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## Cultivating Devotion The Sixteenth-Century Enclosed Gardens of the Low Countries

UDC: 7.04:7.034.5

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The Enclosed Gardens of Mechelen are extraordinary 16<sup>th</sup>-century reliquaries that frame not only relics but also *papier-mâché* seals, jewelry, *poupées de Malines*, glass beads and pilgrim badges against a background of silk vegetation. Together, these objects compose a garden enclosed by a gate as praised in the *Song of Songs*. These mixed-media shrines were assembled and organized by religious women during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Seven of these Enclosed Gardens were cherished by the *Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Gasthuiszusters* of Mechelen. The Gardens are a unique expression of the spiritual “horticulture” of the female convent. This horticulture is deeply rooted in the devotion to the Virgin Mary. This article not only explores the iconography of the Enclosed Gardens, but also the techniques and materials used for the making of the Enclosed Gardens and, additionally it explores how these influenced the devotional experience of religious women.

**Keywords:** Enclosed Gardens, *Song of Songs*, the Holy Hunt, silk flowers, spiritual labour, *Imitatio Mariae*, female religious, *Unio Mystica*

### Introduction

Over the last decades art historians have started to examine objects and images that were not part of the canon of art history. Thanks to several twists and turns, the discipline of art history reinvented itself, making way for new yet-to-be-discovered images, objects and the way they functioned in society. Hence, scholars developed interest for objects that were not confined to conventional views on what “art” is or should be.<sup>1</sup> The artefacts discussed in this article, known as *Besloten Hofjes* or Enclosed Gardens, are an example of such “reassessed” objects. Enclosed Gardens are a unique kind of 16<sup>th</sup>-century wooden “boxes”, small cabinets filled with relics, wax seals, pipe clay and *papier-mâché* medallions, jewellery, polychrome statues in wood and alabaster, glass beads, pilgrim badges and embroidery against a background of silk vegetation. Together, these objects compose a garden enclosed by a gate. The hybridity of such an artefact is one of the reasons they have long been neglected in the study of medieval material and devotional culture since they do not fit into just one category or art media.<sup>2</sup> It was only in the 1990s that pioneering scholars Paul Vandebroek and Jeffrey Hamburger acknowledged these mixed-media creations as exceptional objects of private devotion.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, Barbara Baert published the first monograph on the phenomenon of the Enclosed Gardens in which she approaches the heavenly gardens from different perspectives. In her own words, “the Enclosed Garden is studied as a symbol of paradise and mystical union, as a sanctuary for interiority, as a sublimation of the sensorium (in particular the sense of smell), as a typical gendered product, and as a centre of psycho-energetic creative processes”<sup>4</sup>

The term “enclosed garden” refers to the following passage in the *Song of Songs*: “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain” (4:12). Yet it would be incorrect to assume that all of these shrines are in reference to this heavenly enclosed space. Some of them are not even enclosed by a gate and may therefore be in references to the heavenly paradise in a more general sense (fig. 1). The typology of

these gardens is somewhere in between a carved altarpiece used for private devotion and a reliquary. Moreover, when studying 16<sup>th</sup>-century inventories, one rarely encounters the terminology *Besloten Hofje*. More commonly used are *jardinet / jardin / hofke* in reference to a garden or *casse / caske* in reference to the wooden boxes.

