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The Visualization of Urban Landscape in the Southern Netherlands during the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period

by Katrien Lichtert (University of Ghent and University of Antwerp)

This article is a short review of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the University of Ghent and the University of Antwerp entitled *The Visualisation of Urban Landscape in the Southern Netherlands during the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period*. The project investigates the different forms of visual urban representations in different media that were produced during the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Because of the large scope of such a subject we (my colleague, Jelle de Rock (M.A. History) and myself (M.A. Art History)) restricted our investigation to the four largest cities in Flanders and Brabant at the time: Bruges and Ghent (in the county of Flanders) and Brussels and Antwerp (in the Duchy of Brabant). The aim of the project is to follow the changes in physical space and spatial perception through the study of visual representations of these cities.

The following summarizes the research approach to the project. Through studying visual representations of a city we can identify the changing urban spatial structures as well as the changing perception of the space that physically represents the city. This concerns the actual urban spatial reality, the way in which different social groups perceived urban reality, the way they used this urban reality to construct their own identity, and the interaction between these features—all issues of great importance. Our hope is to trace how people, living in the city from different social classes, occupied different parts of the actual urban reality and experienced different aspects of urban identity. More specifically, we're exploring ways in which the citizens experienced the spatial reality of the city, and how they profiled themselves within the city (e.g. through explicit forms of civil architecture, ornamentation, etc.). How did they use the city and its urban identity to create, establish and confirm their own social positions, or, more precisely, the positions they wanted to communicate to the outside world? How did these ideas interact with the physical urban

reality? The late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period were eras of profound change, as reflected in the urban structures of the Southern Netherlands. These changes were spurred by a range of factors, including the late medieval crisis, and its subsequent redefinition of the positions of different leading groups in the city. These changes in attitude are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of urban identity. It is clear that along with the changes in the perception of the city in general, so too did the attitude against urban life change. Through our study we will focus on determining how these changes affected the different processes of identification. Urban space played an important role in the visualisation and consolidation of the relations between different social groups. It also offered possibilities that could lead us to formulate certain claims in the struggle for power between individuals and between certain groups within the city, as well the competition between different cities or between the city and its sovereign.

Representations of the city appear in a variety of sources, both literary and iconographical, both of which played pivotal roles in establishing urban identity of this period. Our research project focuses on the visual sources. It is not by accident that in the period in question visual culture boomed and visual representations of cities are present in large numbers of objects created in different media. The visual focus offers certain advantages compared to written sources. Far more than written sources, visual images allow scholars to study and identify the spatial changes in the city over the course of time. Visual culture also allows one to approach different strategies of representation found in the different urban social groups in varied ways. Another advantage of iconographic sources are their suitability for investigation of mental attitudes over the long term. They offer the possibility of comparing periods and revealing certain information that is difficult to find in traditional written sources.

Considering the significant place of visual culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern towns it is strange that, until now, almost no sources grapple with the image of the city in terms of the place of the city in the perception of society and its different social categories. Therefore, this project, by its focus on this particular source material, should be a helpful addition to the general discourse of urban history.

Obviously this matter is complex. The target is to create a representative corpus of visual sources that allow certain patterns to unfold in the strategies of representation of those different urban groups. So we divided the iconographic material into different typological clusters according to different social groups. As mentioned before, our attention is focused on those social groups who were present in the urban reality. In general these were the sovereign and the court; the city council; the different crafts and guilds; fraternities; merchants and the clergy.

This broad range is reflected in the broad spectrum of different media used to depict the city. Although we've started with the investigation of early Netherlandish painting, the visual material is found in objects such as tapestries, prints, stained glass, town seals, and more. To obtain optimum results it is important that every source is treated with the utmost accuracy and that each source is investigated through the same precise, standardized method. Therefore we have created a questionnaire in which different aspects are consecutively examined. The purpose is to determine the different traditions in visual representation and the changes that occurred in these traditions during the period. Afterwards we will analyze this information with diverse material collected about the social positions of the urban social groups together with considerations about urban identity in general (e.g. originating from contemporary sources).

Ultimately, this compiled information will allow us to answer specific questions about the different strategies of representation that were applied by those specific social groups. Once we have identified these structural elements, we can link them with the general mental framework. In this way we can transform the whole in questions about the production of urban space and the significance of urban group identity.



François Dubois. *Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day* (Paris, 24 August, 1572). C.1572. o/wd 94 X
154 cm Musée Cantonal Des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne Switzerland