

H. GERSON · E. H. TER KUILE

ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN BELGIUM

1600 TO 1800



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EDITOR'S NOTE

THIS volume deals with the history of art and architecture in the Southern Netherlands from about 1600 to the end of the eighteenth century. Owing to the arrangement of material for the adjoining volumes, which seemed advisable for practical reasons, the volume also contains a survey of architecture and sculpture from the coming of Italian Renaissance influence to about 1600. This anomaly must be frankly admitted. It must also be admitted that the title of the volume is faulty in two ways. First, it does not acknowledge the anomaly just pointed out; and secondly, it introduces a geographical term which strictly speaking did not come into being until 1830. But that classic of historiography, Henri Pirenne's monumental history of the Southern Netherlands, is called Histoire de Belgique; and perhaps this may be accepted as a sufficient excuse for a title more manageable than correct.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

FROM the end of the fourteenth century the Dukes of Burgundy, by marriages and other means, gradually acquired more and more of the regions that are usually referred to as 'the Netherlands' or the Low Countries. By the marriage of Mary of Burgundy, heir to Charles the Bold, to Maximilian of Austria, these Burgundian lands became Hapsburg patrimony. Charles V, who was born in Ghent, was proud of his Low Countries heritage, and did all he could to extend it. His acquisition of the Duchy of Gelderland in 1543, after a long and strenuous fight, put him in complete control of all the duchies, counties, and principalities of the Low Countries, with the sole exception of the episcopal principality of Liège, which retained its singular autonomy until the French Revolution. The territories thus gained by the Dukes of Burgundy and their Hapsburg heirs kept their traditional administrative institutions, and their rights and privileges with regard to their Seigneurs, though the Burgundians did make a premature attempt to establish centralized administration. The representatives or States of the different territories were called more than once, and as early as the time of Philip the Good, to sit in joint session as the 'States General', while a supreme court of justice, the Grand Council, was established in Malines (Mechelen). At the same time other central boards and governmental councils came into existence. Moreover, Charles often appointed female members of his family as regents with authority over the stadholders (lieutenants) of the separate territories. These regents were assisted by the Council of State and other central administrative councils. Thus, towards the middle of the sixteenth century the Low Countries were well on the way towards becoming a formal Hapsburg monarchy. Charles V managed to break the feudal link between the French Crown and the south-western Netherlands, and to weaken that between the remaining Netherlands territories and the German Empire, by establishing Burgundy as an entity only nominally a member of the Empire.

Despite many kinds of political resistance, a unified Netherlands seemed an attainable goal provided the necessary precautions were taken. The fusion of more recently acquired territories with those that had become familiar with Burgundian and Hapsburg rule seemed to be mainly a matter of time and patience. Culturally there appeared to be no serious obstacles to the unification. With the exception of a relatively minor Walloon region in the south, and of the county of Friesland, closely related Germanic dialects were spoken everywhere, and the idiom of Brabant was on the way to becoming the universally accepted literary language of the Netherlands. Moreover, ecclesiastical connexions with bishops and archbishops whose sees were outside the Netherlands were broken when, in 1559, a reorganization of the hierarchy took place upon the insistent demand of the ruler. Three Netherlands archbishoprics were established, including all the patrimonial territories. It was too early yet for a true Netherlands

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patriotism, but there was no question either of incompatibilities between groups of territories. Political frontiers were not yet, or not to any extent, clear cultural or economic lines of demarcation.¹

As regards art, the acceptance of the Renaissance brought about more unity than had hitherto prevailed. Regional characteristics wilted away together with the Gothic style that had produced them, and the numerous pupils of the Antwerp painter, Frans Floris – according to van Mander there were over a hundred of them² – spread a uniform Mannerism throughout the whole of the Netherlands. Antwerp was the economic and artistic metropolis, just as Brussels was the administrative centre.

The central government expected that the ecclesiastical reorganization which it had introduced in 1559, in spite of violent opposition on the part of the clergy, would put an end to heresy. However, the religious groups that sprang from the Reformation brought about serious tensions, which came into the open after more than a score of years under Philip II, who succeeded Charles in 1555. Unlike his father, Philip was a stranger among his Low Countries subjects. After 1559, when he departed for his Spanish kingdom, he never again set foot in the Netherlands. His reign was marked by a religious and political intransigence which, if it did not actually give rise to the ensuing crisis, certainly hastened its development. The opposition of both nobility and people had a number of different causes: interests had been hurt, honour wounded, there was animosity against foreign administrators, the interference of the central government was resented, the financial results of the king's administration gave rise to objections, and there was, most of all, the religious sentiment of the Calvinists, the most militant among the Reformed, who were to be found principally in the towns of Flanders and of the neighbouring Walloon districts.

The year 1566 saw a series of dramatic events. First a written complaint was handed to the Regent in Brussels. Then there was a wave of wild iconoclasm that swept over Flanders, spreading as far as Friesland. The king dispatched his commander, the Duke of Alba, to the Netherlands, where he restored order by force of arms. Thousands fled abroad. Among the refugees was the richest member of the high nobility, William, Prince of Orange, Stadholder (i.e. Governor) of Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht, and a member of the Council of State. He was by no means a fanatical Calvinist, but he belonged to the fiercest and most convinced opponents of the king's policy. He and his brother, with troops levied abroad, returned to invade the Netherlands at several points. Alba inflicted a decisive defeat upon them, however, after which the only way for the *émigrés* to damage the king's cause was by freebooting at sea. For the time being resistance on land throughout the Netherlands came to an end. Then, in 1572, the freebooters, the 'Waterbeggars', suddenly landed and occupied the port of Den Briel. This was the sign for a new revolt in a number of towns. William of Orange and his brother Louis carried out invasions in the south and east. Determined resistance to the central authorities broke out, particularly in the counties of Holland and Zeeland, although Amsterdam took no part in it. The Prince of Orange went to Holland to take the lead in this desperate stand. Now the central authority was thrown into confusion, and the Duke of Alba was recalled. The revolt grew, but by the Pacification of Ghent, William