

On Marcus van Vaernewijck's and Karel van Mander's non-religious interpretation of iconoclasm in the Low Countries as an expression of attitude towards sacred art

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Marcus van Vaernewijck

Wersja polska – s. 27

Iconoclasm in the Low Countries and the first attempts at its interpretation

PIOTR KRASNY

In the summer of 1566, there were violent iconoclastic riots in the Netherlands, which became a defining moment in the country's political and religious history, and in the history of its art.¹ The economic crisis, and especially the food shortages that afflicted the Low Countries at that time, were exploited by Protestant preachers to instruct the people that God would send misfortunes to the faithful in order to make them realize the need to destroy the error-prone Papist (i.e. Catholic) Church and to establish in its place a true Church of Christ. This new congregation was to adopt the teachings of the Christian religion and the liturgical order as defined by John Calvin (1509–1564) and implemented in Geneva, as well as in the Kingdom of France.²

The teachings of the Evangelical pastors above all bent the ear of the city's poor, who were particularly hard hit by the crisis. Poorly educated believers coming from this class were unable to understand the theological depth of the sermons they listened to. According to the observers of the goings-on of the city commoners, the people who represented that group were too savage and too primitive to try to change their lives in accordance with the recommendations from the preachers of the "new faith". Nevertheless, they proved able to accept, with full strength of conviction, the call for the violent expulsion of friars and priests from churches, and above all, to cleanse these buildings of "false idols", that is, of religious-theme paintings, stained glass windows, and sculptures.³

From August 10th to the beginning of September, crowds of self-proclaimed restorers of the Church demolished the churches, combining the pleasure derived

1 H. Kaptein, *De Beeldenstorm*, Hilversum 2002, pp. 82–92.

2 J. Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm*, Haarlem 1978, pp. 9–17; A. Duke, *Dissident Identities in Early Modern Low Countries*, Farnham 2009, pp. 189–203; S. Deyon, A. Lottin, *Les casseurs de l'été 1566. L'iconoclasme dans le Nord*, Lille 2013, pp. 20–36.

3 J. Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm*, pp. 98–104; A. Duke, *Dissident Identities*, pp. 179–188; S. Deyon, A. Lottin, *Les casseurs de l'été 1566*, pp. 210–225; R. Voges, *Power, Faith and Pictures. Frans Hogenberg's Account of Beeldenstorm*, "Low Countries Review", 131, 2016, No. 1, pp. 121–140.



1. Frans Hogenberg, *Iconoclasm in the Low Countries*, copperplate engraving, 1570.
→ see p. 28

from hoodlum activities with the conviction that they were fulfilling God's will (see: Fig. 1). The iconoclasts' efficiency was surprisingly high – in just one day they were able to “cleanse” all temples in a medium-sized city down to the bare walls. It took a little longer to achieve similar results in the largest urban centres of the Low Countries, such as Ghent, Antwerp, or Utrecht,⁴ which did not change the fact that their actions also brought overwhelming results in these locations. In the first of the aforementioned cities, the iconoclasts managed to ravage the cathedral, 7 parish churches, 25 monastic churches, 10 hospital churches, and 7 chapels.⁵

The losses suffered as a result of iconoclasm in the Netherlands were all the more painful as they affected the works of artists considered to be the leading masters of brush and chisel by enlightened Europeans at the time, often on a par with the greatest and most valued Italian counterparts.⁶ Within a few weeks, Netherlandish cities lost hundreds of paintings and carved altars, coming from the same workshops whose products were imported at great cost and on a large scale to Italy, France, Germany, England, and Spain, where the exquisite form of these works and their sophisticated ideological message were admired.⁷ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bruges and Antwerp were the main hubs of European art trade, which was subject to strict bureaucratic control in these centres.⁸ Thus, precise data was available, making it possible to calculate the enormous value of the damage caused by iconoclasts to the artistic heritage. This aspect of their “output”, however, escaped the attention of most people who tried to describe and analyse the course of the iconoclastic riots while they were still underway, and also shortly after their suppression.

These dramatic actions and the resulting damage were documented in the accounts by representatives of the local administration and clergy, sent to the Brussels office of the governor of the Netherlands, King Philip II of Spain (1527–1598). The authors of these documents also tried to recapitulate the culpability of the iconoclasts, stating that they had committed “sacrilege and iniquity in the churches”, manifested their “sectarianism”, as well as being guilty of violent disturbances of the social order, which turned into a rebellion against the royal authority. However, the problem of irretrievable destruction of valuable works of art was invariably absent from the official judgments of iconoclasm formulated by either the state or church authorities,⁹ which, furthermore, corresponded to the practice of assessing the effects of war conflicts commonly used by the widely understood administrative apparatus in the first centuries of the modern era.¹⁰ However, losses of this kind were noticed by Netherlandish humanists, perhaps in the wake of Erasmus

4 J. Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm*, pp. 18–96. S. Deyon, A. Lottin, *Les casseurs de l'été 1566*, pp. 39–63.

5 M. Bauwens, A. Somers, *The Institutional Nature of Parishes and Restoration of the Church after Iconoclasm. The Case of Saint James and Saint Pharahild in Ghent (1566–1614)*, “Revue Belge de Philologie et Histoire”, 93, 2015, No. 3–4, p. 675.

6 D. Fratini, *Guicciardini e Vasari. Modelli confronto per la geografia artistica delle Fiandre*, “Horti Hesperidum. Studi di Storia del Collezionismo e Storia Artistica”, 8, 2018, No. 1, pp. 193–195.

