

The Lady Chapel in Search of an Image

6.1 Introduction

The other “great chapel” of St. Jacob’s, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, “Our Dear Lady,” never enjoyed the deep and unshakeable support that placed the Blessed Sacrament Chapel at the center of the Counter Reformation in Antwerp. Founded in 1559, the Lady Chapel’s growth progressed slowly until the 1620s.¹ It was a chapel in search of a sacred image that could attract the fervent devotion already spread thin in a city filled with powerful and gracious manifestations of Mary. Even when the chapel finally did settle on one particular sculpture, conflict disrupted apportionment of space inside and private claims intruded on the communal dedication to the Virgin.

Antwerp Catholics worshipped various potent images of the Virgin. The proliferation of her cult was carefully orchestrated as part of the larger campaign to persuade and convert through visual communication. On the façade of the City Hall after 1587 she ruled again as the Queen of Heaven triumphant over heresy. In the Cathedral she was exalted as the miraculous Virgin on the Stick. Chosen as patroness of the city, the procession that carried her through Antwerp during the feast of the Assumption gave occasion to the most popular of the year’s celebrations. The prominence of image and procession as symbols of Catholic faith made them the flashpoints that triggered the first outbreaks of iconoclastic violence in 1566 and then marked the restoration of Catholic power after 1585. In the Dominican Church an image of the Virgin of the Rosary won over tens of thousands who joined the Rosary confraternity in devotion to her. On the façade of the new Jesuit Church completed in 1621 the Virgin enthroned in majesty looked down from the pediment and across the roofs to her counterpart on the City Hall, as she extended her protective gaze over the city that she loved. Inside the Jesuit Church, dedicated to the Virgin as well as to St. Ignatius of Loyola, diverse paintings and sculptures glorified her in the magnificent Houtappel Chapel dedicated to Mary. The Jesuits claimed that their example ignited the popular devotion expressed in the hundreds of Mary images erected on street corners throughout the city and cared for

1 See above, chapter 1, n.58, for the chapel’s foundation.

through countless acts of individual and communal piety.² By contrast, inside St. Jacob's no image of the Virgin had won the hearts of the people.

The Lady Chapel at St. Jacob's replaced its altarpiece three times in less than a century, indicating a restless dissatisfaction. Other chapels, even if they drastically changed the format of their altar retables, made it a point to conserve and often incorporate parts of the older decoration into the new arrangements. But no trace remains of the earlier altarpieces for the Lady Chapel.

First came a triptych with *The Assumption of the Virgin* at its center, *The Presentation of Mary* and *The Visitation* in the wings, donated by Francisca de Cuellar, widow of one of the wealthiest Spanish merchants in the city. A later inventory situated this triptych in the "old chapel", suggesting that it dated to between 1608 when Francisca de Cuellar included in her testament the earliest reference to a chapel, as opposed to an altar, of Our Dear Lady, and 1624, when the construction started that eventually would expand the chapel to its present size.³

Between 1624 and 1630 the Lady Chapel grew to three bays, an oblong row, reaching from the choir into the north transept, in a plan that intentionally mirrored the Sacrament Chapel as it was at the time (see fig. 1.6, dates 1559, 1624–1630, 1636, 1676).⁴ In 1636 the new ambulatory, built according to a "concept" approved by the "leading artists and master-builders" of the city, pushed

2 See Muller 2006 (Jesuit Use), 129.

3 RAAKASJA B.27, "grooten boeck oft Clappeye vande Capelle, begonst in September ao.1645 door Confreere Adriaen de Cock", begun as an ongoing inventory of chapel ornaments: 53; Schilderyen: "een oudt tafereel ofte autaeer stuck wesende de hemelvaert van onse lieve vrouwe, met twee deuren, eertyde geven in d'oude Capelle door mevrouwe Quelliaer./ twee stucken dier eertyden hebben gestaen in de oude casse oft houdtwerck des voors. oudt autaeer stuck, het subiect van het een wesende de presentatie van onse lieve vrouw het ander de visitatie van Elisabeth. Twee hooge pineelteens d'een een Cruceficx het ander Jesus, Maria, Joseph, gemaect tot het onderste nicken vande geseyde oude casse". Van Lerijs in RAAKASJA (old number 560), 449, refers to the testament of Francisca de Cuellar.

4 RAAKASJA B.19/13, c.1624, draft of donors' pledge to contribute "tot het viercant maecken der voors. Cappelle volgens de modelle aen ons daervan gethoont"; RAAKASJA 991, file with documentation of the construction, including a contract of June 20, 1624, between chapel wardens and mason Jan van den Sande for construction of the chapel; RAAKASJA 993, July 24, 1624, request by chapel wardens to the city Magistrate for permission to build the chapel "in the manner like that of the Blessed Sacrament choir standing on the other side," an opportunity not to be missed considering that several "pious and devout people donate notable sums" for the purpose (2,200 guilders); RAAKASJA 995, 1628 receipt from Cornelis van den Eynde, surveyor and mason, for 2,500 guilders from Jan de Gaverelle for construction of the chapel; 1628 receipt from Cornelis van den Eynde for 500 guilders from Hendrick de Clerck "for the good work" of building the chapel.