# Low Countries Women as Funders of Art and Architecture: Gender, Property Rights, and the Financing of the Flemish Baroque

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Abstract

From the late sixteenth century into the early eighteenth, the Southern Low Countries constituted one of the most important regions for artistic production and exchange in Europe. This essay reveals the understudied roles of women in the flourishing of that visual culture. I argue that this topic must be approached with a solid understanding of the gendered property laws and practices that shaped both how women used their wealth to finance art and architecture, and the sources through which we access that activity.

*Keywords:* patronage, property, women, art, architecture

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In or around 1659, somewhere in the rooms of the grand urban mansion-cum-publishing house called the 'Golden Compass' in Antwerp, a woman named Anna Goos sat for her portrait (fig. 1).[1] She had married the heir of this publishing dynasty, Balthasar II Moretus, in 1645, when she was just eighteen and he thirty. Now Anna was the mother of several children, and running one of the busiest and most prosperous households in the city. She gazed intently at the painter, Jacob van Reesbroeck, who recorded her carefully coiffed hair, understated clothing, and fine jewellery, details that communicated wealth, taste, moral rectitude, and authority. Although Anna might not have known it yet, she was proving herself so capable in her roles that Balthasar II would leave her the publishing business in his will, making her, when he died in 1673, arguably one of the most influential women in Antwerp. She headed the press for three years before transferring it over to their son, Balthasar III.[2] When she died in 1691, she left her children not only a large investment portfolio, but also a house filled with artworks by some of the most famous painters of the seventeenth century.[3]

Elite women like Anna Goos made significant contributions towards the flourishing of the Flemish Baroque, considered here as encompassing the art and architecture created in the Southern Low Countries between 1585, when Spain re-established control over the region, and the early eighteenth century. Yet our knowledge of their activity in this arena is quite limited. My purpose in this contribution is to give an overview of what we do know and to show that this space offers fertile ground for new research. In order to bring these women to light, I argue that art historians need to wade into waters typically navigated by economic and legal historians, and to approach their research with a solid understanding of the gendered property laws that shaped both how women used their wealth towards art and architecture, and the sources through which we can access that activity.

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1  Slegers and De Roo, *Jacob Van Reesbroeck*, 12-14.
2  Selleslach, 'How to Transfer the Officina Plantiniana'.
3  Duverger, *Antwerpse kunstinventarissen*, XII, 135-143.

## Patronage or Funding?

I am concerned here with what is typically called patronage, but that framework, at least as it is often used in art history, poses a few interlinked problems for my purposes. First, the term 'patron' carries certain connotations, conjuring up a sort of free agent, a man of taste and intellect, one who variously recognises genius, bestows beneficence, generates ideas, takes initiative, and makes decisions that determine the final character of a commission. Such actions and subjectivities have been for millennia coded as masculine, and they thus play into unconscious biases: art historians in search of a patron have traditionally been looking for a man's name among the records. Second, the patronage model tends to create an oversimplified picture of the various ways in which artworks were ordered, designed, and paid for. In some cases, a commission was indeed straightforward, with a single patron ordering a work from a single artist. But often, and particularly with series of works and

architectural projects, execution could spread out over a number of years and involve multiple artists, and funds might come from multiple sources. Where there is an impulse to single out a primary patron for credit, women are again more likely to be overlooked. And finally, while there was a great deal of wealth in Southern Netherlandish female hands during the period in question, women's diminished legal capacitation – in particular during marriage – means that a woman's name often figures less prominently, or even not at all, in the documentation concerning a work for which she was, in fact, paying.

For all of these reasons, I use the term 'funding' rather than 'patronage' in this article. I am not including here the type of funding that we typically call consumption: the purchase of second-hand works or those created for the mass market.[4] Nor am I thinking about financial investment on the production side, like when female publishers such as Anna Goos purchased plates and presses, or when a woman supported a male artist's career.[5] This is not because women were unimportant actors in all these arenas – quite the opposite is true – but because keeping focus on the funding of new commissions opens our eyes to women's part in shaping the art historical canon, and in making possible the remarkable innovations of Flemish artists and architects in the long seventeenth century.

