In the sixteenth century, most figural carving was not independent in the way that we think of sculpture today. Rather, it was an integral part of buildings and furnishings of churches, and comprised such objects as choir stalls.

Choir stalls were built in all cathedrals, monasteries, and collegiate churches, as well as some chapels and parish churches for the performance of the ‘divine office’, also called the ‘hours’ or ‘opus Dei’, a ritual that was performed daily by religious communities in the Latin West at eight specified times of the day and night. At its core is the weekly recitation of all 150 psalms from the Old Testament Book of Psalms, but there were many accretions to the office over time. As the fundamental work of most religious communities, it meant that members spent as many as 12 hours a day in the choir in the sixteenth century.

Despite the importance of carved wooden choir stalls in the medieval and early modern periods – as indicated by their central function – viewed as furniture, they have not been well integrated into the art-historical discourse. Comprehensive studies of Netherlandish woodwork, such as Bierens de Haan’s Het houtsnijwerk in Nederland tijdens de Gothiek en de Renaissance, discuss choir stalls more generally. However, a great deal of literature has focused almost exclusively on misericord carvings (e.g., fig. 1), since it is one of the few sites of surviving secular sculpture from this period, beginning, most notably with respect to Netherlandish stalls,