

## Review

Brecht Deseure, *Revolutie in Antwerpen. De aquarellen van Pierre Goetsbloets (1794-1797)*, Antwerp, Ludion, 2021, 320 pp. ISBN 9789493039490.



Pierre Goetsbloets was an amateur draughtsman from Antwerp who, thanks to his wealth, had ample opportunity to record the early years of French revolutionary rule in the Southern Netherlands. The hundreds of watercolours that he produced have had to wait a long time for a book edition. Brecht Deseure deserves all the credit for this initiative. The book under review is beautifully produced: the large format (29 x 25 cm) allows Deseure to show the watercolours in their full glory. In the past, it was not easy to consult the manuscripts of Pierre Goetsbloets in the Royal Library in Brussels. Only in exceptional cases were researchers allowed to consult the originals, while taking photographs was out of the

question, which has hampered research of this ten-volume manuscript numbering some 5,500 pages. It makes this edition all the more valuable.

Apart from the difficulties in consulting the work, there are several other reasons why it took so long for this treasure to appear in a modern edition. Historians write history, but they are rarely trained to work with images. Art historians, on the other hand, are mainly interested in 'high art' produced by skilled artists. The watercolours by Pierre Goetsbloets are charming in every way, but are more the work of a talented amateur rather than a professional artist. This visual chronicle has therefore fallen between two stools. It is a fate that befalls visual sources more often than written ones. Although a lot of ink has been spilled on the French Revolution, it was only in 2005 that the most important visual source regarding this period was published by Philippe de Carbonnières, on the gouache drawings held by the Musée Carnavelet in Paris.<sup>1</sup>

But there is more to it. Goetsbloets remains in this study an enigmatic man, about whom there is hardly more to tell than that he is the author of the ten-volume chronicle from the years 1794-1797, which he called *Tijdsgebeurtenissen* ('Time Events'). Goetsbloets

1 Philippe de Carbonnières, *Lesueur. Gouaches révolutionnaires* (Paris 2005).

belonged to the hundred wealthiest citizens of Antwerp. Not having to work to earn his keep, he had all the time to devote himself to his hobbies. With a zeal that soon assumed maniacal proportions, he recorded how the world around him changed due to the French conquest of the Southern Netherlands in 1794 and its subsequent annexation on 1 October 1795. Yet his passion for writing did not result in an autobiography; he only occasionally revealed something about his own life, such as the fate of a soldier who was billeted with him. The majority of his chronicle consists of a mishmash of different texts: he copied street songs, proclamations, ordinances, and newspaper articles. The result is more a *Fundgrube* than a readable chronicle about Antwerp during the French Revolution. For Goetsbloets himself, the texts he copied were often an occasion to show off his calligraphy skills, a field in which he truly excelled.

For understandable reasons, Brecht Deseure has simplified this unfathomable paper monument. He has made a selection of the watercolours that Goetsbloets produced for his chronicle, both of events that he had witnessed and of images that he had made upon reading a newspaper report. Deseure has selected 130 of the 280 watercolours; each one is accompanied by a short explanatory text on the adjoining page. He divided these watercolours into six categories: the Antwerp of Goetsbloets, allegorical images, the French Revolution, the practice of French authority, the attack on the church, and, finally, revolutionary celebrations. This division, of course, does not respect the chronology of the original manuscripts, but it opens up the enigmatic oeuvre of Goetsbloets to a broad audience. Deseure, who wrote his dissertation on historical discourse during the French Period in Belgium, is an expert guide who writes accurately, both in the extensive introduction and in the texts accompanying the illustrations.

For the historiography, the watercolours of the revolutionary feasts are by far the most important. Here, Goetsbloets did not rely on his imagination but is a visual chronicler of those feasts. Although he was an outspoken opponent of revolutionary novelty, he took the trouble to visit and draw the republican celebrations into great detail. Nowhere else – not even in France – has such a rich visual record of these festivities been preserved. Scholars interested in revolutionary festival culture cannot ignore this book.

It is somewhat of a pity, therefore, that Deseure (perhaps to serve an Antwerp audience?) does not show many watercolours of the revolutionary festivities, but instead focuses his attention on Goetsbloets's reconstruction of the Antwerp Ommegang, a procession which had not been held since the middle of the eighteenth century. I would have liked to see the inclusion of more of these unique visual representations, such as the watercolour of the school teachers who participated with their pupils in the procession on 29 February 1796, which culminated in the planting of the tree of liberty in front of Antwerp's town hall. It is almost touching how well Goetsbloets manages to capture the atmosphere of children walking in that procession on a winter's day, with French cockades on their hats, one in an oversized coat, another with his hands tucked into a muff, while a sulking third child is addressed by the schoolmaster, who gently pushes him along. Fortunately, Deseure did include the pen-and-ink drawing of the interior of a small school. He rightly points out its iconographic importance, because an eighteenth-century classroom is probably nowhere better depicted than here: it bursts with authentic details, such as the wooden schoolbags on the wall and the mantelpiece.

Surprisingly, military violence portrayed by Goetsbloets is only sparsely depicted in the edition, even though it is typical of the early years of the French presence in the Southern Netherlands. The well-known watercolour 'Revolt of the peasants against the Carmagnols' is only shown in postage stamp format in the introduction (18), while the watercolour 'The French republicans march towards the Soignies woods to finish off the Belgian brigands and *chouans*' is not depicted at all.

Let there be no misunderstanding: *Revolutie in Antwerpen* is both a beautiful and an important book. It is the first time that Goetsbloets's rich pictorial chronicle has been made accessible. It does not matter that the exuberant calligraphy and the chaotic character of the ten-volume manuscript are not yet fully revealed in this edition. Deseure is the first to acknowledge that this source is a treasure trove which has not yet revealed all its secrets, and that further research is needed into, for instance, the iconographic examples that inspired Goetsbloets.

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