## Historiography

Since the 1990s, scholars have demonstrated that art and architectural patronage comprised one of the most potent means by which early modern elite women, whose rights and opportunities were curtailed by and in comparison to men, could exert agency over their lives and shape the world around them.[6] Throughout these studies runs the problem of women's visibility in the archives, and how their commissions and influence might be accessed via different sources and routes of reasoning.[7] The last few years have seen an upswing in this research, alongside an even bigger surge in attention to early modern female artists, who have been the subject of a number of recent monographs and exhibitions.[8]

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**4**  See for example McIver, 'Material Culture'.
**5**  Wyffels, 'De drukkersvrouwen'; Wyffels, 'A Window of Opportunity'; Puyenbroek, 'Dynamic Partnership'. See also Lieke van Deinsen's current FWO project 'Partners in Innovation. Women Publishers as Knowledgeable Agents in the Low Countries' Book Trade (1550-1750)'.
**6**  Important are Lawrence (ed.), *Women and Art*; McIver, *Women, Art, and Architecture*; McIver (ed.), *Wives, Widows, Mistresses, and Nuns*; Hand, *Women, Manuscripts and Identity*; McIver and Stollhans (eds.), *Patronage, Gender and the Arts*; Hickson, *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage*; King, 'Lay Patronage'; Pearson (ed.), *Women and Portraits*; DePrano, *Art Patronage*; Modesti, *Women's Patronage*; García Pérez (ed.), *The Making of Juana of Austria*.
**7**  For a focused discussion see Solum, 'Attributing Influence'.
**8**  Bohn, *Women Artists*; Strausmann-Pflanzer and Tostmann (eds.), *By Her Hand*; Hall-Van den Elsen, *Luisa Roldán*; Dyballa (ed.), *Geniale Frauen*; Oberer, *Rosalba Carriera*; Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani*; Navarro and Schmidt, *Plautilla Nelli*; Koja and Wagner (eds.), *Aus dem Schatten*; Vandi, *Suor Eufrasia Burlamacchi*; Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson*; Banta, Greist, and Kutasz Christensen (eds.), *Making her Mark*; Bava, Mori, and Tapié (eds.), *The Ladies of Art*. See also the upcoming (2026) exhibition *Unforgettable. Women artists from Antwerp to Amsterdam, 1600-1750* at the National Museum of Women and the Arts in Washington and the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent.

For the seventeenth century, some Dutch (Northern) women of the ruling classes, in particular Amalia of Solms, figure prominently in the literature on female patronage.[9] We are also currently seeing the spotlight turned on Dutch women funders among the mercantile elite: Catherine Powell-Warren's excellent book on Agnes Block is a game-changer, and Judith Noorman's nwo project 'The Female Impact. Rethinking the Early Modern Art Market' is making major strides in the same arena, for example by highlighting Maria van Nesse.[10] For Southern women's funding in the same period, the bulk of the publications comprise the 1994 *Hooglied* catalogue and my own work on Beguines and spiritual daughters (discussed below).[11] There is not yet the same stirring of enthusiasm for early modern women's patronage in the Belgian sphere that we are seeing in the Netherlands; however, recent new work suggests that there is a real opportunity here to build momentum and advance the field.

## Women, Property, and Purchasing Power

For a woman to be a funder, in the sense that I use the term here, she had to both have wealth and be legally capacitated to use that wealth to commission art and architecture. As researchers, we can only assess these two factors if we understand the gendered property laws to which she was subject. There is a strong tradition of studying early modern women's property rights, especially in the English context, but also for a wide range of other regions including Spain, France, some Germanic lands, and Scandinavia.[12] For the United Provinces, Adriane Schmidt's work has been particularly important, and it is now fairly well known to historians of this region that Dutch women had (relatively) broad property rights, and that their signatures, in many cases, bore the same legal weight as those of men.[13] Feminist social and economic historians have deftly brought that knowledge to bear on various aspects of seventeenth-century Dutch women's lives, for example in terms of the labour market and criminality.[14] Judith Noorman is currently doing the same for

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**9** Beranek and ffolliott, 'The Agency of Portrayal'; Sutton (ed.), *Women Artists and Patrons*; Akkerman, *Elizabeth Stuart*.

**10** Powell-Warren, *Gender and Self-Fashioning.* Noorman's project website is www.thefemaleimpact.org/ (Accessed on 18 October 2024) and its most substantial publication so far is Noorman and Van der Maal, *Het unieke memorieboek.*

**11** Vandenbroeck (ed.), *Hooglied*; Moran, 'Of Locked Doors'; Moran, '"A cui ne fece dono"'; Moran, 'Bringing the Counter Reformation'; Moran, 'Women at Work'; Moran, 'Resurrecting'; Moran, 'Women and Artistic Knowledge'; Moran, *Unconventual Women.*

**12** Spicksley, 'Women, "Usury" and Credit'; Micheletto, 'Only Unpaid Labour Force?'; Ågren, '"His Estate" – or Hers?'; Sperling and Wray (eds.), *Across the Religious Divide*; Sperling, 'Dowry or Inheritance?'; Hammons, 'Rethinking Women and Property'; Gottschalk, 'Does Property have a Gender?'; Coolidge, '"Neither Dumb, Deaf, nor Destitute"'; Ferguson, Wright, and Buck (eds.), *Women, Property, and the Letters of the Law*; McGough, 'Women, Private Property'; Crosswhite, 'Women and Land'; Poska, 'Gender, Property, and Retirement Strategies'; Lehfeldt, 'Convents as Litigants'; Diefendorf, 'Women and Property'; Simonton and Montenach (eds.), *Female Agency.*

**13** Schmidt, 'Survival Strategies'; Schmidt, 'Women and Guilds'; Schmidt, 'Generous Provisions'; Schmidt, 'Gelijk hebben, gelijk krijgen?'.

