Images of stone
The physicality of art and the image debates in the sixteenth century

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The second half of the sixteenth century is one of the most understudied, yet intriguing periods in the history of Netherlandish art. In that era, art and artists were subject to covert pressure as reformatory iconoclastic movements gained ground and eventually destroyed numerous works of art throughout the Netherlands. Before and after the iconoclastic riots of 1566, Netherlandish Catholics and Protestants alike wrote numerous pamphlets on the feasibility of (religious) art. These pamphlets inform us as to what was controversial about art and why. However, they have been studied only fragmentarily, mainly by David Freedberg and Keith Moxey more than three decades ago, and have been left untouched since.

One of the main topics in the image debates in the iconoclastic era in the Netherlands (c. 1550–1585) was the physicality of religious art. On the eve of iconoclasm, age-old arguments on the materiality of art reverberated as never before. For extremist ‘Calvinists’, this physicality was itself proof of its idolatrous nature, while for Catholic polemists the material nature of imagery simply confirmed its profane and thus ‘un-idolatrous’ character. References are made to the materials used to create art — gold, marble, wood, paint and so forth — on nearly every page in each of these many pamphlets and treatises: from Molanus to Marnix van Sint-Aldegonde and from Duncanus to Bloccius, every polemicist since Erasmus discussed the physicality of art as conflicting (or not) with the spirituality of true religion. Yet this crucial aspect of the image debates has been overlooked thus far, even though it helps to explain several important iconographic and stylistic experiments and trends in Netherlandish art in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

This article analyses the polemics on the physicality of art and the materials used to express that physicality in its (art) historical context. Additionally, it demonstrates that artists working in the second half of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries subtly responded to this ongoing, passionate debate. In other words, the focus of sixteenth-century polemicists writing on the physicality of art seems to have forced painters to reconsider how to use, when to use and how to represent different materials. Although the consequences of the debates reach far further, the focus of this article will lie on Maarten van Heemskerck’s and Maarten de Vos’s Saint Luke painting the Virgin (figs. 1 & 4) and on the outer wings of Rubens’s ground-breaking altarpiece, The descent from the cross (fig. 12 a & b).