Although only a few examples still exist to this day, inventory records testify that these cabinets were quite common objects between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> They could be found within enclosed female and male religious communities or in public spaces, such as churches, but also in private collections of high nobility and laymen.<sup>6</sup> Yet over the last century, these gardens were mainly studied within the context of the female monastic community on both the level of their production and reception. More specifically, they are said to have been made by the *Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Gasthuiszusters* of Mechelen, a Hospitaller order following the rule of Saint Augustine. This is mainly due to their unique collection of no less than seven flowery gardens cherished for over five hundred years. The precise production process of these reliquary gardens is uncertain, although it appears that in general the production involved both male and female actors and varied from piece to piece. Sources indeed indicate that not only religious women, but also men were involved in the production process of these shrines. In some cases, male painters and illuminators were committed to the creation of these pieces.<sup>7</sup> Even in the case of the Mechelen Enclosed Gardens, male sculptors and painters were engaged in the making of their painted wings and polychrome sculptures. The gender aspect that has until now been studied in relation to these artefacts must therefore be reevaluated. Considering the hybrid and idiosyncratic character of these gardens, it is indeed very hard to make general claims on their genesis and function. Each object should therefore be considered individually.

In this article, however, I would like to reflect on the Gardens and their Marian iconography and, subsequently, devotion. The Marian devotion is most vigorously present within those cabinets made and/or used by religious women. The first part of this article will focus on the iconography of the Enclosed Gardens based on the pieces still known today. Special attention will be paid to the iconographical scheme of a Mechelen Enclosed Garden depicting the hunt for the unicorn, an example that embodies Marian iconography and devotion in a unique way (fig. 2). The second part of this study will explore the techniques and materials used for the making of these gardens and, additionally, how this influenced their meaning and the meditational practice. Therefore, this essay aims to evaluate the various ways in which handiwork and the concept of *Imitatio Mariae* relate to each other by focussing on the silk flowers, one of the most prominent features of these gardens. It is a well-known fact that embroidery and the motif of the flower are deeply rooted in feminine religious orders. Therefore, these flowers are not merely *parergon*, but rather a *pars pro toto* to gain a better understanding of the production and function of the Enclosed Gardens.<sup>8</sup>

For the study of these objects, there are three kinds of primary sources at one's disposal; the first group consists of the prayers and notes that can be found within the Enclosed Gardens themselves. These tend to provide more information on the original perception of these objects and their status within the female convent. The *authentica*, for instance, identifies the relics that are mounted in the gardens, but also confirms that these gardens were perceived as a display of saintly bones. The second group is external to the Enclosed Gardens, but closely related to the same visual culture in which they functioned. These include prayer books and other literary sources at the disposal of nuns and beguines in the early modern period. These tracts can sometimes be designated as the "source" of the imagery used by religious women. Finally, the third group consists of archival sources providing information about the production, circulation and function of Enclosed Gardens and the multitude of objects of which they are composed.

### **The virgin and the garden**

The imagery from the *Song of Songs* or the *Song of Salomon* was frequently used and favoured in female religious communities.<sup>9</sup> The love hymn of a bridegroom and a bride has undergone many allegorical readings from early Christianity onwards. The theologian Origen Adamantius (c. 184-c. 253), for example, identified the bridegroom from the *Song of Songs* as Jesus and as the word of God.<sup>10</sup> The bride was identified as the Church

and the individual soul of the believer. Since then, many scholars have written commentaries on this famous love duet. It was Saint Ambrose (337-397), however, who not only identified the bride as the Church and the soul of the devout, but also as the Virgin Mary.<sup>11</sup> Just as in the above-mentioned passage of the famous love hymn, the enclosed garden thus became a symbol to praise the virtues and virginity of Mary.

Similarly, the enclosed garden of the canticles, both as the praise of the bride's virginity and the setting of this love duet, was subjected to such allegorical readings. Therefore, the Enclosed Gardens do not limit their *being* to the garden of the *Song of Songs*. As will be shown, they also symbolise the Heavenly and Earthly Paradise, the Paradise of the Church, the enclosed community of the religious and the "paradise" of the human heart where the mystical marriage or *Unio Mystica* takes place. This *Unio Mystica* is a unique state in which the enlightened soul gains absolute insight into the divine and subsequently becomes one with the higher, celestial reality.<sup>12</sup> It was in the sermons of the French abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) that this relation between the secluded garden and the mystical union were fully explored. But the imagery of the enclosed garden also represents more abstract concepts of "seclusion", "solitude" and thus "virginity" and "chastity"; virtues embodied by the Mother Mary.<sup>13</sup>