**14** For example: Van der Heijden, *Women and Crime*; Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship.*

art history, reminding us that Dutch women's ownership and control of property not only enabled them to fund art, but also means that they left substantial archival records of that activity.[15]

For the Southern Low Countries, much excellent, focused work has been done on women's property rights and legal capacitation in the later medieval period, and we also have good research by Laura van Aert on the sixteenth century.[16] But for the seventeenth there is no comparable scholarship. The secondary literature comprises just two temporally broad, decades-old but still reliable overviews: John Gilissen's 1962 essay *Le statut de la femme dans l'ancien droit belge* and Philippe Godding's 1987 *Le droit privé dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux du 12e au 18e siècle*.[17] To confirm the specific jurisdictional differences (by province and city) we still need to look at the primary sources, the *coutumes* or *costumen* that were regularly published in this period, as well as the archival documents that show these statutes in practice.[18] Far more work remains to be done, and to my knowledge only Heidi Deneweth has consistently applied knowledge of women's legal rights to social history questions in this arena.[19] I have brought it to bear on early modern Beguines' and spiritual daughters' funding of art and architecture, but it is otherwise absent in the scholarship on the Flemish Baroque.[20] The rest of this section gives a brief overview of seventeenth-century Southern Netherlandish women's property rights that I hope will be useful for future scholars.

Like their Dutch counterparts, women in the Southern Low Countries owned a substantial proportion of private property. The region followed what John Hajnal coined the 'Northern European late marriage pattern', based on the principle of equal inheritance, in which all offspring of a married couple – both male and female – were by law due equal portions of their parents' marital estate.[21] Offspring were further expected to set up their own households, and so adolescent boys and girls both tended to spend time in the workforce before marriage, resulting in the 'late' age at first marriage: early to mid-twenties for women and late twenties for men. For the upper echelons of society, this need to work did not apply, and it does seem that we see more teenage brides among them. At the same time, significant numbers of rich women remained unmarried. The nobility was

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**15**  Noorman (ed.), *Gouden vrouwen*.

**16**  For the medieval period, see Guzzetti, 'Women's Inheritance'; Naessens, 'Judicial Authorities' Views'; Hutton, *Women and Economic Activities*; Howell, *The Marriage Exchange*. It is important to note that Howell's study deals with Douai, which she explains had a different 'inheritance regime' than most of the rest of the Low Countries. On the sixteenth century, see Van Aert, 'The Legal Possibilities'; Van Aert, 'Trade and Gender Emancipation'; Van Aert, 'Tussen norm en praktijk'.

**17**  Gilissen, *Le statut de la femme*; Godding, *Le droit privé*.

**18**  These were published periodically from the second half of the sixteenth century onward. Specific volumes consulted here span the seventeenth century and cover the County of Artois, the city and lordship of Mechelen, the city of Antwerp, the city and territories of Dendermonde, the Prince-Bishopric of Liège, the Duchy of Brabant, the County of Namur, and the County of Flanders: *Costumen, usancien*; *Coustumes generales*; *Coutumes et ordonnances*; *Rechten ende costumen Antvverpen*; Christyn, *Brabandts Recht*; Maestertius, *Beschryvinge vande stadt*; Vanden Hane, *Vlaemsch recht*.

**19**  Deneweth, 'A Fine Balance'; Deneweth, 'Spanningen'.

**20**  Moran, 'Resurrecting'; Moran, '"A cui ne fece dono"'; Moran, 'Of Locked Doors'.

**21**  Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns'; Hajnal, 'Two Kinds of Preindustrial Household'; Van Zanden, De Moor, and Carmichael, *Capital Women*.

not exempt from equal inheritance laws, and only assets directly tied to noble titles, for example a castle that served as the seat of a lordship, were subject to primogeniture.

