

'JESUITS, RUBENS AND THE ART OF PERSUASION' REVIVES FORMER CHAPEL IN NOTTEBOHM HALL

Today, the Nottebohm Hall is the prestigious library space of the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library. Two hundred and fifty years ago, it was a miraculous chapel bathed in light and decorated with paintings by baroque artists. It was where brotherhoods gathered whose members shared not only their faith but also their influential position in society. Rubens and Van Dyck were members. What this chapel looked like was long a great mystery. The exhibition *Jesuits, Rubens and the Art of Persuasion* brings that baroque showroom back to life.

In the early seventeenth century, several sodalities (derived from *sodalis*, Latin for comrade) emerged in Antwerp. These were brotherhoods of lay people who came together around a particular devotion. They existed in the High Middle Ages already. During the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits had their own building erected on the current Conscienceplein. That sodality building housed two chapels, on the ground floor and the first floor. They were the Lower and Upper Sodalities. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prominent Antwerp citizens regularly visited these chapels. Members shared their faith. But the brotherhoods also represented a social occasion for city officials, wealthy merchants, artists and craftsmen. In their heyday, the Sodalities on Conscienceplein had around 4,000 members – almost 10 per cent of Antwerp's population at the time. Rubens and Van Dyck were also members. The Sodalities were eventually abolished in 1773, along with the entire Jesuit order. All works of art were sold, along with the silverware and liturgical vestments, the marble work and the altars. Everything was scattered and much disappeared without a trace.

A dining hall fit for a king

What the chapels looked like was long a great mystery. Thanks to entries in guidebooks from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we know that the Sodality building was an impressive tourist attraction. This is evident, for example, from a testimony from 1745. Antwerp was then briefly taken by Louis XV of France. French soldiers spoke of the Upper Sodality as 'a dining hall fit for a king'. Knowing that their king was living in Versailles at the time, it must have made a great impression on the soldiers.

Intensive detective work

An undated, anonymous and incomplete ground plan was long the main source for finding out which paintings hung in the Upper Sodality. In 1983 Rudi Mannaerts (pastor of St Andrew's Church) wrote his master's thesis on, among other things, the interior of the Sodality. A few years ago, he discovered that a painting of the Upper Sodality existed in all likelihood. Thanks to the intensive detective work

in art databases carried out by Steven Van Impe and Marijke Drijbooms, this painting was actually found.

An impressive Marian cycle

Nine paintings hung on the west wall. Together they formed a Marian cycle. Each painting was dedicated to a different honorary title by which Our Lady was known. Each painting was adorned with a baroque marble frame. Some of the paintings have been recovered, including *Our Lady Queen of Martyrs* (currently known as *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence*) and *Our Lady Queen of Angels* by Marc Antonio Garibaldo, an Antwerp painter who is otherwise virtually unknown. Both paintings hang today in the secretariat of Antwerp's Church of St Lawrence, out of sight of the public.

On the northern altar wall hung the first painting to appear in the chapel, *The Coronation of Saint Rosalia* by Anthony Van Dyck. While on a study trip to Palermo, Van Dyck became trapped after an outbreak of plague. During the ensuing lockdown, they discovered the bones of Rosalia, the city's patron saint. Van Dyck witnessed the solemn entry of these relics into Palermo. He produced eight paintings for the local churches. When he returned to Antwerp in 1627, the Jesuits had just housed a piece of Rosalia's relics in the Sodality. A year later, Van Dyck joined the 'Sodality of the Bejaarde Jongmans' (unmarried young men) and painted this large canvas for the main altar.

Van Dyck also made another painting, of the Blessed Hermann Joseph. This German monk entered into a mystical marriage with Mary in a vision. That was the ideal theme for the 'Sodality of the Bejaarde Jongmans'. Van Dyck's paintings were the masterpieces of the Upper Sodality and can be admired today at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

The ceiling was also richly decorated with a cycle of Marian paintings depicting her life in different steps. They were flanked by smaller paintings depicting biblical verses.

A walk through the Upper Sodality

The exhibition is conceived as a walk through the Upper Sodality. Original works, contemporaneous copies and projections are presented, insofar as possible, in their original locations in the Nottebohm Hall. The art is interspersed with books from our collection. In this way, we tell how the sodalities functioned and in what context the works of art ended up here and disappeared.

The exhibition is not an end point for the study of the Sodalities. Questions remain unanswered. Hopefully, this exhibition will provide new puzzle pieces about the history of the Nottebohm Hall.

The exhibition *Baroque Brotherhoods in the Nottebohm Hall* is part of the city festival Baroque Influencers. With exhibitions, concerts and other events, the city festival shows how inspiring the baroque is and remains.

Within the programme, the exhibition *Baroque Brotherhoods in the Nottebohm Hall* is part of a triptych, *Jesuits, Rubens and the Art of Persuasion*, with exhibitions held in both the St Charles Borromeo Church and the Snijders&Rockoxhuis. The exhibitions can be visited together with a combi-ticket or separately.

Practical information

Jesuits, Rubens and the Art of Persuasion. Baroque Brotherhoods in the Nottebohm Hall

From Saturday 22 April to Sunday 10 September 2023

Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library

Conscienceplein 4, 2000 Antwerp

consciencebibliotheek.be/en

Opening hours

Tuesday to Sunday from 10:00 to 17:00

Closed on Mondays

Tickets

Tickets Nottebohm Hall via consciencebibliotheek.be: €8 / €5 / free

Combitickets (Nottebohm Hall & Snijders&Rockoxhuis & St Charles Borromeo Church) via

consciencebibliotheek.be: €18 / €10 / €5 / free

Guided tours

Basic tours for individual visitors on Sunday 7 May, 21 May, 4 June, 18 June and 3 September 2023 from 14:00 to 15:30. Info & tickets via consciencebibliotheek.be.

Expert tours with Anthon Milh, Sara Joan Moran, Hans Geybels and Joris Geldhof on Saturday 6 May, Sunday 14 May, Saturday 3 June and Saturday 24 June. Info & tickets via consciencebibliotheek.be.

For groups upon reservation. Info & tickets via consciencebibliotheek.be.