These concepts of "seclusion" and "virginity" in relation to the figure of Mary are also present in the imagery of the seven Mechelen Enclosed Gardens.<sup>14</sup> One of these gardens houses the statues of a Calvary and is surrounded by a scene of the Hunt of the Unicorn and a variety of Marian symbols which refer to the purity of the Virgin Mary (fig. 2). A Latin inscription on the gate of this Enclosed Garden reads: "You are a garden, overflowing with virtues and countless treasures, never tainted with any filth, growing a flower full of graces."<sup>15</sup> In this quote, the garden is associated with Mary, praised for her virtuousness and virginity and carrying the Christ Child, symbolised as the "flower full of graces". At the bottom of the Enclosed Garden, one can read another Latin inscription, freely translated as: "The unicorn, breaking out of a strong kingdom in paradise, becomes tame again in the lap of a virgin, thus cleansing us from a sinful poison."<sup>16</sup> This inscription is in reference to the group of polychrome statues depicting the Hunt of the Unicorn / The Holy Hunt. Already in ancient times, the unicorn was perceived as a wild and untameable beast. No hunter can hunt this animal; only a pure virgin is able to tame this savage beast. This theme of the Hunt symbolises the incarnation of Christ, because it was only in the womb of the purest virgin, the Mother Mary, that the word could become flesh.<sup>17</sup> In the Mechelen Enclosed Garden, the theme of the Hunt has been supplemented with other symbolic references to the virginity and Virgin Birth of Jesus, such as the tower of David, the fleece of Gideon, the flowering rod of Aaron, the golden pot (*urna aurea*), the sealed fountain and the burning bush of Moses.<sup>18</sup> The interpretation of the theme of the Hunt as the incarnation of Christ is not only confirmed by the above mentioned inscription on the gate of the Enclosed Garden but also by the presence of numerous pilgrim badges depicting the Annunciation (fig. 3).<sup>19</sup>

The same iconographical scheme of this mixed-media cabinet is also present in another Mechelen Enclosed Garden in the form of a *papier-mâché* seal (fig. 4). Even though the provenance and production circumstances of this seal are unknown, it was probably pressed in a mould such as the one in the collection of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (fig. 5).<sup>20</sup> The making of the seals in *papier-mâché* was an occupation in which religious women did engage.<sup>21</sup> The seal bears several inscriptions referring to many of the Marian symbols discussed above, such as; (*Ave [Maria] Graia plena d[omi]n[u]s tecum*), the sealed fountain (*fons signatus*), Aaron's rod (*virga aaro[nis]*), the fleece of Gideon (*vellus iedionis*), the Golden Pot (*urna aurea*) and the burning bush of Moses (*rub[u]s moisi*).

An illumination from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century reveals a similar composition with these same annotations (fig. 6).<sup>22</sup> The illumination is painted on vellum and probably originated in Southern Germany. The image might have been part of a manuscript. Again, the illumination depicts the Virgin seated within the walls of an enclosed garden and accompanied by the unicorn. The archangel Gabriel blows the horn and holds the leashes of four hunting dogs. The inscriptions identify these dogs as Truth, Justice, Peace, and Mercy. The banderol hanging from the horn of Garbiel reads: *Ave gracia plena*. All of these are, of course, very similar to the seal of the Mechelen Enclosed Garden. This iconographical scheme has been expanded with even more symbolic references to the virginity of Mary, such as Noah's Ark, the fountain of the garden, a Pelican in its Piety, the star of Jacob and a lion



1 *Enclosed Garden with Mary and Child*, mixed-media, 16<sup>th</sup> c., Herentals, Begijnhofmuseum (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, cliché X017521)



2 *Enclosed Garden with Calvary and the Hunt for the Unicorn*, c. 1500-1530, Mechelen, Musea en Erfgoed Mechelen - Collectie Gasthuiszusters (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, cliché X103024)



3 Pilgrim badge from the *Enclosed Garden with Calvary and the Hunt for the Unicorn*, c. 1500-1530, Mechelen, Musea en Erfgoed Mechelen - Collectie Gasthuiszusters (© KU Leuven, Leuven).





with its whelps.<sup>23</sup> Most striking is the little Christ Child descending from God to the Mother Mary, again underlining this scene as an allegory of the incarnation.