This means that there was no dowry system in the Low Countries; in fact, the word dowry, *bruidschat*, does not appear a single time in Duverger's thirteen-volume *Antwerpse kunstinventarissen*, a collection of excerpts of seventeenth-century documents from Antwerp's notarial archive that relate to art. While this might not seem a point worth belabouring at first glance, as a historian of women in this region I have run into countless instances – both in published texts and in conversation – in which the assumption of a dowry system has led to incorrect claims and misinterpretations of historical data. These range from the common mischaracterisation of a young bride's contribution to the marital estate as a dowry transferred from her father to her husband, to the notion that the only women who had any control over property were widows, to the idea that girls were sent into convents because their parents could not afford dowries for multiple daughters. The problem with such assumptions is not just that they are inaccurate, but that they lead to additional false conclusions while keeping us from recognising the spaces in which women had agency.

Belgian archives are replete with documents that were shaped by, and reflect, the laws around marriage and inheritance that were outlined in the *costumen*, and these can tell us a great deal about women. They constitute three main categories: marriage contracts, wills, and probate inventories. The first specified the various assets (often listed in appended or separate inventories) that bride and groom brought into the marital estate, which was formed as a legal entity when they wed. In some places, immovable goods were explicitly excluded from these contributions. Future income generated from marital assets, as well as from work, also became part of the communal property, and each spouse owned one half of its total value. If the couple had no children when one of them died, then the deceased spouse's half might either go back to his or her natal family or to the surviving spouse, depending on what was allowed in the local jurisdiction; if there were children, then that half was divided among them. In addition to the marital estate, husband and wife also had separate personal estates, into which went any (additional) inheritances that either received. These personal assets could be bequeathed to whomever the testator or testatrix wished.

The 1589 marriage contract between two of the most recognisable faces for historians of Flemish art, Adriana Perez and Nicolas Rockox (fig. 2), for example, notes the goods and investments that each was bringing into the marriage. According to the document, should one of them die before they had children, all the assets that the deceased had contributed, or their equivalent value, were to return to her or his family, as would any inheritances acquired during the marriage. The contract further specifies that if there were offspring on the death of the first spouse, the marital estate, excepting the surviving spouse's clothing and jewels (and if it were Rockox, his weapons, horse, and armour), was to be divided in half, with one half kept by the living parent and the rest going to the children.[22] These stip-ulations are far less expressions of the wishes of the bride and groom, or of their parents, than they are reflections of existing property law in Antwerp in the late sixteenth century.

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**22** Van Cuyck, *Levensschets*, 17-18.

*Fig. 2  Peter Paul Rubens,* Epitaph of Nicolaas Rockox and Adriana Perez, *1613-1615, oil on panel, 146 × 233 cm, Antwerp, Royal Museums of Fine Arts.*

Built into the provisions of this marriage contract was the hope that Rockox and Perez would have legitimate children. While they ultimately did not, if there had been offspring, then when the first parent died, each of those children would have been legally due an inheritance. An inventory of the marital property would have been drawn up by professional assessors to establish its total value. If there were several children, some assets would likely have been sold, converting them to cash to make an equal division manageable.[23] This is the purpose of a significant proportion of preserved probate inventories (*sterfhuisen*) from the Southern Low Countries. Without an understanding of inheritance law, non-specialist scholars can misinterpret these documents, for example by not realising that they concern marital property or that each spouse had a separate personal estate. Those personal estates were (ideally) detailed in other sets of documents. Moreover, any special provisions or exceptions noted by those who drew up these inventories can only be understood in light of the relevant legal framework.

The law thus ensured both that a woman owned property, and that her daughters would inherit just as much as her sons. But to act as a funder, a woman also needed to be able to *use* her property. As elsewhere in Europe, all early modern Low Countries women spent some or even all of their lives as wards under the protection of (mainly male) guardians, whose signatures were usually necessary to authorise the buying, selling, investing, or transferring of her assets. For underage boys and girls these guardians – *voogden* in Dutch – were automatically parents (in some places both acted jointly, in others it was

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**23**  See for example the 1617 inventory of Isabel da Vega's and Emmanuel Ximenes's joint property, made on the occasion of her death: Moran (trans.), 'Inventory of Moveable Marital Property'.

only the father), and if the latter died or were incapacitated, replacements were appointed. This changed at marriage: males, even if they had not yet reached the age of majority, were emancipated and became the guardians of their new wives, and females in turn became the wards of their husbands. Laws were in place to protect a wife's personal property, as well as her half of the marital property (i.e., her children's lawful inheritance), from being squandered by her spouse, and there were some instances in which a wife's signature was legally binding on its own, for example when she wrote her will and in the case of *koopvrouwen*, who were registered as independent traders.[24] Still, in general, wives were under *coverture*, unable to independently sign contracts and restricted in what they could do with both their joint and personal property by the will of their husbands.