7 S. Porras, *Art of the Northern Renaissance. Courts, Commerce and Devotion*, London 2018, pp. 110–119.

8 D. Ewing, *Marketing Art in Antwerp, 1460–1560*. Our Lady's Pand, “The Art Bulletin”, 72, 1990, No. 4, pp. 558–554.

9 A broad selection of such accounts is published in extenso by Solange Deyon and Devon Lottin (*Les casseurs de l'été 1566*, pp. 255–273).

10 K. Brosens, *Mars en Minerva zijn doch noyt de beste vrienden gheweest*, in: *Ravage. Kunst en cultuur in tijden van conflict*, J. Tollebeek, E. Van Assche (eds.), Leuven 2014, p. 29.

of Rotterdam (Geert Geerts, 1466–1536), who described the iconoclastic riots in Basel in 1529 and lamented the damage suffered by art on that occasion.¹¹ Some of these intellectuals focused so much on the losses suffered by the artistic heritage of the Low Countries at the iconoclasts' hand that they did not see, or tried to ignore, the other kinds of damage those had caused. In this study, I will present the particularly eloquent statements by two such authors and try to explain why they did not include in their views on the 1566 iconoclasm the most obvious aspect of the events they are describing – namely, their meaning and their implications in the sphere of religion. I will also consider whether the “de-sacralisation” of iconoclasm in these texts could indicate a crisis in the perception of the particularity of religious art in the Netherlands during the Reformation.

Iconoclasm as an unlawful expression of the commoners' frustration, as interpreted by Marcus van Vaernewijck

The most important historical account of the iconoclastic riots in the Netherlands is the extensive text *Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghent 1566–1568* (*About those terrible times in the Netherlands, especially in Ghent, 1566–1568*),¹² edited by Marcus van Vaernewijck (1518–1569) (see: Fig. 2), a Ghent patrician, city clerk and humanist, author of several significant treatises on the history of the Netherlands and its cultural heritage.¹³ Although the aforementioned text, compiled shortly before van Vaernewijck's death, was not published in print until the nineteenth century, it was widely known to northern European historiographers. Van Vaernewijck not only described in detail the actions of iconoclasts in Ghent and its vicinity, but he also made an attempt to explain the social determinants of these unrests, their immediate causes, and the effects on the state of preservation of Low Countries' heritage and the transformations of Netherlandish consciousness.¹⁴ This interpretation of the history of native iconoclasm had a fundamental impact on the way this issue was described in historical works published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁵ The highly emotional tone that characterizes the narrative of *About those terrible times...*¹⁶ allows us to treat it also as a document of the author's personal attitude towards the destruction



2. Pieter de Jode the Elder, *Portrait of Marcus van Vaernewijck*, copperplate engraving, 1619.

→ see p. 30

11 C. Christ-von Wedel, *Das Selbstverständnis des Erasmus von Rotterdam als "Intellektueller" im städtischen Kontext des 16. Jahrhunderts*, "Documenta Pragensia", 27, 2008, p. 245; A.J. DiFuria, *Maarten van Heemskerck's Rome, Antiquity, Memory and the Cult of Ruins*, Leiden 2017, p. 248.

12 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghent 1566–1568*, in: J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen. Beeldenstorm in Gent 1566. Het ooggetuigenveslag van Marcus van Vaernewijck*, Gent 2016, pp. 15–131.

13 E.O.G. Haitzma Mulier, A. van der Lem, *Repertorium van geschiedschrijvers in Nederland 1550–1800*, Amsterdam 1990, p. 411; K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld van een zestiende-eeuwse Gentenaar. Marcus van Vaernewijck. Een ideeën- en mentaliteitshistorische studie op basis van zijn kroniek Van die Beroerlicke Tijden*, Gent 2005, pp. 74–76, 117–132; J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen*, pp. 10–11.

14 H. Van Nuffel, *Marcus van Vaernewijck (1518–1569) en zijn Kroniek Over de beroerlicke tijden*, "Standen en Landen", 40, 1966, pp. 115–145; K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, p. 209; J. Oddens, *Marcus van Vaernewijck en de Gentse Beeldenstorm*, "Skript. Historisch Tijdschrift", 27, 2014, No. 4, pp. 39–50; J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen*, pp. 11–14.

15 J. Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm*, p. 112.

16 K. Jonckhere, *The Power of Iconic Memory. Iconoclasm as a Mental Maker*, "Low Countries Historical Review", 131, 2016, No. 1, pp. 145–154.

of works of sacred art, expressed by a person belonging to the intellectual elite of the Netherlands and in all likelihood professing values that are characteristic of that elite.

Van Vaernewijck very thoroughly described the role of the teachings by Protestant preachers in provoking the iconoclastic riots in Ghent. As he observed, while referring to Calvin's conceptions, they proclaimed that Christianity is a religion of the word, not a religion of images, whereas the Old Testament is an unambiguous testimony that God abhors the worship of idols, which not only represent false gods, but are also an attempt to falsify the representation of the one true Creator. He also stated that the Ghent reformers preached the need to "cleanse" the interiors of temples in order to prepare them for the proper worship of God.¹⁷ However, what is striking in the text of *About those terrible times...*, is that the author of the work did not take any position on these Protestant teachings; on the one hand not trying to support them in any way, and on the other hand not engaging in polemics against them. He only went as far as to say that under their influence, people had fallen into a fanatical, destructive amok. He wrote: "the iconoclasts were convinced that they brought great joy unto God, and therefore they acted the way they did without any scruples. Sparing no effort, they would run, day and night, from one church to another. They moved in gangs of thirty, forty, or fifty people, many of whom were women and girls, all the while singing psalms," whereas the preachers who instructed them were convinced that they were maintaining the proper Christian order.¹⁸