Marian imagery is not only present in the typology of the Enclosed Gardens or the symbolic polychrome statues they house, but it is also represented by the numerous silk flowers that adorn the shrines. It is common knowledge that the white lily is a reference to Mary and her chastity. This interpretation also derived from the imagery of the *Song of Songs*, more specifically the following passage: "Like a lily among thorns, so is my darling among the young women." But not only the white lily came to symbolise the virtues of the Virgin. Other flowers often mentioned in reference to the Virgin are violets (Virgin's humility) and roses (passion and the Virgin's chastity).<sup>24</sup> The relation between flowers and the Virgin went beyond comparing this vegetation to the Mother Mary, however. A German folk legend traces the origin of the *Marienblume* or daisies back to the Virgin Mary.<sup>25</sup> The story goes as follows: when the Christ child was three years old, Mary wanted to braid him a birthday wreath. However, as no flower was growing on Christmas Eve, not even in the Holy Land, and no flowers were to be bought in Nazareth, Mary started to make flowers herself. She took a piece of bright yellow silk which she received from David, and ran it into thick threads of white silk. While doing so she pricked her finger with a needle and her blood stained some of the threads, turning them red. The little child was deeply touched by this and loved the flowers even more for it. When spring came, the Child took the artificial flower and planted it in the Vale of Nazareth and watered the flower with a golden cup given to him by the Wisemen of the East and breathed upon it. The plant grew and became the most perfect of plants. It grew in every meadow. From that time this flower has continued to flourish, even when plucked a hundred times, again it would blossom.<sup>26</sup> The legend not only situates the genesis of the artificial flowers in a Marian context, but also attributes the *creation* of such flowers to the Virgin Mary. It should also be noted that one of the names for artificial flowers in Dutch is *meyen* which refers to the month *mei* or May, a month which is dedicated to Virgin Mary.<sup>27</sup> One could thus assume there was a connection between artificial flowers and the Virgin Mary that went beyond a mere flower symbolism. The next part of this article will evaluate how and to what extent the making of these flowery gardens was influenced by Marian devotion.

### *Imitatio Mariae*

Other than the iconography of some of the Enclosed Gardens, their function and production can also be rooted in a deep devotional and spiritual exercise. One of the devotional practices in female convents was handiwork which could take many forms, from the making of fine linen to producing real pieces of art, an occupation known as *Nonnenarbeit*.<sup>28</sup> The purpose of this *arbeit* had as much to do with aesthetics as it was a practice of cultivating discipline and order in the enclosed communities.<sup>29</sup> The *arbeit* was perceived as an antidote for sins such as idleness and gossip. The regulations of the Mechelen *Gasthuiszusters*, written in 1509 after their reformation, state the following: "The sisters will no longer be without work and will preserve themselves from unemployment and poison of the soul and other malice. And to preserve themselves they will always, if they are not in the *oratorium* or taking care of the sick, assemble in a room which will serve this purpose and will, with mother, gracefully and devotionally engage in some work for the common wealth. Either in weaving or sewing or something else which one knows how to do well and all of them will report to mother and no one will misbehave in this".<sup>30</sup> Regulations on monastic handiwork were very strict since it was in no way meant as a personal activity. None of the sisters could therefore make something for their personal benefit or for someone from outside the convent.<sup>31</sup> However, the practice of handiwork went beyond cultivating discipline - it cultivated devotion as well and was meant to be a graceful and devotional activity. In the original Dutch wording the term "*gestichtelyck*" is used, literally meaning "growing in faith".<sup>32</sup>