Single women, by contrast, had significant freedom. Young unmarried women (as well as men) were released from parental guardianship when they reached the age of majority, which varied by time and place but was most commonly set at twenty-five; they might also be eligible for emancipation several years earlier if they were already living independently. For a wife, wardship ended if her husband died and left her a widow. In Brabant and Liège these single women were still considered legally incapacitated, and thus in need of male guardians to represent their interests, but this does not mean that they were assigned a permanent *voogd*. Instead, a temporary guardian or *momboor*, often a male relative, was found to serve in that role on a case-by-case basis, giving unmarried women a much larger degree of agency than wives in such matters. In Flanders the situation was even better: single adult women were legally capacitated, with no need for a *voogd* or *momboor* at all. They were free to sign their own contracts independently, including with artists and architects.

We can bring some of this knowledge back to bear on the two women we have already seen portrayed in this essay, Anna Goos and Adriana Perez, and think about their roles in having these portraits made. Goos's portrait, we know, was one of several that her husband Balthasar II Moretus mentioned in a journal entry of 2 March 1659. Balthasar recorded an agreement to pay Jacob van Reesbroeck for making pictures of himself, his wife, and his mother, as well as alterations to portraits of his maternal grandparents. Researchers working on these archives may be able to clarify from which estate this payment was made, but with the information now at hand there is really no way to tell whether Balthasar was using his own money or that of the marital estate. Anna Goos may or may not have funded her portrait, though considering it in the context of the other portraits and the journal, it seems quite likely that her husband initiated the project.

For the beautiful epitaph triptych that Rubens executed for Perez and Nicolas Rockox, the circumstantial evidence has different implications. There is no known documentation concerning the commission, and Kendra Grimmett has recently used the painting as a starting point to consider Perez's possible role as 'co-patron' of the collection of art in her home, until now credited only to her husband, and for thinking about Perez's active input as a viewer inside the household.[25] This is exactly the sort of challenge that we should take up, and adopting a property rights perspective allows us to pursue it in a concrete way: considering the work's intended function of adorning the couple's shared grave, it seems

24  Van Aert, 'Tussen norm en praktijk'.
25  Grimmett, 'The Images'. On Rockox, see Huet and Grieten, *Nicolaas Rockox*.

probable that it was paid for from the marital coffers. If that is the case, then Perez and Rockox indeed played equal roles as funders, and we should consider how each of them might have shaped the triptych's appearance. Returning to the archives with this legal knowledge could tell us more about not only this work, but also countless others traditionally credited to married male patrons, revealing wives' financial roles and prompting new questions about their involvement in commissions.

For the remainder of this essay, I will assess the current literature and potential for new research on female funders of Flemish Baroque art and architecture. I have divided these actors into several categories: the Archduchess Isabella, wealthy laywomen, spiritual daughters, and religious communities. The lines between these groups blur a bit, but I find them nonetheless useful, particularly in thinking about how to approach further research.

## Isabella Clara Eugenia

There is a decades-long tradition of spotlighting the patronage of sixteenth-century Habsburg female governors of the Low Countries – Margaret of Austria, Mary of Hungary, and to a lesser extent Margaret of Parma.[26] The one seventeenth-century female governor, the Spanish infanta and Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia (fig. 3), is well-known to the Belgian public but has received less scholarly attention; remarkably, we still do not have a proper biography of her. She was the daughter of Philip II of Spain, who in 1598 named both herself and her new husband, Albert of Austria, sovereign governors of the Low Countries.[27] Spurred by politics and their own deep piety, the archdukes revitalised Catholicism in their territories, supporting the rebuilding and decorating of religious institutions, and they made their court in Brussels into a thriving artistic centre.[28] After Albert's death in 1621, Isabella governed alone until she passed away in 1633.

In the literature the archduke long overshadowed the infanta, probably in part because Isabella herself crafted her public identity around what Cordula van Wyhe has called 'radical submission' to her husband and the Church.[29] Important research focused on her has appeared sporadically, including Margit Thøfner's 1996 dissertation, and van Wyhe's work on Isabella's foundation of the Carmelite convent in Brussels as well as her 2011 edited volume on the archduchess.[30] But until very recently, Isabella's funding of