Van Vaernewijck's disapproval of the destructive actions of the iconoclasts was not expressed in accusations that they offended God with their actions or committed a terrible sin. The Ghent humanist saw in them a crowd of people who were driven mad by hunger and poverty; people who were therefore easily provoked and induced to participate in riots.¹⁹ He believed that the iconoclasts cut off the heads of the statues and furiously chopped them into pieces in order to relieve their sense of humiliation through these acts of violence.²⁰ He denounced these people as a monkey-minded ("aapis geest") mob, and a drunken barbarian horde ("dronken barbaarse horde"), fuelling their fanaticism with wine robbed from the monasteries.²¹ Above all, however, he could not forgive the iconoclasts for being so primitive and so blind that they did not perceive the great artistic value ("grote artistieke waarde") of the destroyed works of art, which were the object of pride for the city of Ghent and the whole of Flanders.²²

In the pages of *About those terrible times...*, the assessment of the damage done by the iconoclasts was also made from an artistic, rather than a religious, perspective. Only in the case of the Marian altar in Sint-Niklaaskerk did van Vaernewijck note that this work had enjoyed great veneration among the people, as evidenced

17 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, pp. 17–55. See also: K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 190–191, 209–233; P. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots. The Political Culture of Dutch Revolt*, Ithaca 2008, pp. 85–86.

18 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, p. 103. See also: A. Duke, *Dissident Identities*, p. 185; K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 232–233; K. Jonckhere, *The Power of Iconic Memory*, p. 149.

19 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, p. 85. See also: P. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots*, pp. 85, 157; M. Bauwens, A. Somers, *The Institutional Nature of Parishes*, p. 675.

20 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, p. 97. See also: K. Jonckhere, *The Power of Iconic Memory*, p. 149.

21 Ibidem, p. 100.

22 Ibidem, p. 103.

by numerous votive offerings in the form of women's jewellery.²³ Above all, however, he lamented: "so many valuable objects and works of art have been damaged or destroyed that all we are left with is to mourn them, and let the matter rest."²⁴ He pointed out that among the paintings, stained glass pieces, and sculptures that the mob had annihilated, there were many objects made with extraordinary artistry ("bijzonder kunstige") by great masters such as Jan de Heere (born between 1502 and 1505 – died in 1575 or 1576), who deserved the name of the second Praxiteles,²⁵ Francoijs van de Velde, distinguished by his skill and diligence,²⁶ or the famous Frans Floris (1516–1570) from Antwerp.²⁷

While mocking the religious fanaticism of the iconoclasts, van Vaernewijck also showed no understanding for the Catholics' naïve faith in miracles by means of which God would shame the sinners who raised their hands upon holy images. With undisguised amusement, the humanist described the crowds of people who, upon seeing the figure of Saint Maurice being thrown into the sewer, shouted: "Look, look, a miracle has happened! This saint is in full armour, and yet he swims." For he scornfully concluded that "it was not a miracle, but a natural phenomenon, since the statue was made of wood."²⁸ However, he did consider it a kind of miracle that the altar of the Mystical Lamb in the Ghent cathedral was spared the destruction by the iconoclasts. He found this a great consolation that the said altarpiece had been salvaged from the hands of madmen, as he considered it a "masterpiece" ("meesterwerk"), a "wonder of art" ("wonder van kunst"), and a set of the most magnificent paintings from the earlier phase of the history of Netherlandish painting, work of Jan van Eyck (1390–1441) of whom Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) "wrote with great delight."²⁹

It is unlikely that the striking lack of indignation in the text of *About those terrible times...* for the brutal questioning of the Catholic dogma of the cult of images by Ghent iconoclasts was due to van Vaernewijck's succumbing to Protestant teachings. This Ghent historiographer declared himself a Catholic throughout his life, and his participation in holy masses and following other "Roman" services was exemplary.³⁰ However, he defined his identity to an equal (or perhaps even greater) degree through national patriotism (he published only in Flemish), and local patriotism. As reported by Joris de Zutter, Vaernewijck wrote about his hometown "my Ghent, beautiful Ghent", taking pride in living in a space filled with magnificent buildings, housing numerous works of art by the most eminent Flemish artists.³¹ His father, also named Marcus, was a member of the Guild of Saint Luke, an association of painters. Neither the oeuvre nor the artistic attitude of the elder van Vaernewijck are known, but it can be surmised that – like many Flemish painters – he was proud of his profession and instilled in his son a particular love of painting and other arts.³²

23 Ibidem, p. 99.

24 Ibidem.

25 Ibidem, p. 89.

26 Ibidem.

27 Ibidem, p. 72. See also: A. Duke, *Dissident Identities*, p. 188.

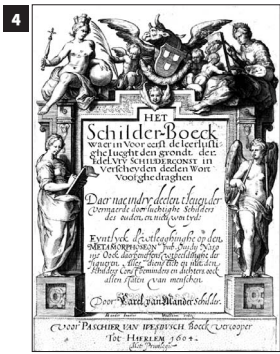
28 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, p. 97.

29 Ibidem, pp. 107–109. See also: W. Waterschoot, *Lucas d'Heere en Marcus van Vaernewijck voor het Lam Gods*, "Jaarboek de Fontaine", 16, 1966, pp. 113–118; K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, p. 143.

30 J. Pollman, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt in the Netherlands*, Oxford 2011, p. 44; M. Bauwens, A. Somers, *The Institutional Nature of Parishes*, p. 677.

31 J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen*, pp. 12–13.

32 K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 65–66; J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen*, pp. 10–11.



3. Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *Portrait of Karel van Mander*, copperplate engraving, 1604. → see p. 34

4. Jacob Matham after Karel van Mander, title page of *Het Schilder-boeck*, copperplate engraving, 1604. → see p. 34

The author of *About those terrible times...* combined this fascination with advancing his knowledge of the history of art, as evidenced on the one hand by his very early awareness of *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (*The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*) by Vasari, published in 1550 and 1568,³³ and on the other hand, by his impressive knowledge of the authorship of a large number of paintings and sculptures in Ghent's churches, revealed not only in *About those terrible times...*, but also in *Den spiegel der Nederlandscher audtheyt* (*The Mirror of Netherlandish antiquities*), published in 1568.³⁴

Van Vaernewijck's numerous statements clearly show that his faith – as that of Erasmus of Rotterdam³⁵ – had a humanistic dimension thereto, that is, it was based on a thoroughly considered Catholic interpretation of the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers.³⁶ Thus, the actions of the iconoclasts did not hurt his religious feelings too much. On the other hand, they had struck a heavy blow to his cultural identification, almost completely destroying the artistic heritage that shaped it. It should not be surprising, therefore, that although he described Ghent iconoclasm “like an outright plague sent by God, which no man is able to counter”,³⁷ he saw its dramatic effects almost exclusively in the “secular” aspect of artistic achievements.³⁸ Unlike religious truths, the components of this legacy were susceptible to irretrievable destruction, and that is why van Vaernewijck perceived their loss as “too sad to express”.³⁹

Iconoclasm as “enormous harm and loss to art” caused, according to Karel van Mander, by beauty-insensitive barbarians

Iconoclasm was an equally distressing experience in the life of Karel van Mander (1548–1606) (see: Fig. 3), an artist and historiographer who in 1567 began studying painting in Ghent,⁴⁰ which the iconoclasts had “cleansed” a year earlier from paintings, leaving its church interiors empty and bare, a view that visitors thereto found depressing for many years to come.⁴¹ *Het Schilder-boeck. Daer nae in dry delen 't leven der vermaerde doorluchtighe schilders des ouden, en nieuwen tyd* (*The Painter's Book in which the lives of outstanding painters of the old and new age are presented in a matter-of-fact manner*), published in Haarlem in 1604, became this artist's life's work (see: Fig. 4).⁴² The book – as its author himself freely admitted – was

33 W. Waterschoot, *Lucas d'Heere*, pp. 115–116; K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, p. 143.
 34 K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 126–127; L. Kleine Deters, “Paintings that Can Give Great Joy for Lovers of Art”. *Marcus van Vaernewijck's Notes about Art and Artists (1588)*, “Simiolus. Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art”, 42, 2020, No. 1–2, pp. 89–145.
 35 See esp.: D. Ménager, *Erasmus, the Intellectuals and the Reuchlin Affair*, in: *Biblical Humanism and the Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, E. Rummel (ed.), Leiden 2008, pp. 39–56.
 36 K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 192–209; J. Pollman, *Catholic Identity*, p. 44; J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen*, p. 13.
 37 M. van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, p. 80. See also: K. Jonkhere, *The Power of Iconic Memory*, p. 142.
 38 L. Kleine Deters, *Paintings*, p. 103.
 39 J. De Zutter, *Te triest om 't al te vertellen*, p. 9.
 40 R. De Mambro Santos, *Cronologia della vita e delle opera principali di Karel van Mander*, in: K. van Mander, *Le vite degli illustri pittori fiamminghi, olandesi e tedeschi*, translated and edited by R. De Mambro Santos, Sant'Oreste 2000, p. 74.
 41 M. Bauwens, A. Somers, *The Institutional Nature of Parishes*, p. 676–681.
 42 R. De Mambro Santos, *Periplo fiammingo. Introduzione alle Vite di Karel van Mander*, in: K. van Mander, *Le vite*, pp. 11–12.

a continuation of Vasari's *Lives...*, complementing his collection of biographies with the accounts of outstanding Netherlandish and Northern European painters.⁴³ Most researchers therefore consulted van Mander's work in search for specific biographical information and anecdotes about artists,⁴⁴ or analysed the importance of his book for defining the canon of Flemish, Dutch and German artists who deserved a place in the history of art.⁴⁵ We should note, however, that, according to the author of *The Painter's Book...*, this work was also meant to change the perception of the Low Countries, which around 1600 were described almost exclusively as the "bloody theatre" of a decades-long war, fuelled by their inhabitants, savaged by "mad and treacherous discord".⁴⁶ In the introduction to his book, van Mander claimed that he was inspired to write it by a letter from Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini (1551–1610), who had instructed him: "You should not describe the heroes nor the battle turmoil nor dust, because it is brushes and canvasses that mark your country's identity."⁴⁷ The Netherlandish historiographer therefore decided to convince his readers that the true character of the Low Countries is best expressed by painters of that realm who "deserve a similar veneration" to that enjoyed by the greatest Italian artists, as well as enlightened art lovers (*kunst-livenden*) "whose souls are pure, allowing them to enjoy and delight in beautiful and perfect things, capable of surpassing nature itself, such as magnificent works of art, which they admire and appreciate with great discerning judgement, thanks to their personal knowledge, the fruit of their innate predispositions".⁴⁸ The exploits of the iconoclasts constituted a serious obstacle in propagating such an image of the inhabitants of the Netherlands. Van Mander therefore had to define his position firmly against the iconoclastic riots of 1566,⁴⁹ perceived on the one hand as the first act of a heroic revolt against the Spanish rule, and on the other hand as the first demonstration of interfaith conflicts, which constantly fuelled warfare in the Low Countries and led to increasing destruction of their cultural heritage.⁵⁰

43 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck. Daer nae in dry delen 't leven der vermaerde doorluchtighe schilders des ouden, en nieuwen tyd*, Haarlem 1694, fol. 198; R. De Mambro Santos, *Periplo fiammingo*, p. 12.