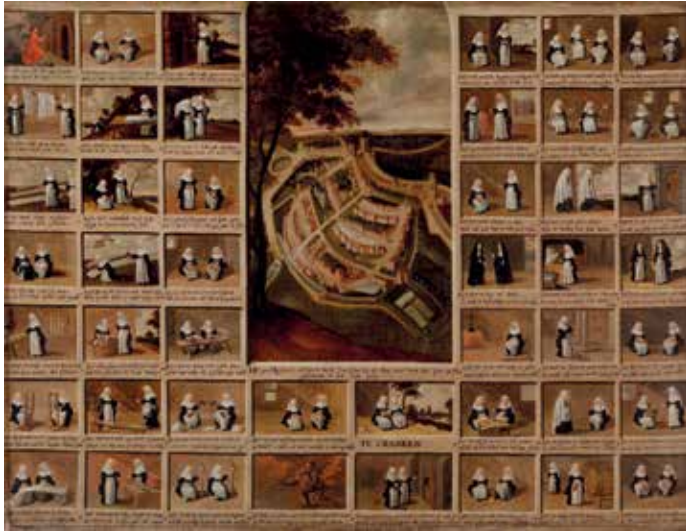
Another source which exemplifies this concept of spiritual labour is a painting of the beguineage of Mechelen, composed of 46 small scenes depicting the activities of the beguines, framing a bird's-eye view of the enclosed community (fig. 7). It is unclear when this painting was completed, although it probably dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and had quite a few repaints over the centuries.<sup>33</sup> Whatever the production date may have been, it is clear that it wishes to portray the beguineage in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, before it got destroyed in 1578. In each small

frame, two beguines are portrayed during an activity. These scenes are accompanied by two sentences describing the represented activity. It is remarkable how the first sentence explains the labour while the second sentence links this labour to a spiritual insight which the sisters gained by performing these duties. The beguines engage in the making of sheets, silk threads, twine, embroideries, rosaries and lace. One of the scenes, for example, depicts two beguines weaving a chaplet of flowers, the inscription underneath reads: "Sister are you busy, making rosaries, work unto the virgin holy crown to reach" (fig. 8).

The connection between spiritual handiwork and textiles might derive from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, more specifically those chapters focussing on the childhood of the Virgin Mary.<sup>34</sup> According to this apocryphal text, Mary was one of the virgins of the Temple of Jerusalem where her days consisted of prayer and weaving.<sup>35</sup> The pseudo-gospel gave rise to many legends and was the inspiration for the motif of the Virgin at the loom (fig. 9). In late medieval art, the wool-work activities of the Virgin Mary were sometimes exchanged with embroidery or knitting. This is also the case in a painting of the Abegg-Stiftung where the Virgin Mary is shown working on an embroidery accompanied by two other virgins. In the background, the Blessed Virgin is depicted once more, this time kneeling before an altarpiece (fig. 10). In this way, both work (*vita activa*) and prayer (*vita contemplativa*) are depicted, a dual lifestyle which was well-known to sisters of enclosed communities. These images are, in the words of Miri Rubin, "resources which offered identification, somewhat specular - prompting the question: "could that be me?" - directive, alluring, and for us abundant".<sup>36</sup> By engaging in the same activities as the Virgin Mary, the sisters committed to something known as *Imitatio Mariae*.<sup>37</sup> This concept of imitation knows many different expressions but at the core of this meditational practice lies empathy for the venerated.<sup>38</sup> Comparable to *Imitatio Christi*, Mary's life and activities were not simply the subject of meditation but could become the meditational practice itself. Handiwork can thus be seen both as a meditational practice and the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Moreover, this meditational handiwork also possessed the potential to become the impetus for the mental scene which the author produced while performing this spiritual exercise. In the words of David Freedberg: "The act of meditation is conceived of (and) in terms of a specific parallel with actual image making. He [or she] who meditates must depict mental scenes in the same way the painter depicts real ones".<sup>39</sup> It is in this way that the making of devotional images could generate a visionary experience.