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**26** Eichberger and Beaven, 'Family Members'; Eichberger, 'Devotional Objects'; Eichberger, 'Margaret of Austria's Portrait Collection'; Carpino, 'Margaret of Austria's Funerary Complex'; Pearson, 'Devotional Portrait Diptychs'; MacDonald, 'Collecting a New World'; Gelfand, 'Regency, Power'; Eichberger and Bleyerveld (eds.), *Women of Distinction*; Eichberger, 'A Noble Residence'; Attreed, 'Gender, Patronage, and Diplomacy'; Van den Boogert and Kerkhoff (eds.), *Maria van Hongarije*; De Jonge, 'A Model Court Architect'; Réthelyi (ed.), *Mary of Hungary*; Kerkhoff, 'Maria van Hongarije en haar hof'; Van Wyhe, 'The Fabric of Female Rule'; Courts, 'Caterina van Hemessen'; Dhanens, *Twee tapijtwerken*; Van Eck, 'Margaret of Parma's Gift'; Ferber Bogdan, 'Patrona and Servitor'; Lichtert (ed.), *Margaret. Duchess of Parma.*
**27** On their arrival in the Low Countries, see Thøfner, 'Marrying the City'.
**28** De Maeyer, *Albrecht en Isabella*; Thomas and Duerloo (eds.), *Albert & Isabella.*
**29** Van Wyhe, 'Court and Convent'. On Albert's life, see Duerloo, *Dynasty and Piety.*
**30** Thøfner, *The Bearing of Images*; Van Wyhe, 'Piety and Politics'; Van Wyhe (ed.), *Isabel Clara Eugenia.* See also Arblaster, 'The Infanta and the English Benedictine Nuns'; García García, 'The Cross-influences'.

*Fig. 3 Juan Pantoja de la Cruz,* Isabel Clara Eugenia, *1598-1599, oil on canvas, 112 × 89 cm, Madrid, Prado.*

the visual arts had only been analysed in depth in terms of the *Triumph of the Eucharist* tapestries, which she had Rubens design for the royal convent of the Poor Clares in Madrid.[31]

New interest was signalled in 2022, when the Prado included Isabella in its 'Protagonistas femeninas en la formación de las colecciones del Prado' programme in collaboration with Noelia García Pérez of the Universidad de Murcia, highlighting the infanta's patronage in a new route set up for visitors in the museum as well as a symposium of March of that year.[32] Then, in September of 2024, the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) joined with the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM) to host the conference 'The Archduchess Isabella (1566-1633). Artistic Agency between Madrid and the Southern Netherlands'. Based on this impassioned research, I think we can expect many publications on Isabella's funding of art and architecture in the coming years.

**31**  Lyon, *Figuring Faith*; Libby, 'The Solomonic Ambitions'.
**32**  A short catalogue accompanied the initiative: García Pérez (ed.), *El Prado en Femenino*.

## Wealthy Laywomen

Little has been done on lay female funders from the nobility and merchant elite of the Southern Low Countries; in fact, only two studies have been published to my knowledge. The first is Christine Göttler's 1999 article on Felipa Mendes Borges's building and decorating of a memorial chapel in the church of the Antwerp Discalced Carmelites, with Rubens's *St. Teresa of Avila Interceding for Souls in Purgatory* as its altarpiece.[33] Mendes Borges was a married woman of the Portuguese merchant class, and she funded the chapel by testamentary bequest using her personal estate (which totalled some 100,000 florins).[34] The second study is by Valerie Herremans, and it has just appeared in the Festschrift for Katlijne van der Stighelen, *Campaspe Talks Back. Women who Made a Difference in the Arts in the Early Modern Low Countries*.[35] Herremans does an excellent job in detailing how the widowed (1644) Maria-Anna Mulert-van den Tympel, Countess of Hautreppe, renovated the castle of Horst, building a carriage house and a new chapel, and commissioning 'monumental stucco ceilings that were unprecedented in the Southern Netherlands'.[36]

To build up a picture of elite laywomen's funding, we might start by returning to Brussels and examining the court, where we at present know surprisingly little about patronage among the courtiers. Thanks to Dries Raeymaekers, however, we have a good understanding of the court's workings, and Birgit Houben's work has further revealed all sorts of details about Isabella's ladies-in-waiting.[37] Having found potential protagonists, we could then branch out into the literature on these women's noble families, such as the de Croÿs, the Arenbergs, the de Lignes, as well as preserved family archives. For both noblewomen and those a step or two down on the social ladder, Duverger is extremely helpful, as are volumes of transcribed funerary inscriptions. Modern secondary literature also offers titbits on laywomen's funding. For example, in *Patronen van patronage* Bert Timmermans notes that Cornelia Draeck, wife of Nicolaas de Respaigne, commissioned the high altar for the St. Cordula church in Schoten in 1648.[38] A collaborative study of the Beguinage church at Lier further reveals that in 1671, a widow named Maria Melzi paid for the marble altar of the Virgin (fig. 4).[39]

