This essay will explore an aspect often neglected in the study of courtly and civic ceremony: the specific issues arising from the use of visual sources. It is conceived as a case study of one of the best known depictions of Netherlandish civic spectacle, the four extant paintings of the 1615 performance of the Brussels annual procession known as the 'ommegang' (fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). These paintings were made by Denis van Alsloot (before 1573-1625 or 1626) for his patron the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia (1566-1633), joint sovereign of the Spanish Netherlands. Although the Infanta originally commissioned eight paintings, it seems that only six were actually made and of those six only four have survived. Moreover, one painting has been cut down and divided in two (fig. 2, 3); luckily, an early copy survives (fig. 6).

Alsloot's four extant paintings portray the ommegang in great detail. Two images show the craft guilds and militia guilds of Brussels respectively (fig. 1, 2, 3). Both types of guild are depicted marching against a background of identifiable civic architecture: the guild houses on the Grote Markt (or Grand Place) in Brussels. The other two surviving images are equally detailed in their description of the procession, although the buildings in the backgrounds remain generic rather than specific portrayals of civic space (fig. 4, 5). One of these latter paintings depicts the festive floats which formed part of the ommegang in 1615, including both newly-made ones dedicated to the Infanta and older pageants such as the 'Ship of State' first used during the 1558 state funeral of Charles V (1500-1558). The last painting focuses on the clergy of Brussels, marching with the miraculous statue of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van de Zavel (or Notre-Dame du Sablon) (fig. 5). Yet in the upper right background of this image the municipal government of Brussels may also be detected, passing though an abutting back street.

Because of their attention to detail, Alsloot's paintings have been used as if they were transparent, documentary records by historians of theatre and medieval civic ritual. In fact, it has almost become a convention to approach the paintings as if they were photographs. For example, already in 1889, Vincent Baestens referred to the paintings as a 'représentation pour ainsi dire photographique'. Nearly a hundred years later, Arnout Balis offered only a slight inflection of this when he classified...
Alsloot's paintings as part of an uncomplicated 'genre documentaire réaliste'?

The present text questions this approach. The aim is not to deny that Alsloot's paintings offer a wealth of information about the 1615 Brussels ommegang or even that their main function was to record a particular event. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that, in relation to images such as Alsloot's, it is highly problematic to separate content from form and original function. This is because, like all representations, Alsloot's paintings have their own rules and conventions. Thus the central premise is that Alsloot's ommegang paintings should be approached not as transparent, 'photographic' records but as cultural artifacts.

This argument falls in three parts. The first section will analyse the traditional functions and meanings of the Brussels ommegang, and how these were articulated in 1615. The second section then considers the original location of Alsloot's paintings. It will show that they were displayed in a context explicitly associated with courtly and aristocratic pursuits such as hunting. Thus the paintings were hung in a courtly context which in itself challenged the fundamentally civic nature of the Brussels ommegang. The third part will argue that Alsloot's paintings in themselves embody this courtly context. It will demonstrate that the four extant images show the Brussels ommegang in a highly unusual format derived from images of jousts; that is, from images of yet another courtly and aristocratic pursuit. Thus, by subtle compositional means, the civic ommegang was reformulated into a spectacle governed by courtly rules and values. On this basis I shall conclude that Alsloot's paintings are not simply transparent records. Rather, they are part of a complex political dialogue between the city of Brussels and its sovereign rulers.

The present text is not in any way an exhaustive treatment of the rich cultural legacy left by Alsloot and his patron. A detailed account of the Brussels ommegang has already been given by Baestens, and by Leo van Puyvelde and Alphonse Wauters. Hence what follows is merely an exploration of a few areas which have previously been neglected in the study of these extraordinary paintings.

5 Denis van Alsloot, The Ecclesiastical Lords and Orders with Notre Dame du Sablon, 1616, oil on panel, 130 x 382 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid (copyright: Museo del Prado, photo: Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).