Therefore, it would not be unusual that the room in which nuns engaged in the devotional practice of making an artefact (whether these were textiles or something else) also kept numerous devotional images. In the convent Leliëndaal in Mechelen, the spinning room of the sisters is known to have held a reliquary garden. This has been reported in an attestation describing the loss of the convent during the occupation of Mechelen by the duke of Alva in 1572. "[...] *Item* our tableau of our workhouse or spinning room, there in the middle was made the Holy Cross and relics, upholstered with silk and other jewellery has completely been taken out and the case has been left behind".<sup>40</sup> Although it is unknown whether the sisters of Leliëndaal made their luxuriously upholstered shrine themselves, since in some cases, these gardens and their silk flowers were made by religious women. Considering the technical difficulty related to the making of artificial flowers it seems probable that within Mechelen there were only few people who had the knowledge and skills of the art. There is a possibility that these objects were made by craftsmen of the so-called *passemmentmakers*. It is uncertain whether this craft dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century since it was not represented by a guild. They are usually grouped with other crafts such as ribbon makers, needle workers and embroiders, but the categorization differs in every city. The *passemmentmakers* made all kind of textile works.<sup>41</sup> It has been suggested that they even made silk flowers as seen in the Enclosed Gardens although archival sources are still vague on this topic.<sup>42</sup> But even if in some cases the silk flowers were made by male craftsmen, there are enough elements confirming the involvement of religious women in the production of these artefacts. For example, an obituary of Magdalena de Vriendt, deceased in 1696, a sister in the convent Bethanië in Mechelen states that: "[...] we must praise our very beloved fellow sister Magdalena de Vriendt, that she has been many years in succession sacristan, but also a singular lover of church ornaments, for which she worked day and night and was committed to printing images, making artificial flowers and other prettiness".<sup>43</sup> The creation of silk flowers was thus not just the result of *handiwork* for the purpose of discipline, but also a way to





7 View of the court beguinage of St Catherine in Mechelen, 17<sup>th</sup> c., Mechelen, Stedelijke Musea Mechelen (© Stedelijke Musea Mechelen, Mechelen)



8 Detail of View of the court beguinage of St Catherine in Mechelen, 17<sup>th</sup> c., Mechelen, Stedelijke Musea Mechelen (© Stedelijke Musea Mechelen, Mechelen)



9 Virgin at the Loom, in: *Horae ad usum Parisiensem*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 919, fol. 34r, 1409 (© Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits)



10 Mary and the Virgins in the Temple, 16<sup>th</sup> c., Riggisberg, Fondation Abegg (© Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg)



gain insight in virtuousness and become as honourable as the Mother Mary. By winding thin silk threads around a parchment and wire structure the nuns gained virtues and at the same time created a flowery garden where, at some point, they would encounter their bridegroom.<sup>44</sup> This reading can be illustrated by an early 17<sup>th</sup> century archival source in which the Mother of the Bethlehem convent in Leuven declares her regulations for the convent. One of the rules of her prescript states: "The making of those silk flowers will be ordered and allowed in regard to the choir sisters, that they – because they are obedient making those flowers – will not be detained or prevented, as is the sisters' custom, to come on the appointed hours to the common prayer, the Office in the choir and the table in the refectory. Because one cannot be done at the same time as the other, so one shall leave the making of flowers before prayer, the Office in the choir or the refectory".<sup>45</sup>