All of these sources can, in turn, lead us to new archival discoveries. While wives' roles in commissioning art and architecture can be challenging to parse, as demonstrated above, we obviously still have a great deal of evidence for their funding. The documentation for widows and never-married laywomen, called *jongedochters* (spinsters), is probably even more plentiful. Probate inventories in particular show that women collected art, and searching out their funding of new works will certainly be fruitful.[40]

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**33** Göttler, 'Securing Space'.
**34** Göttler, 'Securing Space', 139.
**35** Herremans, 'Arte et Marte'.
**36** Herremans, 'Arte et Marte', 282.
**37** Raeymaekers, *One Foot in the Palace*; Houben and Raeymaekers, 'Women and the Politics of Access'; Houben, 'Intimacy and Politics'.
**38** Timmermans, *Patronen van patronage*, 184.
**39** Mees (ed.), *De begijnhofkerk van Lier*, 92-93.
**40** Kleinert, 'Hidden in the Footnotes'. There are also numerous examples throughout the Duverger volumes.

*Fig. 4 Anonymous,* Altar with altarpiece of the Assumption, *marble and oil on canvas, c. 1671, Lier, St. Margaret's church.*

## Spiritual Daughters

One important group in seventeenth-century Southern Low Countries society was the 'spiritual daughters', unmarried women who made simple (i.e., not permanently binding) vows of chastity in the name of spiritual purity, but rather than joining a community, lived ordinary lives in the world.[41] While a few were widows, most were *jongedochters*, and we often see them specified as such in the documents. Their lifestyle was formalised,

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**41**  De Vroede, *'Kwezels' en 'zusters'.*

and their particular religious identity differentiated, by the fact that each had a confessor or 'spiritual father': a male cleric who provided guidance. The spiritual daughter movement was especially promoted in the Low Countries by the Jesuits, who drew criticism for deliberately recruiting unmarried wealthy women with an eye towards attaining their fortunes. But we can also see this as a space of agency for these women, who by remaining single retained control their inheritances and incomes, and in contributing to the Counter-Reformation Church could benefit their communities and make a name for themselves.

Material traces of the spiritual daughters can still be found all over Belgian churches, particularly in gravestones and epitaphs associated with artworks, such as that for Catherine van Aken (d. 1716) in St. Catherine's church in Mechelen (fig. 5). I have examined spiritual daughter funding at one of the grandest surviving examples of a Flemish Baroque space, the chapel of the Virgin in the Jesuit church at Antwerp, which was built and decorated between 1621 and 1674 by the sisters Maria, Anna, Christina, and Lucretia Susanna



*Fig. 5 Anonymous,* St. Catherine with the Epitaph of Spiritual Daughter Catherine van Aken, *1718, marble, Mechelen, St. Catherine's church.*

*Fig. 6 Peter Paul Rubens, Hans van Mildert, Robrecht de Nole, and others,* Chapel of the Virgin, *c. 1621-1674, multimedia, Antwerp, St. Charles Borromeo church.*

Houtappel, along with their maternal cousin Anna Sgrevens (fig. 6).[42] Timmermans has noted the importance of many other spiritual daughters in funding the construction of the same church, and Jeffrey Muller, in his study of St. Jacob's church in Antwerp, mentions spiritual daughters variously ordering funerary monuments, founding masses, donating towards a new roodscreen and choir stalls, and purchasing a new communion rail for the church from the mid-seventeenth into the early eighteenth centuries.[43] And just recently, Erik Muls has published a study of Isabella and Catharina Ondermarck, early

42  Moran, 'Resurrecting'.
43  Muller, *St. Jacob's Antwerp*, 137, 260, 96, 509-510.

eighteenth-century spiritual daughters in Bruges who used the proceeds from savvy real estate investment to build an almshouse dedicated to St. Catherine.[44] These findings, I am sure, are just the tip of the iceberg. Because they were both unmarried and often disproportionately wealthy, spiritual daughters left behind a great deal of records, and there must be many more stories to tell about their art and architectural funding.

## Female Religious Communities

The Catholic Habsburg Low Countries were replete with female religious communities, including convents for contemplative enclosed nuns, tertiary convents, houses of secular Augustinian canonesses, the regular Augustinians or 'black sisters' who ran urban hospitals, and the semi-monastic Court Beguinages who did not follow a papal rule. There were also small, informal communities for celibate women. In Antwerp alone, there were twenty houses of nuns and tertiaries with aggregate populations of 690 in 1629, and 815 in 1716, in addition to the Beguinage of St. Catherine, whose population ranged between 200 and 300.[45] Some religious communities, in particular the ancient, rural contemplative houses, the hospitals, and the larger Beguinages, were quite wealthy, and they built architectural complexes with chapels and churches that were filled with artworks.[46]

