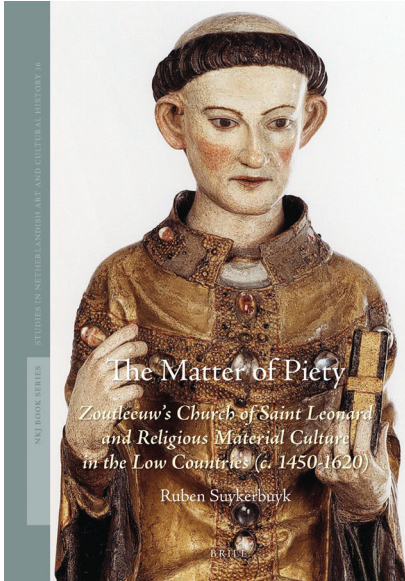


Review

Ruben Suykerbuyk, *The Matter of Piety. Zoutleeuw's Church of Saint Leonard and Religious Material Culture in the Low Countries (c. 1450-1620)*, Leiden, Brill, 2020, 428 pp. ISBN 9789004426306.



Few, if any, medieval churches in Belgium have survived both the iconoclastic furies of 1566 and the attacks of the French revolutionaries two centuries later as wonderfully intact as Saint Leonard's church in Zoutleeuw. The unique preservation of this pilgrimage church, its extraordinary interior, and its large collection of fifteenth-century devotional objects provide art historian Ruben Suykerbuyk with an excellent starting point to study the dynamics between Netherlandish lay piety and material culture, against the backdrop of the religious controversies of the long sixteenth century. It is not only the extended timespan and the bottom-up perspective that lends this beautifully published book (the commercial edition of the author's dissertation, defended at the University of Ghent in 2018) an ambitious scope. Its multidisciplinary approach, bridging the gap between history and

art history, and the use of different types of sources – written, visual, and material – further adds to the far-reaching aims of this work. In addition, the methodological framework combines qualitative with quantitative methods of analysis and compares the microhistory of Zoutleeuw's Saint Leonard church to relevant case studies from elsewhere in the Southern Low Countries.

The Matter of Piety is divided into three chronological parts, each organized around a particular devotional object from Saint Leonard's church that embodies devotional thought between 1450 and 1620. Taking the carved altarpiece (1476-1478) of the church as its material point of departure, Part I discusses the origins of the cult of Saint Leonard in Zoutleeuw and its development from a local cult into a popular pilgrimage site during the later Middle Ages, firmly anchored in a wider Netherlandish cult circuit. In contrast to most studies, Suykerbuyk argues convincingly that the rise in popularity of Saint Leonard

cannot be explained by the financially driven promotional campaign of the churchwardens alone. An intense lay piety, localized in devotional artefacts such as the Zoutleeuw altarpiece, is an important explanatory factor as well. Here, Suykerbuyk is indebted to the medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum, whose work has demonstrated that the growing emphasis on inner spirituality in the later Middle Ages was paralleled by a simultaneously increasing sense that the sacred is manifested in materiality.¹ The subsequent surge of material devotion problematizes the idea of a withering medieval religiosity.

Drawing on these conclusions, and focusing on different groups of Catholic lay agents, Part II addresses the key argument of the book. In five compelling chapters, the author challenges the traditional narrative that the introduction of Protestant thought around 1520 represents a sudden and decisive rupture in the already waning religiosity and its material culture of the late Middle Ages. Suykerbuyk finds this so-called 1520 thesis problematic. Indeed, his meticulous analysis of the devotional context of the sacrament house in Saint Leonard church, commissioned by the wealthy couple Van Wilre-Pylipert in the 1550s, contradicts a decline in traditional piety. Instead, the complex iconography of this magnificent representation of the Eucharist points to 'a complex interplay between tradition and innovation' (254). As far as form is concerned, it was still deeply rooted in medieval tradition, but it gained new dimensions in reaction to Protestant criticism. Comparisons to other early- to mid-sixteenth-century sacrament houses in the Low Countries confirm that devotional objects transformed into alternative replies to Protestant refutations of Catholic doctrine. Analysing the personal documents of common people, Judith Pollmann has argued that only after 1585 Catholics in the Low Countries succeeded in formulating a written response to the Reformation.² In *The Matter of Piety*, however, Suykerbuyk reveals that lay Catholics did articulate earlier reactions to Protestant challenges, albeit not in words but through sacred objects.

Part III explores the survival of the cults and pilgrimage sites that flourished around 1500 into the seventeenth century. The Zoutleeuw churchwardens were quick to tap into the renewed popularity of miracle cults in the 1600s. Exploiting the miraculous healing of a crippled boy through the intervention of Saint Leonard in 1612, they immediately commissioned a 'miracle memorial painting' from Jacop Lambrechts in order to revive the cult of their patron saint. They thus harked back to the thaumaturgic powers attributed to Saint Leonard a century before while at the same time employing a relatively new pictorial genre to promote his cult. Again, Suykerbuyk's long-term approach reveals that the medieval roots of lay piety were vital to the renewal of cults in the confessionalized landscape a century later. Through material representations of miracles, promoted by the Council of Trent as the focal point of Counter-Reformation piety, lay believers reshaped medieval cults, often in a fruitful dialogue with the Habsburg government, as an interesting final chapter shows. Contrary to most recent research, the author demonstrates that the archducal court did not always determine the devotional agenda but reacted to local initiatives as well.

1 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York 2011).

2 Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (Oxford 2011).

Catholicism has always been a material religion. No wonder, then, that in the wake of the material turn of the 1990s scholars of religion have in recent years (re)discovered devotional materiality as a rewarding concept to study medieval and early modern spirituality. *The Matter of Piety* is an impressively rich and highly readable contribution to this rapidly growing body of scholarly literature. Its long-term approach of lay engagement with devotional objects cleverly illuminates ‘the thin line between tradition and transformation’ (321), thus adding to our understanding of the complex process of change and continuity in the long sixteenth century. It is also an outstanding example of how writing a microhistory – and comparing it to a range of other case studies – complicates generally accepted views on major historical events such as the advent of Protestantism. Moreover, the ‘close reading’ of artefacts and paintings works wonderfully well with the quantitative analysis of the churchwardens’ accounts. Their complementary character further enriches our knowledge of religious materiality.

Although the book mainly lives up to its promises, inevitably such an ambitious study invites some minor criticisms. Suykerbuyk’s claim, for example, that the book revises dominant narratives is perhaps a bit too firm. His findings concerning the change/continuity discourse refine rather than revise the conclusions of other scholars, such as Duffy, Walker Bynum, and Pollmann. He is also not the first (art) historian who, opting for a grassroots perspective in combination with a long-term approach, illuminates how the introduction of Protestantism changed the function of traditional material culture in a post-Reformation context (see the work of Evangelisti and the present reviewer). Furthermore, in a work that puts objects central stage, the ‘agency of things’ is conspicuously absent. The notion of objects as historical actors – one of the most recent trends in the study of materiality – could have added a meaningful extra layer to this study. The same goes for the sensory aspects of smelling or touching devotional things, or the emotions these senses evoked. Here, the work could have benefited from the ground-breaking research by anthropologists such as Alfred Gell and, more recently, Birgit Meyer, who focuses especially on material religion. Yet these few critical remarks merely underline one of the great merits of this important work: it opens up fruitful avenues for new research.

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