44 B. Ridderbos, *Objects and Questions*, in: *Early Netherlandish Painting. Rediscovery, reception and Research*, B. Ridderbos, A. van Buren, H. van Veen (eds.), Amsterdam 2002, pp. 150–152; R. Bernhard, *From Waagen to Friedlander*, in: *Early Netherlandish Painting*, pp. 231–232; D. Ribouillault, *Regurgitating Nature. On a Celebrated Anecdote by Karel van Mander about Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, "Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art", 8, 2016, No. 1, pp. 1–36.

45 W.S. Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon. Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck*, Chicago 1991.

46 M. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 198r.

47 Ibidem, fol. 198r. On the alleged direct meeting between van Mander and Aldobrandini in Rome in 1570s, see: C.L.C. Ewart Witcombe, *The Vatican Apartment of Cinzio Aldobrandini. Notes and Documents*, "Archivum Historiae Pontificiae", 19, 1981, p. 178.

48 Van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 197r.

49 C. Ford, *Iconoclasm, the Commodity and the art of Painting*, in: *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, S. Boldrick, R. Clay (eds.), London 2007, pp. 77–88; R. Suykerbuyk, *Zoutleeuw's Church of Saint Leonard and Religious Material Culture in the Low Countries (c. 1450–1620)*, Leiden 2020, p. 255.

50 J. Art, *Religion and Secularization. The Continuing of Iconoclastic Fury*, in: *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*, vol. 5: *Accounting for the Past: 1650–2000*, D. Fokkema, F. Grijzenhout (eds.), translated by P. Vincent, London 2004, pp. 93–95; A. Duke, *Dissident Identities*, p. 179.

The attitude of various authors to iconoclasm was understandably often conditioned by their approach to religious art. Persons convinced of the idolatrous character of the latter saw iconoclasm as a good deed, whereas writers who recognized the rightness of belief of the Christian cult of images regarded their destruction as a mortal sin.⁵¹ However, the application of these criteria to the analysis of van Mander's text is not possible, because in *The Painter's Book*... we do not find any unambiguous declarations regarding the above-mentioned issues. This reticence of the Flemish writer must be surprising, especially when we note that in the *Lives*... of Vasari that inspired him, there are numerous instances of praise for paintings and sculptures that perfectly express ecclesiastical teachings, or effectively stimulate the piety of the faithful. It is also impossible not to notice that van Mander did not take up Vasarian considerations about the ideal of the Christian artist,⁵² and furthermore, described actions that were shockingly different from the attitude of Fra Angelico, who – according to Vasari – epitomised that ideal in a manner approximating perfection.⁵³

In the life of Gillis Mostart (1534–1598), contained in *The Painter's Book*..., we read that “he was not overly religious, nor was he willing to follow the instructions of the Spaniards, on whom he often played peculiar jokes. For example, he painted a representation of Virgin Mary for a Spanish client who, however, refused to remunerate him properly. The artist then covered the painting with a layer of plaster and glue, on which he painted Our Lady with vulgar ornaments, dressed like a harlot. He then invited the Spaniard to the studio, where the painting he had ordered stood upside down on an easel. Mostart picked up the painting and turned it towards the client. The latter, upon seeing such a profanation of the Virgin Mary, fell into a rage and immediately went to the local margrave, named Ernestus, to make a complaint. The painter washed the new layer of the painting with water, dried it quickly and placed it again on the easel. The margrave came to the workshop, shouting: ‘What is this I hear about you, Gillis? I am sorry to say that there has been a complaint against you. Whatever possessed you to paint something so monstrous?’ The artist invited him inside, and showed him the picture in which the subject was portrayed in the most appropriate way. The Spaniard (who accompanied Ernestus) was speechless. Then Gillis began to complain about the client's slander, claiming that he was trying hard to find an excuse to obtain the painting without paying the proper price for it. In the end, the Spaniard humbly admitted that he must have made a mistake. The painter committed many other antics of a similar kind. Once, he painted a scene within the representation of the *Last Supper*, in which all the figures were fighting with each other, and then washed it away as well. On another occasion, he painted the *Last Judgment*, in which he placed himself and a friend of his, sitting in hell and playing chess. He has pulled so many pranks like this that it is impossible to describe them all herein. Indeed, they would merit a separate book devoted solely to those.”⁵⁴

51 C. Dupreux, P. Jezler, J. Wirth, *Vorwort*, in: *Bildersturm. Wahnsinn oder Gottes Wille?*, iidem (eds.), Zürich 2000, p. 8.

52 See: P. Barolsky, *Michelangelo's Nose. A Myth and Its Maker*, University Park 1997, pp. 54–58; S.F.M. Stonell, *The Spiritual Language of Art. Medieval Christian Themes in Writings on Art in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden 2014, pp. 207–217.

53 S.F.M. Stonell, *The Spiritual Language of Art*, pp. 207–209, 211.

54 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 261r. See also: D. Kuzle, *From Criminal to Courtier. The Soldier in Netherlandish Art, 1550–1572*, Leiden 2002, p. 174.