Paul Vandenbroeck's 1994 exhibition *Hooglied. De Beeldwereld van religieuze vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, vanaf de 13de eeuw* was groundbreaking in bringing the artistic worlds of Low Countries religious women to light, and the catalogue remains an essential resource.[47] But it did not spur much in terms of follow-up research. Since the exhibition we have seen Andrea Pearson's work on nuns' visual culture in the early sixteenth century, while for the period after the Revolt there is only Margit Thøfner's essay on nuns' portraits, Cordula van Wyhe's work on Isabella's patronage of the Brussels Carmelites, and my own work on the Beguines.[48] While the latter has been fairly extensive, I have been largely working towards an overview of the Court Beguinages, and there is still much to do in terms of both examining corporate patronage at the different institutions and conducting case studies of individual Beguines, who, unlike nuns, retained their personal property and left the same kinds of archival records as did laywomen.

The female monasteries, by contrast, are at present almost a total terra incognita. Bert Timmermans's contribution to the 2024 *Campaspe* volume finally draws attention to the place of female monasteries in seventeenth-century Southern Low Countries urban landscapes. He touches on architectural patronage, especially for the Facon (Augustinian) and Annunciate

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44  Muls, 'Isabella and Catharina Ondermarck'.
45  For the regular religious, see Marinus, *De contrareformatie te Antwerpen*, 154. For the Beguinage, see Moran, '"A cui ne fece dono"', 228.
46  Moran, *Unconventual Women*.
47  Vandenbroeck (ed.), *Hooglied*.
48  Thøfner, 'The Absent Made Present'; Van Wyhe, 'Court and Convent'; Van Wyhe, 'Piety and Politics'; Moran, '"A cui ne fece dono"'; Moran, 'Bringing the Counter-Reformation Home'; Moran, 'Women at Work'; Moran, 'Women and Artistic Knowledge'; Moran, *Unconventual Women*.

*Fig. 7 Jan Van Helmont,* Group Portrait of the Antwerp Black Sisters of the St. Elisabeth Hospital, *late seventeenth-early eighteenth century, oil on canvas, 205 × 118 cm, Antwerp, Sint-Elisabethgasthuis.*

convents in Antwerp.[49] But there is far more work to do, and a promising body of visual culture to work with: the photograph database of the KIK/IRPA reveals hundreds of artworks from the institutional collections of nuns and tertiaries, such as the intriguing group portrait by Jan van Helmont of the Antwerp hospital sisters (fig. 7). A few of these religious houses, like the Antwerp Carmelites, still exist and even have their seventeenth-century churches in use, but inventories of their collections have generally not been published.

Filling in our knowledge of conventual women's roles in funding Flemish Baroque art may perhaps be best achieved by studying one community at a time, using both Vandenbroeck and the KIK/IRPA database, and then looking to the *Monasticon* volumes for the Belgian provinces and cities, which give basic historical data on the communities. Examining the accounts of art-historically minded foreign visitors like those of Jean Baptiste Descamps (1769) and Guillame Pierre Mensaert (1763), which do include visits to convent churches, will also tell us much, and provide a starting point for archival work.[50] Here again there must be a wealth of information available: we need only to look for it.

## Conclusion

The contributions of women to the visual and architectural culture of the seventeenth-century Southern Low Countries were profound, yet they remain underexplored.

**49** Timmermans, 'Art Patronage'.
**50** Descamps, *Voyage pittoresque*; Mensaert, *Le peintre amateur.*

Significant progress has been made in recognising figures like Isabella Clara Eugenia, whose influence extended beyond her personal commissions to the broader artistic networks she supported. Additionally, scholars are beginning to acknowledge the collective impact of noblewomen, Beguines, spiritual daughters, and nuns in shaping the artistic landscape, even as they navigated societal and legal constraints on women's agency. But there still remains much to be done.

An abundance of archival materials, combined with tangible evidence of female funding, presents exciting opportunities for further research. But a deep understanding of gendered property laws is essential for this work. Scholars must examine the legal statutes relevant to their female subjects, paying close attention to the specific times and places in which these women acted. They need to understand that women in the early modern Southern Low Countries were property owners, and that many – especially those who were wealthy – operated with considerable independence, but that their ability to use their own property could be limited by age, marital status, or monastic vows. Wives' contributions in particular may have gone undocumented, requiring careful interpretative approaches. Additionally, quoting archival documents directly is crucial to ensure that future researchers can critically engage with the sources. By taking this approach in our analysis of archives, buildings, and artworks, we can not only uncover the vital roles that women played in funding the outstanding achievements of Flemish Baroque artists and architects, but also gain a more accurate understanding of early modern art and society.

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