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Report date: 21/11/2021

Iconography of the 7 Enclosed Gardens



G1 - Enclosed Garden with a Calvary Scene and the Hunt of the Unicorn

Mechelen

c. 1510-1530

124 x 158,5 x 33 cm

Museum Hof van Busleyden – Collection Our Lady Hospital Sisters, inv. GHZ BH001

Provenance

On permanent loan from the Our Lady Hospital, Mechelen

Iconography

This Enclosed Garden combines two different narratives related to Christ's virgin birth and Salvation. The first group of polychromed statues depicts the Hunt on the Unicorn. At the bottom left the angel blows on his horn while holding two dogs on a leash. At the right side, a unicorn is seeking shelter in the Virgins' lap. The unicorn was widely perceived as a wild and untamable beast that no hunter was able to hunt; only a pure virgin, as the tradition goes, is able to tame the savage beast. This theme of the Hunt symbolises the incarnation of Christ, because it was only in the womb of the purest virgin, the Mother Mary, the word could become flesh. A Latin inscription on the gate of this Enclosed Garden further emphasises the purity of Mary: "You are a garden, overflowing with virtues and countless treasures, never tainted with any filth, growing a flower full of graces."^[1] The garden is thus a metaphor for

the Virgin Mary while the flower symbolises the Christ Child. At the bottom of the Enclosed Garden, one can read another inscription in Latin connecting the virgin birth to Salvation: "The unicorn, breaking out of a strong kingdom in paradise, becomes tame again in the lap of a virgin, thus cleansing us from a sinful poison."^[2] The theme of the Holy Hunt has been supplemented with other symbolic references to the virgin birth of Jesus, such as the tower of David, the fleece of Gideon, the flowering rod of Aaron, the golden pot (*urna aurea*), the sealed fountain and the burning bush of Moses. The second sculpture group consists of a crucified Christ mounted on an altar and surrounded by ten candles. Standing on each side of the cross are St John the Evangelist, with his poisoned cup, and Mary Magdalene, with her jar of ointment. A small statue of God is looking down upon the Christ's sacrifice. The wooden case of this Enclosed Garden was probably not made in the same period as the early sixteenth-century sculptures. The ornaments at the bottom of the case are identical to a wooden cabinet of the Our Lady Hospital which, according to an inscription in the woodwork, was made in 1622.^[3] Could it be possible that the original sixteenth-century framework was replaced in the seventeenth century? This might explain why this is the only Enclosed Garden of the Our Lady Hospital without painted wings.

^[1] *Tu es ortus cunctis deliciis affluens multisque divitiis umquam tactus spurriciis (sic) gignens florem refertum gratiæ.*

^[2] The Latin inscription reads: *Reynosceron forti imperio Egressus de celi palatio Virginis mansuescit in gremio nos veneni purgans a vicio.*

^[3] *Closet* (no signature, 1622, 200 x 217,5 x 83 cm, OCMW, Collection Our Lady Hospital Sisters, inv. GHZ M004)

Bibliography

Weale 1864: 39, n°214; Neefs 1869: 272-273; Willocx 1895: 90-91; Malines 1911: 31, n°120; Poupeye 1912: 78-79; Atwerpen 1948: 50, n°352; **Godenne 1957: 47-127**; De Borghgrave d'Altena 1959: 66; Crab et al. 1971: 421-423, MB/37; Vandenbroeck 1994: 120-125, n°114; Hoflack 1998: 54, n°49; De Nijn 2000: 124-125, n°3; Iterbeke 2016: 220-223, n°33.



G2 - Enclosed Garden with Saint Elisabeth, Saint Ursula and Saint Catherine

Mechelen

c. 1524-1530

134 x 188,5 x 22,2 cm

Museum Hof van Busleyden – Collection Our Lady Hospital Sisters, inv. GHZ BH002

Provenance

On permanent loan from the Our Lady Hospital, Mechelen

Iconography

Amidst an overwhelming amount of silk fauna and flora one can discover three female saints: St Elisabeth with her crown, book and crippled beggar at her feet; St Ursula protecting the eleven thousand virgins under her cloak whilst holding three arrows responsible for her death, and St Catherine with a golden sword in her hands trampling the emperor Maxentius. All three statuettes are stamped with the Mechelen makers' mark and carry the inscription 'DOERMAEL' on their socles. Between these sculptures, two small figures illustrate a *noli me tangere* scene, Mary Magdalene kneeling in front of the resurrected Christ. This Enclosed Garden is one of the best kept and richest examples of the Mechelen collection. Not only are these sculptures fine examples of the *Poupées de Malines*, the mixed-media triptych is also filled with a varied amount of precious *devotionalia*. A large *Agnus Dei* depicting Christ's