With this anecdote, van Mander testified that during the revolt in the Netherlands there was an artist who mocked traditional Christian iconography and took considerable pleasure in thus offending the religious feelings of zealous Catholics. The historiographer did not criticize such acts, but seemed to treat them as good jokes, testimony to Mostart's wit and intellectual independence. Such a liberal approach to religious art, shared – as it seems – by the artist and his biographer alike, was undoubtedly the aftermath of the iconoclastic riots of 1566, during which the sacred nature of church images and their significance for the Christian religious service were questioned and challenged in the extreme. The Calvinist hostility towards the cult of holy images that led to these excesses was certainly known to van Mander, apparently a supporter of the Reformed religion, since – like most of the followers of the latter – he left the Southern Netherlands in the 1580s and travelled to Amsterdam and Haarlem, where it could be practiced freely. In the last phase of his life, this artist and historiographer leaned towards Mennonitism (the Dutch version of Anabaptism),⁵⁵ although a slightly different testimony of his religious identification is evidenced by his burial in the Calvinist Oude Kerk in Amsterdam.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, van Mander's lack of pious attitude towards Catholic religious iconography did not translate into praising the actions of Netherlandish iconoclasts, who consistently "cleansed" the churches of the paintings and sculptures that represented it. The historiographer lamented that these excesses led to the destruction of outstanding works by Hugo van der Goes (1440–1482),⁵⁷ Geertgen tot Sint Jans (ca. 1465 – ca. 1495),⁵⁸ Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen (1470–1533),⁵⁹ Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (ca. 1504–1559),⁶⁰ Jan van Scorel (1495–1562),⁶¹ Joachim Beuckelaer (ca. 1530 – ca. 1547),⁶² Frans Floris,⁶³ Pieter Aertsen (1507/1508–1575),⁶⁴ Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574),⁶⁵ Anthonis Blockland van Montfoort (1533–1583),⁶⁶ and he also bitterly regretted that the iconoclastic riots had interrupted the splendid development of stained glass art in the Netherlands.⁶⁷ He described the iconoclasts as a mob blinded by fanaticism and mindless rage ("blinden ijver en onverstandighe raserije") and violent actions, which they excited.⁶⁸ He believed that the iconoclasts' actions, marked by thoughtless fury,⁶⁹ were as much shameful as pointless,⁷⁰

55 D.A. Shank, *Karel Van Mander's Mennonite Roots in Flanders*, "Mennonite Quarterly Review", 79, 2005, No. 2, pp. 235–249.

56 R. De Mambro Santos, *Cronologia della vita*, pp. 75, 77.

57 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 204r. See also: C. Ford, *Iconoclasm*, p. 82.

58 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 206r. See also: C. Ford, *Iconoclasm*, p. 80; J.R. Decker, *The Technology of Salvation and the Art of Geergeten tot Sint Jans*, London 2017, pp. 11–13.

59 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 207v.

60 Ibidem, fol. 224v.

61 Ibidem, fol. 236r.

62 Ibidem, fol. 239r.

63 Ibidem, fol. 241v. See also: A.J. DiFuria, *Maarten van Heemskerck's Rome*, p. 248.

64 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 244r. See also: C. Ford, *Iconoclasm*, p. 80.

65 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 247r. See also: C. Ford, *Iconoclasm*, p. 84; A.J. DiFuria, *Maarten van Heemskerck's Rome*, p. 248.

66 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 254r.

67 Ibidem, fol. 258r.

68 Ibidem, fol. 254r.

69 Ibidem, fol. 236r, 241v.

70 Ibidem, fol. 247r.

whereas the hands, which executed these actions, he described as mean (“snoode handen”),⁷¹ barbaric (“barbarische”),⁷² devilish (“duivelsche”)⁷³ or sacrilegious (“heiligscheyndighe”).⁷⁴

The last two insults directed at the iconoclasts by van Mander came from the religious language, but in the text of *The Painter's Book*... it is impossible to find even a single accusation of these people offending God or taking away the tools serving to bolster religious life. The Flemish historiographer reproached the iconoclasts for destroying beautiful works (“schoon dinghen”) of exceptional value, representing the highest achievements of the art of painting.⁷⁵ He believed that outstanding artworks were created as a result of their author's innate talents, his long-standing practice, the understanding of “beautiful manners” and theoretical and artistic knowledge, coupled with well-directed ambition.⁷⁶ They are therefore very rare and extremely valuable goods, and their annihilation always causes “enormous harm and loss for art” (“groot jammer en verlies voor kunst”).⁷⁷ Hence he attributed equally great merit to those who defended church paintings *in situ*, and to the art lovers who sheltered artworks in their homes, while depriving them of their cult function on this occasion⁷⁸ – just as Cornelis Suycker (d. 1626) had done with the remnants of the *Seven acts of mercy* by Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen from the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam,⁷⁹ as Maarten de Vos (1532–1603) had done with an altar commissioned by the guild of carpenters and cabinet makers for the cathedral in Antwerp by Quentin Massijs (1466–1530),⁸⁰ or as Hans Vermeyen (before 1559–1606) had done with the work of his father Jan Cornelisz at the Sint-Gorick Church in Brussels.⁸¹ It can therefore be concluded that van Mander perceived the iconoclasm of 1566 as a “secular” vice, directed against the artistic achievements of the Flemish painters,⁸² and that describing it as a sacrilegious act probably resulted from the desire to equate it with blasphemy, considered the greatest of human sins and crimes in the sixteenth century.⁸³ Ricardo De Mambro Santos believes that the author of *The Painter's Book*... distanced himself in this text from the specific perception of sacred art, precisely in order to ensure that its objects and its creators might continue to exist and function in the Calvinist-dominated North Netherlands. If, for van Mander, paintings with religious themes were merely one variety of historical painting, which should be judged solely on the basis of the artistic representation

71 Ibidem, fol. 236r.

72 Ibidem, fol. 254r.

73 Ibidem, fol. 241r.

74 Ibidem, fol. 244v. See also: R. Suykerbuyck, *Zoutleeuw's Church*, p. 355.

75 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 254r.

