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Saint Bavo in the Service of Burgundian Heritage: Philip the Handsome and Political Propaganda

Among the numerous extant portraits of Philip the Handsome (1478-1506), son of Mary of Burgundy and of Maximilian of Austria, created in his lifetime, one in particular attracts the imagination of a modern viewer: on the right external wing of Hieronymus Bosch's famous "Last Judgement" triptych (now in Vienna), the young duke is represented as St Bavo. Introduced by Dirk Bax as early as 1983, this curious iconography has still not received a conclusive explanation. In the Middle Ages the religious metaphor was one of the most powerful means of the princely propaganda, and some of Philip's ancestors were represented as or compared to various saints or personages of the sacred history. Nevertheless, no one of them was ever depicted as St Bavo, and the choice of this local Ghent and Haarlem saint does not seem to have been evident for Philip. This paper argues that the choice of St Bavo was caused mainly by his attribute – a falcon that can also be found in some childhood portraits of Philip and that played an essential part in the lifetime iconography of Mary of Burgundy, being a symbol of her rights to the heritage of her forefathers and of her power as a duchess suo jure. Employing falcon as his mother's attribute to stress his origins and hereditary rights, Philippe might also have been governed by the desire to create a synthetic image charged with the sacred as well as political meaning: establishing the "visual" continuous line of succession from the Dukes of Burgundy to the House of Habsburgs, it conveyed at the same time the idea of a perfect sovereign, benefactor and pacificator.