This rule, especially the last sentence, was clearly a result of the complaints of several other sisters about the "pass-time" of their fellow nuns.<sup>46</sup> Sister Margaret Smulders, for instance, states in her visitation letter: "If someone told Mater she was allowing too much time for making all the bouquets and flowerpots, she would answer that she likes to see a well-adorned image of Our Lord. So do I, but on shrines that are so tiny, what a waste of money".<sup>47</sup> In this same document, Margaret also mentions how this practice of making silk flowers was expensive and time consuming: "We know from the chaplain that Anna [= Anna Vignarola, a fellow sister],<sup>48</sup> has made from the most expensive silk flowers a large life-like arrangement intended as a gift for her Godfather. There are some in house who knew about it, but not many. [...] God would that no one of us could make silken flowers, it would be to our profit and salvation".<sup>49</sup> Not only do these passages testify to the negative attitude of Margaret Smulders toward these flowery shrines, it also demonstrates that her fellow sister, Anna Vignarola, and her Mother superior approved of the making of these flowers as an act of devotion and love towards the Mother Mary and Christ. The document of the Leuven convent testifies to the manifold origins and varied receptions of these "horticultural" shrines. These documents can perhaps best illustrate the complexity of the research concerning the Enclosed Gardens and their typological cognates in general. In conclusion, this article has explored an extraordinary externalisation of spiritual horticulture of the female convent which embodies the Marian iconography. Even though this Marian iconography is not always literally present, some of these flowery gardens were made by a spirit imbued with Marian devotion and filled with imagery symbolizing the Virgin Mary.

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\* I am most grateful to my supervisor professor Barbara Baert for her help, comments and support. These are the results of an ongoing PhD research at Illuminare - Centre for the Study of Medieval Art (KU Leuven), embedded in a broader research and conservation project on the Enclosed Gardens. See: B. BAERT, "Late mediaeval 'Enclosed Gardens' of the Low Countries: Contributions to Gender Artistic Expression", in: *Studies in Iconology 2*, Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 2016a; J. VANDERMEERSCH-L. WATTEEUW, "De conservering van de 16de-eeuwse Mechelse Besloten Hofjes. Een interdisciplinaire aanpak voor het historische mixed media," in: *8th BRK-APROA Colloquium, Innovatie in de Conservatie-Restauratie*, 2016, pp. 41-52; B. BAERT-H. ITERBEKE-L. WATTEEUW, "Late Medieval Enclosed Gardens of the Low Countries: Mixed Media, Remnant Art, Récyclage and Gender in the Low Countries (16<sup>th</sup> c. onwards)", *Agency of Things*, New York, Routledge, (at press).

