‘Self-Imaging and the engraver’s virtù: Hendrick Goltzius’s Pietà of 1598’

Walter S. Melion

Drawn in pen and ink on parchment, Hendrick Goltzius’s Pietà of 1598 is a signature work replete with allusions to its maker, whose artisanship, invoked to signal Goltzius’s commanding presence as inventor and draftsman, comes paradoxically to affirm his selfless devotion to the Virgin and Christ (fig. 1).1 Owned first by Philip II, then by the Fuggers of Augsburg, and perhaps also by Rudolf II, the Pietà is one of a community of prints and drawings executed in the 1590s, in which Goltzius addresses himself to Catholic patrons by operating within a thematics of Christian virtue and artisanal virtuosity.2 Locating selfhood in his mastery of pictorial means, Goltzius casts artifice itself as the figure of Christian piety, placing his powers of art into service to the exigencies of religious truth. In this paper, I want to examine how he does this, first by distinguishing the Pietà from demonstration prints of the 1580s which proclaim the virtue of Goltzius’s burin-hand, and second by situating the Pietà within the Catholic discourse on virtù codified in a series of post-Tridentine texts on image-making, the most cogent of which is Bishop Gabriele Paleotti’s Discorso intorno alle imagini of 1582.

The Pietà is a devotional image that features the mourning Virgin who cradles Christ’s body, meditating upon his passion and death. Supported on a corporal, the dead Christ is the object of her gaze and spur to her grief, which she expresses by gesturing to her heart. Her exemplary sorrow resonates with that of the figures around her, who echo her responses. Disposed in a hemicycle below the seated Virgin, these figures pay homage to Christ, either gazing at his sacrificial body or folding their hands in prayer, having retired into introspective contemplation. Their hands to their hearts, kneeling angels hold tapers that light the Virgin, while the Magdalene supports Christ’s left hand, lifting it to her lips. At the sides of the image, angels hover with the instruments of the Passion, displaying the arma Christi more traditionally associated with the Man of Sorrows theme.3 They, too, attend to the Virgin and Christ, and their presence serves to emphasize that Christ’s suffering and death preoccupy the Virgin and her entourage. Above the Virgin rises Golgotha, identified by the cross from which Christ’s body has been removed, while in the right middleground, the entombment takes place in a cavern lit by candles.

As Karel van Mander makes clear in the ‘Life of Hendrick Goltzius’,