resurrection (dated 1513), small miniatures on parchment, pilgrim badges from nearby sacred sites and numerous relics accompanied by authentiques upholster the devotional cabinet. The tinfoil which used to cover the background of the wooden case has faded into salmon-coloured paper. In the sixteenth century this covering would have looked like a sun-reflecting golden layer as if the Enclosed Garden was glistening divine light. The painted wings of the Garden show one male and two female figures accompanied by their patron saints; the Apostle James the Major and St Margaret. The man, wearing a lavish fur-lined cloak, is kneeling in front of a prayer desk while his hands are folded in prayer. The Apostle James, standing next to him, was freely modelled after a woodcut by Jacob Cornelisz. Van Oostanen published circa 1521. Just as her male counterpart, the first, slightly older looking, women on the right wings is dressed in more luxurious clothing. However, the second female figure is dressed as a professed hospital sister. Previously these three figures were considered superiors of the Our Lady Hospital. However, recent research has identified them as Jacob Van den Putte, Margaretha Svos and their daughter Maria Van den Putte, who professed in the Our Lady Hospital in 1524. Supposedly, the parents of sister Van den Putte commissioned this Garden after the profession of their daughter.

Bibliography

Weale 1864: 38, n°213; Neefs 1869: 272-273; Willocx 1895: 90-91; Malines 1911: 31, n°120; Poupeye 1912: 78-79; Atwerpen 1948: 50, n°352; **Godenne 1957: 47-127**; De Borghgrave d'Altena 1959: 66; Crab et al. 1971: 421-423, MB/37; Vandenbroeck 1994: 239, n°114; Hoflack 1998: 54, n°49; De Nijn 2000: 124-125, n°3; Iterbeke 2016: 220-223, n°33.



G3 - Enclosed Garden with a Calvary Scene, the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist

Mechelen

Portrait wings attributed to Master of the Guild of Saint George or his circle

Sculpture of crucified Christ signed with *CORNEILIS*

c. 1525-1528

109 x 151,5 x 28,2 cm

Museum Hof van Busleyden – Collection Our Lady Hospital Sisters, inv. GHZ BH003

Provenance

On permanent loan from the Our Lady Hospital, Mechelen

Iconography

The central theme of this Mechelen Enclosed Garden is the concept of redemption symbolised by the crucifixion of Christ. The symmetrical structure of this example closely resembles that of the three largest cabinets (G1, G2, G6).^[1] In the middle of this floral Garden, the crucified Christ is depicted with Mary and John standing on either side of the cross. At the foot of the cross lies a skull and a bone, referring to the remains of the first man, Adam. Since early Christianity, Christ was considered the second Adam, releasing humankind from the original sin imposed on them by their first ancestors.^[2] To emphasise this connection, Christian tradition declares that the cross of Christ stood on the burial place of Adam, also known as Golgotha or Calvary. By placing this Holy Cross in a paradisiacal garden, the Enclosed Garden accentuates the possibility of salvation and to regain access to the lost paradise after the self-sacrifice of Christ.^[3] The banderol at the bottom further

underlines this thought by stating: “Christ died for us in great need on the mountain of Cavalry the most bitter death. And Jesus’ wounds are our mercy and deliver us of our crimes and sins”.^[4] On the closed gate, moreover, the five wounds of Christ are depicted

Notes

^[1] The wooden case of this Enclosed Garden is the only one bearing the mark of the city of Mechelen

^[2] Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, *The book of Genesis in late antiquity: encounters between Jewish and Christian exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 71-79.

^[3] For more information on the depiction of the Holy Cross in paradise, see: Barbara Baert, *A heritage of holy wood: the Legend of the true cross in text and image* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004) XX-XX; Barbara Baert, “Adam, Seth and Jerusalem. The Legend of the Wood of the Cross in Medieval Literature and Iconography,” in *Adam, le premier home* (Firenze: Sislem, 2012), 69-99.

^[4] The original reads: “XPS is voor ons ghestorve(n) in grot(e) noot inden berch van Calvarie(n) die alder bitterste doot // IHS wonde(n) is ons gherade ende verlaetenisse van onsen misdaden en(de) sonden.”

Bibliography

Weale 1864: 39-40, n°216; Neefs 1869: 275, n°216; Willocx 1895: 91-92; Malines 1911: 32, n°122.; Poupeye 1912: 83-84; De Borghgrave d’Altena 1959: 66; Crab et al. 1971: 264-265, MS/8C and 455, MB/38; Leuven 1969: 217-218, n°194; Vandenbroeck 1994: 251, n°175; Hoflack 1998: 56-57, n°52;



G4 - Enclosed Garden with the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, Daniel in the Lion's Den and Saint Jerome

Mechelen

c. 1530

83,5x142x23

Museum Hof van Busleyden – Collection Our Lady Hospital Sisters, inv. GHZ BH004

Provenance

On permanent loan from the Our Lady Hospital, Mechelen

Iconography

Although remarkably smaller in size, the artistic quality of this sixteenth-century Enclosed Garden with Daniel in the lions' den is in no way inferior to the larger examples. The central scene depicts the old testament story of the prophet Daniel who, after remaining faithful to his forbidden Christian faith, was thrown in a sealed lions' den by king Darius (Daniel 6). Carried by an Angel, the minor prophet Habakkuk was able to provide Daniel with food without breaking the dens' seal. When the lions' den was opened again, Daniel was found alive and well. The sculpted narrative of Daniel in the den is surrounded by two other figures, the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, and Saint Jerome. In contrast to most wooden sculptures in the Enclosed Gardens, these figures are made of alabaster. The connection between the figure of Daniel, Saint Anne and Saint Jerome remains unclear. All three, however, knew a special veneration in the Our Lady Hospital.

