Seeing in Sequence

Peter Paul Rubens’ Ceiling Cycle at the Jesuit Church in Antwerp

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The Jesuit church in Antwerp ranked as one of the most splendid Counter Reformation churches built North of the Alps in the early seventeenth century. Its magnificent Italian facade designed by Francois Aguilonius (1567-1617) and Pieter Huysens (1578-1637) (fig. 1) provided an imposing image of the Jesuit order that saw itself as the leading reform movement of the period. The facade was matched by an ostentatious interior that displayed polished Italian marble and a rich decorative scheme. The most notable parts of the program consisted of Peter Paul Rubens’ (1577-1640) high altarpieces depicting Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier and a series of thirty-nine ceiling paintings that were executed between 1620 and 1621.

Given the magnificence of Rubens’ project, it is all the more regrettable that the original scheme was lost in a fire in 1718. While parts of the church and its decoration survived - the choir with Rubens’ high altarpieces, the side chapels and the facade - the ceiling paintings in the nave were completely destroyed. Luckily, writers have been able to recover their original appearance through the study of Rubens’ preparatory oil sketches, later copies after the final ceilings by Jacob de Wit (1695-1734) and Christian Benjamin Müller (1690-1758), and an early eighteenth-century description of the ceilings by the Jesuit Jan Baptist Van Caukercken (1675-1755). On the basis of this evidence and the survival of contemporary views of the original interior by Pieter Neeffs (1578-1656/61) (fig. 2) and others, writers have also been able to reconstruct the layout of the ceilings. John Rupert Martin convincingly demonstrated that the ceiling paintings located in the vaults of the upper galleries presented two parallel sequences of nine alternating Old and New Testament scenes (fig. 3) while the ceiling paintings above the aisles and narthex featured a series of twenty-one male and female saints. Following Caukercken’s early description, he identified eight pairings of familiar type-antitype relationships in the upper ceilings. For example, he connected the New Testament scene of the Raising of the Cross (fig. 4, 5) to the Sacrifice of Isaac (fig. 6, 7), an Old Testament event that was thought to foreshadow Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. In the literature there is now general consensus that the upper level ceilings constituted a ‘straightforward’ narrative progression of typological pairs.

Despite the apparent neatness of this typological reading, there are two ceilings that fall outside of the binary progression: Moses in prayer (fig. 8) and the Coronation of the Virgin (fig. 9, 10), which both occupied the