1999; Meadow 2002; Richardson 2011; Sullivan 1991.
15. Bloccius 1567, 282-283: ‘Een schoon velt, bosch, berch, etc. is schoonder kerck dan de pausche moort-cuylen, welck zijn kerckers’.
16. Bloccius 1567, 266: ‘Want ghelyck een mensche die in een bordeel gaat, wordt gelasterd ende beruchticht, alsoo mach niemandt in een pausche kerck gaan’.
20. On this print, see Horst 2003, 68-70, 314.
An allegory of artistic choice in times of trouble

Apostels hebben liever in huysen, schepen, bergen, ende straten geleert, dan in al godsdienstig tempels dat Woord Gods (…) souden geleert hebben.  
22 Des Sainctes 1587, fol. 34v.  
23 Vreesten 1857.  
25 On this print, see Horst 2003, 72; Philips Galle after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The parable of the good shepherd, engraving, 222 x 293 mm. Also see Sellink 2001, vol. 4.  
26 Bloccius 1567, 66: 'dat de ketters van de tempels meene tenallen ende schuure, want alderley beesten lietem in de Pausche al godsdienstig tempels'.  
27 Jonckheere 2012, 229-231.  
29 Bloccius 1567, 68, 180, 238ff: 'dat God niet en woon in tempels die met hende(n) syn gemaect'.  
30 Spicer 2007, passim.  
31 Kilde 2008, 111-112. After all, the Protestant movement of Luther flourished on the aversion of Rome's megalomaniac building projects, subsidized by indulgences, and Luther himself nailed his ninety-five theses to a church door (according to legend). Entering the church door was entering into corruption.  
33 On the resonances of these discussions in the Low Countries, see Freedberg 1988; Jonckheere 2012, 31-42.  
34 Bloccius 1567, 68, 180, 238ff.  
35 Besançon 2000, passim.  
36 Mangrum & Scavizzi 1998, 21, passim. See also Goldthwaith 1993.  
37 Bloccius 1567, 285: 'want de tempels waren eerst huysen, daerena hebben sy hooge torens met onrechtveerdich goet gemaect'.  
38 Cf. Spicer 2007, 8.  
40 Freedberg 1988, passim.  
42 Noble 2009, passim.  
43 Chastel 1983, 49-90. See also Snow 1983, 40-48, esp. 43.  
45 Including my own work: Jonckheere 2012. See this work for an overview of the recent literature on this subject.  
46 E.g., F.G.V. 1743; Van Haecht 1929-1933; Van Vaernwijk c.1782-1888.  
47 See particularly Koerner 1993, passim (esp. ch. 5: ‘Not made by human hands’). For the discussions in the Low Countries and Antwerp, see Jonckheere 2012, 188-226.  
51 Cat. Leuven 2013, 204-209.  
52 Cf. note 49.  
53 Moreover, the building campaigns were paid for by the revues of Our Lady’s pond (a permanent market for luxury goods, including works of art) since the 15th century. Art, crafts, commerce and religion went hand in hand in the young metropolis. Van Langendonck 1993, 112-120; Vermeulen 2003, 24-28.  
56 Bloccius 1567, 57: ‘Men can van steen ende hout niet heylisch maken’.  
57 Spicer 2007, 2.  
58 Kilde 2008, 91-129.  
59 E.g., Bussels 2012, passim.  
60 For a discussion on the problem of materiality in the Middle Ages, see Camille 1989, passim. On the materiality debate in Antwerp in the second half of the 16th century see Jonckheere 2013.  
61 E.g., Lucas van Valckenborch, Tower of Babel, 1595, panel, 43.5 x 64.5 cm, Koblenz, Mittelrhein-Museum, inv. M3; Joos de Momper the Younger, Tower of Babel, copper, 38.5 x 47.5 cm, Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, inv. 1465 pint.  
62 Belting 1994, 208-224.  
63 E.g., Richardot 1567, n.p.: ‘buijghen ende nicken vande(n) lichaem ghelijckme(n) doet voor Coninghen’. Other examples of this comparison in the 1550s and 1560s in the Low Countries, as well as the art historical implications, are to be found in Jonckheere 2012, 168-196.  
65 Camille 1989, passim.  
66 Jonckheere 2012, 23ff.  
67 Cf. note 55.  
69 Kavaler 2012.  
70 Carroll 2008, 75-87.  
72 Coecke van Aelst 1539, n.p.: ‘daarom(m)e vergadere(n) de som(m)e ige vande(n) antyke(n), en(de) som(m)e ige andere van(den) onsen (...) Me(n) sal oock moge(n) (...) menge(n), en(de) vereenijge(n) de boersche maniere met de dorica, en(de) ook met Ionica, en(de) somtijts met Corinthiai. As quoted in Weissert 2008, 173-200, 198.  
73 For recent literature see, for instance, Ramakers 2011; Keizer & Richardson 2011.  
74 E.g., recently: Sullivan 1991; Meadow 2002; Gibson 2006; Richardson 2011.  
76 Freedberg 1989, 53-65; Gibson 2006, 8.  
77 Sellink 2007, 33-34.  
78 Also mentioned in Silver 2011, 263-305.  
79 On this see Jonckheere 2012, 44-83.  
80 Van Mander 1604, fol. 226-234r: ‘Veel vreemde versieringen van sinnekez sieten van zijn drollen in Print: maer hadder noch seer veel net en suyver geteckent met eenighe schriften by, welcke ten deele te al seer bijnijtt of schimpich wesende, hy in zijn doot-sickte door zijn Huysvrouwe liet verbranden, door leetwesen, oft vreesende sy daer door in lijden quam, oft yet te verantwoorden mocht hebben’.  
81 On antiquaries in Bruegel’s entourage and their relation to local and Roman antiquity, see Meganck 2003.  
82 Cole & Zorach 2009, esp. 31-55.  
83 Augustine, De Catechizandis Rudibus, 1, 13: ‘illos doctissimos, quorum mens magnum rerum est exercitata quaestionibus’.  
84 Spies 1990, 133-150; Spies 1999, 15-17.  
85 Cf. note 84; Grabmann 1957, 221f; Lawn 1993.  
86 The concept of aporieia, introduced recently by Nagel and Pericolo 2010, fits the reading of iconography as proposed in this chapter.
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