Other than these central figures, two small statues are attached on both sides of the wooden box. On the left side, a male saint is dressed in a dark blue dress on top of which he wears a golden cloak. Furthermore, this male saint also wears a dark blue hat. The position of his hands suggests he once held an attribute, perhaps a staff, scroll or sword. The female figure, who is standing opposite of the unidentified male saint, also wears a dark blue dress and is veiled with a golden cloak. She doesn't seem to carry any other attributes. This lack of attributes makes it difficult to pass final judgement on the identities of these saints.

In contrast to the other Mechelen Gardens, this paradisiacal Garden is not enclosed by a gate. It is possible that it was removed over time, which might explain the small red velvet strip at the bottom of the case that could have served as a support, although it is also likely there never was a fence.

In the background of this garden we can distinguish two pipe clay medallions on which Christ is depicted as in profile and a Christ Child holding the attributes of the passion.^[1]

On the right of the Daniel sculpture, a small print depicting the Temptation of Saint Anthony can be distinguished.

Just as the others, this Enclosed Garden is filled with wax seals (*Agnus Dei*), flowers and animals (a squirrel, a snail, spiders, birds) in silk, inscriptions, textiles, rolls of paper enwrapped in textiles and small sequins. The garden can be closed with two painted wings on which Saint Peter (left) and Saint John the Evangelist (right) are depicted.

Notes

^[1] These seals are not unique and were cast in pipeclay, wax and *papier-pressé*. For more different examples of the medallion featuring the same image Christ in profile see: Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 366-367, note 117. Christopher S. Wood, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 155-164.

Bibliography

Weale 1864: 38-39, n°214; Neefs 1869: 273-274; Willocx 1895: 90-91; Malines 1911: 31, n°120; Poupeye 1912: 82-83; De Borghgrave d'Altena 1959: 66; Crab et. al. 1971: 264, MS/8B and 457, MB/40; Vandenbroeck 1994: 187; Hoflack 1998: 51, n°47; De Nijn 2000: XX; Frings 2005: 429-430, n°336.



G5 - Enclosed Garden with a Crucified Christ

Mechelen

c. 1530

56x92x13 cm

Museum Hof van Busleyden – Collection Our Lady Hospital Sisters, inv. GHZ BH005

Provenance

On permanent loan from the Our Lady Hospital, Mechelen

Iconography

This Enclosed Garden featuring a Crucified Christ has a less complex structure than the other Gardens from the collection of the Our Lady Hospital. In the middle of the case is a small sculpture of the crucified Christ enclosed by numerous silk flowers. The top of the wooden case is decorated with five bunches of grapes representing the sacramental wine consumed during Eucharist. The holy cross is flanked by a crescent moon (left) and a golden sun (right) with a glass heart in the middle. These two celestial bodies are in reference to the darkness which came over the world after the crucifixion of the saviour. Between the artificial flowers and ripe fruits, a number of wrapped relics can be distinguished. These relics are said to have belonged to several saints (such as the eleven thousand virgins) and sacred sites (such as the

Holy Land). At the bottom of the cross a small golden gate closes the paradisiacal garden. Just as the *Enclosed Garden featuring a Calvary scene* (G3), this Garden alludes to Christian salvation and the newly regained access to the lost paradise after the crucifixion of Christ.

The middle of the case can be closed off with two painted wings. The left wings represent a Virgin and Child while on the right wing Saint Augustine is depicted. The choice for these two saintly figures is rather apparent considering the shrine was held by a female community following the rule of Saint Augustine.

The small size of this Enclosed Garden suggests this triptych might have served for private devotion. This hypothesis is further supported by the small note which was added into the Garden by a sister called Victoria in 1806. In this note the sister stipulates that she took the Garden from the personal cell of her fellow sister Benedict Meganck after she had died. In the note sister Vitoria also indicates she cleaned the small silk flowers.

This Enclosed Garden thus illustrates how these objects remained a vital part of the devotional life of the Hospital Sisters, not just in the sixteenth century, but also in the centuries that followed. By adding, removing, cleaning and replacing its particles, the sisters kept these gardens alive for the next generation to discover.

Bibliography

Weale 1864: 38-39, n°214; Neefs 1869: 273-274; Willocx 1895: 90-91; Malines 1911: 31, n°120; Poupeye 1912: 82-83; De Borghgrave d'Altena 1959: 66; Crab et al. 1971: 264, MS/8B and 457, MB/40; Vandenbroeck 1994: 187, ill. 175; Hoflack 1998: 51, n°47; De Nijn 2000: XX; Frings 2005: 429-430, n°336.



Enclosed Garden 6 : Enclosed Garden with St Augustine, the Virgin and Child with St Anne and St Elisabeth



Enclosed Garden 7 : Enclosed Garden with a Madonna