76 Ibidem, fol. 196r, 197r. See also: R. De Mambro Santos, *Periplo fiammingo*, pp. 12–48.

77 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 225v.

78 It is worth noting that such an approach was in line with the attitude of the Mennonites, who excluded the cult of images and their placement in churches, but allowed the presence of sacred images in secular space and were eager collectors of such objects. See: H.S. Bender, *Mennonites in Art*, “The Mennonite Quarterly Review”, 27, 1953, No. 3 pp. 187–203.

79 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 207v.

80 Ibidem, fol. 216r.

81 Ibidem, fol. 224v.

82 R. Suykerbuyck, *Zoutleeuw's Church*, p. 355.

83 W.J. Connel, G. Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence. The Case of Antonio Rimaldeschi*, Toronto 2005, pp. 43–45.

of history,⁸⁴ then he must have judged the destruction of religious images only as a crime against art and against the good name of the people distinguished by the noble admiration thereof.

**Giving priority to artistic criteria over religious criteria
in the evaluation of works of sacred art and their destruction,
prevalent in the Netherlands during the period of religious disputes**

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation Catholicism in the Netherlands shaped their identity amongst the “bloody theatre” of war and in times of widespread disagreement, which made the confessional identification of many Flemish people highly chaotic and so remaining until the beginning of the seventeenth century. Among the Catholics of the South Netherlands, there were many former Protestants who returned to communion with Rome for calculated reasons, but retained some aspects of Evangelical teaching deep in their hearts. Many Catholics, sincerely convinced of the essential rightness of belief embodied by their Church, were also not without doubts as to whether the Reformation might have interpreted the teachings of the Scriptures better in some secondary matters.⁸⁵ The community of the Reformed Christians was torn primarily by disputes about the necessity to strictly observe Calvin’s concepts as opposed to the possibility of their reinterpretation. The establishment of a public Calvinist Church in the northern United Provinces at the end of the sixteenth century only complicated this state of affairs. This community needed to keep records not only of its actual members, entitled to join the Lord’s Table therein, but also of many people who avoided being strictly assigned to one of the denominations, who wanted to baptize their child, get married, or conduct a funeral. Thus, there was a large crowd of “the faithful” around the public Church, benefiting from its “services,” but often failing to share in its teachings.⁸⁶ Many enlightened Dutch people, such as the Protestant theologian Jacobus Arminius (1559 or 1560–1609), believed that in order to improve social relations and the purity of faith, one should exclude as many matters as possible from the sphere of religious life, and consider and regulate them in the secular order instead.⁸⁷ The adoption of such an approach in matters of religious art, suggested by van Vaernewijck and van Mander, probably corresponded to the attitude of many of their compatriots.

After the iconoclastic riots in the Low Countries had been put to rest, Governor of Netherlands on behalf of King Philip II, the Duke of Alba (Ferdinand Álvarez de Toledo, 1507–1582) issued a decree on February 14, 1568, in which he ordered the churches to be “repaired” as soon as possible, in such a way that they would not only be fit to celebrate the Catholic liturgy in them, but also correspond with their appearance to the Catholic tradition and manifest the liberation of the Netherlands from Protestant errors.⁸⁸ A symbolic mark of such orthodox normalization was

84 R. De Mambro Santos, *La civil conversazione pittorica. Riflessione critica e produzione artistica nel trattato di Karel van Mander*, Sant’Oreste 1998, pp. 42–73.

85 M.J. Marinus, *De contrareformatie te Antwerpen (1585–1676). Kerkelijk leven in een grootstad*, Brussel 1995, pp. 80, 115–116; K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 184–185, 190–191.

86 S. Perlove, L. Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith. Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age*, University Park 2009, pp. 17–24; T.M. van Leeuwen, *Arminius, Arminianism and Europe*, in: *Arminius, Arminianism and Europe. Jacobus Arminius (1559/1560–1609)*, T.M. van Leeuwen, K.D. Stenglin, M. Tolsma (eds.), Leiden 2009, pp. IX–XXII.

87 S. Perlove, L. Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith*, p. 24; T.M. van Leeuwen, *Arminius*, pp. XVI–XVII.

88 S. Deyon, A. Lottin, *Les casseurs de l’été 1566*, p. 139.

the filling of temples with a large number of sacred paintings and sculptures.⁸⁹ However, it turned out much easier to restore the sacred images within the church spaces than to persuade many people to return to worshipping them. The outbreaks of local iconoclastic riots, which happened quite often in the following years, proved the considerable futility of such efforts.⁹⁰

Having said that, a serious challenge for those attempting to “normalize” Catholic piety in the Netherlands – it seems – lied not only in the stubbornness of some iconoclasts who stuck to the fairly unsubstantiated theological errors. Their attitude towards painting representations, which was shared by van Vaernewijck, was far from the Catholic position. Although in the last months of his life van Vaernewijck was deeply involved in “repairing” the Ghent Sint-Jakobkerk,⁹¹ in the ending of *About those terrible times...* he never expressed, not in a single sentence, a religiously reverent attitude to paintings in churches, appreciating only the artistic value of these works, rather than their influence on the Christian life of the congregation.⁹² Putting of art before religion in this way was probably quite widespread among the Catholics of the Low Countries, since the followers of this religion in Ghent consistently protected the Altar of the Mystical Lamb during subsequent iconoclastic riots,⁹³ but in 1578 they did not prevent the iconoclasts from destroying the relics of the first and most important patron saint of this city, Saint Bavo.⁹⁴

