

Circa 1660: Crisis and Ornament: The Creation of a New Interior for the Parish Church

3.1 Introduction

In 1659 Peeter Neefs the Younger depicted an ideal view of St. Jacob's that never was realized (fig. 2.9, and above, chapter 2, for a full discussion of this picture). The nave, in his perspective, is ornamented with the "antique" works that actually had been built (the 1585 pulpit and 1604 roodscreen). But in the nave chapels he painted imaginary renderings of the new kind of portico altar that already had been perfected in reality and built to unify the private chapels of the ambulatory constructed between 1626 and 1656 (see below, chapter 8). Although Neefs' picture suggests that this design would set the new standard for the nave chapels as well, only two of them actually were built. Just four years later, in 1663, Willem von Ehrenberg pictured a completely different vision, one that St. Jacob's churchwardens would implement in its general outlines, to fashion the church largely as it appears today (fig. 3.1).

Von Ehrenberg introduced for the first time major new elements that would transform the interior of St. Jacob's. His picture functioned both as a project model and as an advertisement to attract support.¹ A monumental stone roodscreen, with its high entablature decorated by life-sized sculptures set in deep niches, lifted by fat marble columns glistening with reflections against the lustrous surface, replaces the spindly and spare wooden structure built in 1604. Instead of the unadorned pulpit from 1585, Von Ehrenberg depicted a structure in which the base of intertwined angels supports a barrel deeply carved with elaborate figural decorations, and overhead, a sounding board crowned with edges that curve along garlands and cartouches, up and down, in and out. Instead of the sober portico altars that Neefs inserted into the side chapels as a new standard, Von Ehrenberg painted ornate retables, each of which projects a distinctive, lively profile to attract attention, animated by spiraling movements and large-scale sculptures beckoning with their glances and gestures. Indeed, he accurately represented the three new retables that already had been built in the south aisle for the St. Anna, St. Job, and St. Roch chapels (see below, chapter 8). But Von Ehrenberg anticipated only faintly the much more exuberant

1 Baisier 2008, I, 121–122.



FIGURE 3.1
Willem von Ehrenberg. The nave of the St. Jacob's Church from west to east. 1663.

roodscreen and pulpit, the great masterpieces that fill the church today. I will discuss these in the detail they deserve later on in this chapter.

Here, I want to point out how the very styles of the pictures by Neefs and Von Ehrenberg reinforced and participated in the different concepts of ornament that they visualize. In place of the thinly painted, diagrammatic linear grid plotted by Neefs, Von Ehrenberg added weight, volume, and movement through his more dynamic touch that brings out flashes of color reflecting off polished surfaces and dramatic contrasts between light and dark.² In what follows I want to set out the conditions and principles from which the churchwardens could generate that new concept of magnificent ornament in St. Jacob's.

3.2 Financial Crisis, Jesuit Threat, and a New Strategy: 1647–1670

In 1647 the churchwardens attached for the first time to their annual account an appendix of outstanding debt they could not meet with regular income from the church. Most of the debt accumulated through construction of the Rubens and Vincque chapels for which the churchwardens were responsible (see below, chapter 8).³ As debt mounted, income dropped. When plague swept through Antwerp in 1654, the city diverted the annual construction

² My comparison inadvertently resembles one of the famous contrasts between “Clearness and Unclearness” made by Wölfflin in *Principles of Art History* (Wölfflin 1950, 213–214).

³ RAAKASJA R.g., *Kerkrekening 1647–1648*, f.28r.: February 1647: appended to this account is a: “Staet vande schulden staenden tot laste vande prochie van St Jacob alhier geprocedeert voordoen meestendeel over het maecken van twee cappellen, een sacraestyne met een stuck vanden ommeganck.”