The Dutch artist and humanist Otto Vaenius (Otto van Veen, 1556–1629), best known as an early master of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), has recently been rediscovered as a talented emblematist and author of several popular emblem books published in the beginning of the seventeenth century, including Horatiana emblemata (1607), Amorum emblemata (1608), and Amoris divini emblemata (1615). Born in Leiden in 1556 into a Catholic family, Vaenius remained faithful to catholicism and to the Habsburg dynasty. In his youth, he entered the service of the Prince-Bishop of Liège as a page; after traveling to Rome and perhaps to Munich and Prague, where he may have visited the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II (1552–1612), he settled in the southern Netherlands in the service of Alexander Farnese (1545–1592), Duke of Parma and Governor of the Spanish Netherlands. In 1593, Vaenius became a master in the Antwerp painters’ guild, and later, engineer at the Antwerp Citadel (in the service of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, sovereigns of the Spanish Netherlands). He was appointed as a surveyor of the Mint (muntwaerdein) in Brussels, a city were he settled in 1615 and died in 1629. Traditionally regarded as a Catholic artist active in the Spanish Netherlands, Vaenius was also a Dutch exile with strong attachments to his homeland, and an open mind whose sympathies extended to men of various religious and philosophical persuasions.1

In a request submitted in 1619 to the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, Vaenius declared that he would devote his remaining years to the creation of engravings ‘and other speculative works, among which the True Precepts of the Art of Painting and Sculpture with notes and images’.2 Unfortunately, the whereabouts of this treatise are unknown—and indeed, it may never have been written.

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2 ‘[…] desearia emplear el resto de sus años en sacar a luz estampas y algunas obras speculativas, como entre otras los Verdaderos Preceptos del Arte de Pintura y Escultura con notas e ymagines […]:’ Quoted by de Maeyer M., Albrecht en Isabella en de schilderkunst (Brussels: 1955), 347–348.
Nevertheless, it is tempting to identify as one of the ‘obras speculativas’ by the pictor doctus his Physicae et theologicae conclusiones of 1621. This slim and visually intriguing treatise on predestination and free will, rarely studied until now, may offer a major key to understanding Vaenius’s rich and multifaceted visual production, as it is underpinned by an original conception of human imagination. The present study offers a general description of the treatise, followed by a detailed explication of the chapter devoted to the imagination (with reference to other relevant chapters as well) and an attempt to illuminate the original and, in some respects, unorthodox aspects of Vaenius’s theory, by contrasting it with the writings of three contemporaries whom Vaenius may have known, Jan Baptist Van Helmont (1580–1644), Thomas Fienus (1567–1631), and Federico Zuccari (1542–1609). We will attempt to reconstruct Vaenius’s conception of the artist by comparing it to his well-known representation of the pictor in the Horatiana Emblemata, and conclude by situating Vaenius’s theory of the imagination more broadly in the intellectual landscape of his time.

The Conclusiones

The Physicae et theologicae conclusiones (1621), an emblematic booklet comprising forty-three pages, is probably the least famous and most enigmatic of Vaenius’s works. The title, Conclusiones, refers to the tradition of university

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