Van Mander’s perception of sacred images as valuable works of art deserving careful protection also differed from the attitude of many Protestant reformers in the Netherlands, who mistrusted all religious representations and treated the history of their destruction in 1566 as a kind of a founding myth of their community.⁹⁵ Contrary to Calvin’s teachings, van Mander was ready to admire even a well-painted image of God the Father,⁹⁶ because he treated it as a work of art, and not as a “false idol” that could gravely offend the faithful.⁹⁷ Such an attitude, shared by many Protestant collectors, who – according to the information provided in *The Painter’s Book...* – safeguarded early-modern Catholic paintings in their homes, resonated perfectly with the views of van Vaernewijck and posed an extremely difficult challenge to Counter-Reformation activists in the Netherlands. After all, they needed to convince some of the local intellectual elite that sacred images were not only works of art, but also objects that played an important role in the life of the Church, as strictly described in ecclesiastical doctrine. The dissemination of these views needed to take place – to a large extent – by using new arguments, because most Catholic apologists had previously only indicated justifications for sparing images

89 See esp.: K. Jonckhere, *Art After Iconoclasm. Painting in the Netherlands between 1566 and 1585*, Brussels 2012.

90 P. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots*, p. 292.

91 K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 90–85; M. Bauwens, A. Somers, *The Institutional Nature of Parishes*, p. 677.

92 K. Iamont, *Het wereldbeeld*, pp. 209–218.

93 B. Ridderbos, *Objects and Questions*, p. 42.

94 W. Sauerlander, *Catholic Rubens. Saints and Martyrs*, translated by D. Dollenmayer, Los Angeles 2014, p. 143.

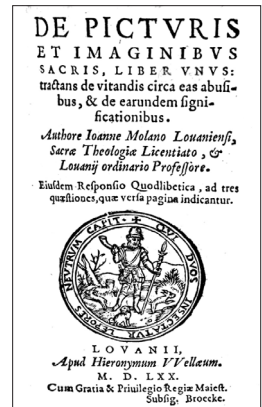
95 A. Duke, *Dissident Identities*, pp. 216–226; R. Voges, *Power, Faith and Pictures*, p. 124.

96 K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, fol. 224v.

97 On the absolute prohibition of representing God in works of art, formulated and justified by John Calvin, see: P. Krasny, *Figury obecności i nieobecności. Wprowadzenie do francuskiej dysputy o świętych obrazach i roli sztuki w życiu Kościoła*, Kraków 2016, pp. 74–78.

from destruction and worshipping them,⁹⁸ rather than reasons for the preservation and consolidation of the specific sacred nature of works of art in the recipients' awareness. These arguments should also appeal to the specificity of humanistic religiosity and theological discourse, that is, they should derive primarily from the Bible and patristic writings, and be convincing by the strength of their direct message, rather than subject to sophisticated scholastic interpretation.⁹⁹

It is therefore not surprising that Iohannes Molanus (Jan Vermeulen or van der Meulen, 1533–1585), professor of theology at the University of Louvain,¹⁰⁰ mentioned in the introduction to his treatise *De picturis et imaginibus sacris liber unus, tractans de vitandis circa eas abusibus et de earundem significationibus* (*One book on sacred paintings and images, describing how to avoid their abuse, and their meaning*), announced in print in 1570 (see: Fig. 5), that he would fight not only the treachery of idolaters, which pushes them to destroy holy images, but also the errors emerging in the attitude of Catholics towards these images. On the one hand, he accused Catholics of a lack of knowledge on rightful teachings about sacred representations, and on the other hand, he blamed them for their negligence (*neglegentia*) in its application.¹⁰¹ Although this last objection was not explained precisely in Molanus's text, it seems to resonate strongly with the attitude of people such as van Vaernevijck or van Mander, who certainly had the intellectual capacity to take into account the sacred character of images in their analysis, but settled for admiring their formal beauty. An analysis of the attitude of these historiographers towards the actions of the iconoclasts in the Low Countries, and the objects of their aggression – in my opinion – facilitates a better understanding of the message expressed in the introductory, art theory part of Molanus's work, which gained great popularity throughout the Catholic world as the first comprehensive account on the role of images in the Catholic Church, developed in an attractive formula for educated readers of the modern era.¹⁰²



5. Title page of *De picturis et imaginibus sacris* by Iohannes Molanus, 1570.

→ see p. 40

98 See esp.: G. Scavizzi, *Arte e architettura sacra. Cronache e documenti sulla controversia tra riformati e cattolici (1500–1550)*, Roma 1982, pp. 130–263.

99 See esp.: M. Gielis, *Leuven Theologians as Opponents of Erasmus and Humanistic Theology*, in: *Biblical Humanism and the Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, E. Rummel (ed.), Leiden 2008, pp. 197–214.

100 R. van Uytten, *Molanus Johannes (Jan)*, in: *Nationaal biografisch woordenboek*, vol. 2, Brussel 1966, pp. 560–562.

101 I. Molanus, *De picturis et imaginibus sacris liber unus, tractans de vitandis circa eas abusibus et de earundem significationibus*, Lovanii 1570, p. 13.

102 C. Hecht, *Katholische Bildertheologie im Zeitalter von Gegenreformation und Barock: Studien zu Traktaten von Johannes Molanus, Gabriele Paleotti und anderen Autoren*, Berlin 2012, pp. 291–299; A. Galizzi Kroegel, *[Jan Vermeulen] Ioannis Molanus, De picturis et imaginibus sacris*, in: *Arte e persuasione. La strategia delle immagini dopo il concilio di Trento*, D. Cattoi, D. Primerano (eds.), Trento 2014, pp. 142–143.