Ethan Matt Kavaler, Anne-Laure Van Bruaene (eds.), ***Netherlandish Culture of the Sixteenth Century. Urban Perspectives.*** Studies in European Urban History 41 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, 388 pp., ISBN: 978 2 503 57582 7)

In his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny the Elder relates the story of a competition between the Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius to determine who created the most lifelike art. Zeuxis managed to depict grapes in so realistic a fashion that birds flew down to peck at them. In his turn, however, Parrhasius tricked his competitor in drawing away a curtain that turned out to be a painted illusion as well. Misled by such artistic skill, Zeuxis willingly admitted his defeat. Apart from inspiring two contributions in the volume at hand, this classical anecdote captures, in a sense, some characteristics of sixteenth-century cultural life in the Low Countries. No doubt the tale reflected the competitive spirit that confronted urban groups and corporations while encouraging interaction between cultural domains. Furthermore, Pliny's account appealed to an intellectual and artistic environment that increasingly valued classical imagery. More specifically, as in the story, artists and artisans began to derive their identity from their craftsmanship, thereby praising creative invention and artifice over the mechanical process itself. The study of these developments from the viewpoint of the urban condition is by definition multidisciplinary and such a broad approach is what *Netherlandish Culture of the Sixteenth Century. Urban Perspectives* aspires to.

Bringing together no less than nineteen separate case studies, this collection of essays originated at a conference held in 2012 at the University of Toronto. All the authors deal with aspects of cultural discourse in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. Forays into the realm of ideas and representations – inhabited by classical allegories, civic personifications and rhetorical drama – alternate with considerations on such practical issues as the organization of printing firms and censorship. Most contributions concentrate on the commercial hub of Antwerp. The predominance of a single – in many respects exceptional – city leaves open the question to what extent conclusions can be generalized. One of the book's great merits rather lies in the pairing of what we credit today as high culture with more popular and artisanal production, revealing the many intersections between these domains.

It goes without saying that while such a variety of essays constitutes a scholarly trove of particular insights it also prevents the presentation of a clear thematic line. However, in their concise introduction, the editors largely succeed in establishing a dialogue between the various individual cases. They start from the observation that 'the concept of

culture is notoriously difficult to define' (x), because it involves interrelated fields of, among others, sensory, spatial, temporal, and imaginative experiences. What sets the cultural expression apart, however, was the interchange and dynamism resulting from the particular outlook of the urbanized Low Countries. Due to territorial fragmentation and weak political bonds, it was the interconnectivity of its cities that mainly fostered shared cultural habits and values, a view inspired by recent scholarship on urban networks. Several authors provide further insight by questioning the integrative effect of performances and imagery. Thus, a first section tackles the layered notion of urban space itself: Jelle de Rock, for instance, traces the emergence of confrontational and free-standing city portraits. The imagining of urban territory was by no means solely driven by technical incentives. A hybrid combination of accuracy with older representational traditions and pictorial markers determined the success of individualized city views. Others concentrate on the appropriation of spaces and conceptions of time within these urban confines. Performative acts allowed individuals and corporations to spatially position themselves, thereby establishing civic relations, linking up with a wider body politic, or even projecting the city into a European horizon, as Elizabeth Neumann argues in her reading of Charles V's entry into Antwerp of 1520.

The second part interprets the discursive tactics employed by civic groups in shaping distinct identities. Guild circles as well as the individual aspirations of craftsmen and artists take center stage. In particular, assumptions about inventiveness and quality of manufacture seem to have gradually pushed manual execution as such into the background. Drawing amongst others on Lodovico Guicciardini's famous description of the Low Countries, Krista de Jonge charts this growing ideal of the independent 'intellectual artist'. Aside from local contacts, these men's international experience came to be seen as a crucial marker of artistic or literary fulfillment. The city presented a source of self-promotion insofar as it was a gateway towards international networks and the focal point of intellectual currencies. What this section fails to address, however, is to what extent such new images still relied on traditional guild associations and also whether such confident boasting transformed older connections between crafts. A similar reshaping of urban self-understanding occurred in relation to the political authorities, particularly in dialogue with the Habsburg court. Though often framed as antagonists, the fruitful interaction between court and city appears in a third cluster of essays. Since ritual communication is a well-studied topic, the deciphering of an urban wish list in the scenery of joyous entries offers little surprises. What emerges is the striking flexibility of the visual media with which a civic audience could enforce favorable policies. Even during the Dutch Revolt, as Violet Soen

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shows, the city could still mobilize its commercial strength to create a margin of negotiation with royal authority.

Key to civic self-fashioning was the city's economic clout. Recent studies stress the driving force of its industries and trade connections. Throughout the different contributions, the reader is left with the impression that economic ties between Netherlandish cities certainly stimulated the fashioning of a common cultural experience. Increasingly, the commodification of art facilitated a new, complex vocabulary with which to reconsider identities and social concerns. Still, one wishes that more authors would have addressed the commercial background more directly. In arguing that mythological paintings responded to social principles and moral questions that likewise preoccupied rhetoricians, poets, and humanists, the fourth part of the book is the most coherent and, in many ways, the most innovative. To name but one example: Tiana Helena Uchacz explains the startling popularity of the subject of 'Mars and Venus surprised by Vulcan' by noting a similar preoccupation with such ethical themes as desire, adultery, and female virtue among the repertoire of the Chambers of Rhetoric and humanist writers. Nevertheless, the actual production and diffusion of such 'civic' expressions remain out of sight in this section. Obviously, mythic portrayals intrigued a wealthy urban class, yet they equally circulated in the world of the court and its nobility. Greater attention to audiences in other centers would have made it possible to gauge the specificity of Antwerp's artistic scene. In this regard, the reader somewhat misses an explicit engagement with the rich literature on the commodification of art and the diversification of luxury industries. Furthermore, and sharply contrasting with the emphasis on layered urban spaces in other contributions, there is little attention to questions of accessibility and spatial interplays. These issues appear more explicitly in two additional essays on literary productions that involved middle class groups. Attracting large crowds, the organization of lotteries required contestants to submit small rhymes, so-called *prozen* – often proverbs exemplifying communal duties as well as social critique – which Dick de Boer considers a channel of informal education. In a similar vein, the lack of institutional censorship promoted a culture of 'free debate' in the performances of the Chambers of Rhetoric, as Anne-Laure Van Bruaene explains. The last two sections of the book show the least cohesion. Broadly speaking, they have to do with how images and texts influenced the emotional responses of people or led to adaptations in another context, transcending the urban world of the Netherlands.

Despite their variety, the essays evoke some common features that can be said to be typical of the culture of the region, although it often remains unclear whether these depended on the urban environment, the outlook of the Low Countries as such, or a specific

Antwerp economic dynamic. In the first place, the diversity of cultural practices strikes the reader, yet what is equally remarkable is their broad dissemination through intersecting centers, linking several groups, elites, and the authorities – all of whom were both consumers and producers. A vast body of scholarship has much improved our knowledge of the economic and social dynamics of the Netherlands. However, this volume proves that only a multidisciplinary approach can fully grasp urban culture in all its complexities. What typified the Low Countries the most is the ambiguities of its cultural discourses. While geared towards innovation, new forms and older traditions continued to co-exist. Time and again the authors demonstrate that the subject matter itself responded to issues of socio-political harmony and self-improvement while remaining open to interpretation. Without enforcing judgement it incited participants to form their own opinion. As such the book clearly shows that the city not only provided a stimulating background but also found itself the central subject of most of these discourses.

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