

**Steven Thiry**

**From Royal Representation to Scientific Aspiration. Charles V's Columnar Device and the Dynamics of Appropriation**

At the eighteenth chapter of the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece in October 1516, a new device for the young Charles of Habsburg was formally presented for the first time. The inventor of the imagery, the Milanese humanist Luigi Marliano, chose the two columns of Hercules and the motto *Plus Oultre* – better known in the later Latinized version *Plus ultra* – as the symbol that best captured the character and the ambitions of the Order's new sovereign. Such personal symbolism was in the early sixteenth century already a well-established tradition at the Burgundian court. Commonly, devices were understood as highly personal signs that embodied individual characteristics and aspirations; some kind of 'moral portrait' of its owner. They were considered as a particular way to represent a sovereign, in the sense that they captured or even shaped his or her political authority. Research on royal representations and the politics of legitimation has, until recently, predominantly focused on art forms like portraits or literary panegyrics. Nevertheless, the more abstract imagery of regal heraldry, devices, badges, seals, material regalia and the rich but hardly studied world of 'political' emblems, constituted the most expanded types of the visualization of princely power. The particular art form of the device should thus not be considered as another 'meaningless' instrument of princely legitimation or glorification, but was – in its regal application – a crucial symbolic system that could render a degree of reality to the political body and its complex theories and discourses.

Their polysemic nature turned devices into dynamic signs who were subjected to a continuous process of appropriation and reinterpretation. The publication of a ruler's image, be it a portrait or more abstract sign of authority, made it perceptible to an active audience ready to interpret, remodel and resignify. While the traditional historiography commented on regal representations as one-way political propaganda, recent research has started to consider acts of symbolic communication as processes wherein particular signs were merged with other (textual) signifiers and iconographic elements. This process of appropriation turned Charles' device into a dynamic symbol serving the agenda of various groups in society, rather than the static representation of rulership. In this manner, innovative concepts were created, though some basic associations – as 'expansion' and 'emulation' in the case of the columnar device for instance – remained more or less stable. The possibility to detach from the individual connotation ensured that it remained a potent iconographic theme throughout the early modern period. This contribution, focusing on the well-known device of Charles V, proposes an approach to such processes that transcends the confines of the visual, material, literary and performative. It centers around two sets of questions that can provide a methodological precept for further research: 1) How was the imagery appropriated? That is, the exposure of the mechanisms behind acts of resignification (varying artistic depictions and bricolage, visual transformations and combinations, relationship between word and image etc.). 2) What were the contextual circumstances for appropriation? When and why did shifting emphasises and transformations take place?

In particular, this article explores three interpretative traditions. The first being the usage of the symbol in the political field, after Charles V's death. Though a strict personal sign not intended to pass from one family member to the other, associations with the columns and the *Plus ultra*-motto frequently turned up in Habsburg imagery.

More striking is the very subtle use of the columns by other European monarchs, especially to endorse their own imperial ambitions. Secondly, I take a look at how the dynamic of the symbol made it possible to appropriate outside the realm of dynastic policy. This was the case for one of the emblems in the *Imago Primi Saeculi*, a volume published in 1640 by the Provincia Flandria-Belgica of the Jesuits to celebrate the centenary of the society. Another different context, which shall serve as my third and final example, is the notion of (scientific) progress which became gradually associated with the device in the second half of the sixteenth century. It was this trajectory that ultimately was appropriated by the world of early modern science to express its aspirations and achievements. These three discourses were not completely separated developments. On the contrary, the iconographic display shared a common assumption that was deeply rooted in early modern thinking. Transgressing traditional boundaries, whether it be political, religious or scientific, ultimately aimed at a deeper understanding of the divine order. All discussed instances, however, show us how little control rulers actually had over the application and destiny of their own representations. New emblematic imagery that thrived from the late fifteenth-century onwards, injected the traditional representational forms with a new dynamic and opened up new interpretative possibilities.