Adriaen Huybrechts, the Wierix Brothers, and Confessional Politics in the Netherlands

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At first glance, an engraved copy of an Albrecht Dürer composition by one of the three Wierix brothers — Johannes (1549–c. 1618), Hieronymus (1553–1619), and Antonius (c. 1555/9–1604) — seems unremarkable. Hieronymus’s large Mass of Saint Gregory (fig. 1), reproducing (and reversing) the famous woodcut of 1511, is one of several dozen prints of varying subject that the brothers copied after Dürer. Most of these were youthful works, undoubtedly part of their training, but they returned to Dürer on several occasions as mature artists. Nor were they alone: in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in both Germany and the Netherlands Dürer’s work was much admired by artists and collectors. In this so-called ‘Dürer-Renaissance,’ aesthetic considerations seemed to over-ride those of subject matter, and by including Dürer’s monogram, Wierix and his publisher, Adriaen Huybrechts (or Huberti or de S. Huberto) have called attention to the print’s source, suggesting that part of the significance of the image lies in the fact that it is a copy of a famous Dürer composition.

Yet virtually any religious image published in Antwerp in the crucial year 1585 — on 17 August of which the city succumbed to a lengthy siege by Spanish forces under the Duke of Parma, and the re-Catholicization of the city began — carries the potential for significance well beyond that of an apprentice’s first essays in a difficult medium or of a mere tribute to a recognized genius of printmaking. The fact that the Mass of Saint Gregory is the only Wierix engraving after a Dürer woodcut — all the others are after engravings — is itself indication that the prototype was chosen as much or more for the importance of its traditional subject matter rather than from technical or aesthetic considerations. Dürer’s attraction to Luther and his teachings is well known; it was already noted by Karel van Mander and would probably have been known to Wierix and Huybrechts. But for the Mass of Saint Gregory they reach back to the pre-Luther, devoutly Catholic Dürer of 1511, a reminder that Dürer’s greatest religious works were created in the bosom of the undivided Church. The Catholic meaning of the engraving is further indicated by its dedication to Johannes Hauchinus, bishop of Mechelen. The print is enmeshed, as are the careers of the engraver and publisher, in the convoluted religious politics of the late sixteenth-century Netherlands.

The Wierix brothers were together among the most prolific and skilled of Netherlandish printmakers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth cen-