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- 3 P. VANDENBROECK, *Hooglied: de beeldwereld van religieuze vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, vanaf de 13de eeuw*, Ghent, Snoeck-Ducaju, 1994; J.F. HAMBURGER, *Nuns as Artists: the Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, Berkeley, University of California press, 1997; IDEM, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, New York, Zone books, 1998; IDEM, *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008. Other important publications for the study of the Enclosed Gardens are: K.M. RUDY, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent. Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011, pp. 110-118; K.M. RUDY, *Postcards on Parchment: The Social Lives of Medieval Books*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015, pp. 23-29, 217-219, 235-236. See also: H. VAN OS, *The Art of Devotion in Late Medieval Ages in Europe 1300-1500*, London, Merrell Holberton, 1994.
- 4 B. BAERT, *op. cit.*, 2016a; See also: IDEM, “Echoes of Liminal Spaces: Revisiting the Late Mediaeval ‘Enclosed Gardens’ of the Low Countries”, in: *Antwerp Royal Museum Annual*, 2012 (published 2014), pp. 9-45; B. BAERT-H. ITERBEKE, “Revisiting the Enclosed Gardens of the Low Countries (Fifteenth Century Onwards). Gender, Textile, and the Intimate Space as Horticulture”, in: *Textile: cloth and culture*, vol. 14, 2016, pp. 1-30; B. BAERT, “An Odour. A Taste. A Touch. Impossible to Describe: Noli me tangere and the Senses”, in: *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, W. DE BOER (ed.), Leiden, Brill, 2013, pp. 109-151; IDEM, “Die spätmittelalterlichen eingefassten Gärten in den Niederlanden”, *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016b, pp. 27-44; IDEM, “Instrumentalities and the Late Medieval ‘Enclosed Gardens’ of the Low Countries”, *Kunst Og Kultur*, vol. 99, no. 3, 2016c, pp. 132-141; IDEM, “The Enclosed Garden: a Utopian and Mystical Sanctuary”, in: *In Search of Utopia: Art and Science in the Era of Thomas More*, J. VAN DER STOCK (ed.), Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016d, pp. 49-53.
- 5 Going through 17<sup>th</sup>-century Antwerp inventories, one will encounter numerous references to these shrines. See: E. DUVERGER, *Antwerpse Kunstinventarissen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, Brussels, Paleis der Academiën, 1985.
- 6 P. HALM-R. BERLINER, *Das Hallesche Heiltum: Man. Afschaffb. 14*, Berlin, Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1931; D. EICHBERGER, *Leben mit Kunst - Wirken durch Kunst. Sammelwesen und Hofkunst unter Margarete von Österreich, Regentin der Niederlande*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2002, pp. 395-399; M. HAMMER-G. HAUCK, “Ein ‘besloten hofje’ as dem Johannesaltar in St. Nicolai in Kalkar”, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2014, pp. 145-164; R. KARRENBROCK-M. PEEZ, “Die ‘besloten hofjes’ in St. Nicolai in Kalkar”, *Jahrbuch der Reinischen Denkmalpflege*, vol. 44, 2014, pp. 118-146.
- 7 D. EICHBERGER, *op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 395-399.
- 8 H. ITERBEKE, *Devotie tot de zijden bloem: tussen techniek en betekenis, de zijden bloemen uit de Besloten Hofjes van de Lage Landen in de zestiende eeuw*, MA Thesis, KU Leuven, 2015.
- 9 P. VANDENBROECK, *op. cit.*, 1994, pp. 91-116.
- 10 R.L. FALKENBURG, *The fruit of devotion: mysticism and the imagery of love in Flemish paintings of the Virgin and the Child, 1450-1550*, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1994, pp. 16-20.
- 11 F.B.A. ASIÉDU, “The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2001, pp. 299-317. Core texts in this Marian reading of the Song of Songs are the *Sigillum Sanctae Mariae* written by Honorius Augustodunensis and *Commentaria in Canticum Cantorum* of Rupert von Deutz. See: B. BAERT, “Je hebt mijn hart verwond: Hooglied in beeld”, in: *Hooglied: bijbelse liefde in beeld, woord en klank*, Leuven, Acco, 2008, p. 68.

- 12 K. LUDWIG JANSEN, "Mary Magdalen and the contemplative life", in: *Medieval Religion: New approaches*, C. HOFFMAN BERMAN (ed.), New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 249-254; C. DISKANT MUIR, *Saintly Brides and Bridegrooms: The Mystic Marriage in Northern Renaissance Art*, London, Harvey Miller Publishers, 2012 pp. 1-12.
- 13 P. BOURGAIN, "Le jardin de l'âme", *Sur la terre comme au ciel: jardin d'Occident à la fin du Moyen Âge*, E. ANTOINE (ed.), Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002, pp. 20-22.
- 14 A possible explanation for these pieces having survived the troubled periods of the city of Mechelen and the 16th-century iconoclastic outbreak, is the fact that the sisters ran a hospital in which they cured epidemic diseases. This occupation made the convent a less favourable location for iconoclasts and other hostile groups. J. OCKELEY, "Het Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-gasthuis te Mechelen van de stichting tot het begin van de negentiende eeuw", in: M. HOFACK, *op. cit.*, 1998, pp. 7-24.
- 15 The original Latin inscription reads: "Tu es ortus cunctis deliciis affluens multisque divitiis umquam tactus spurriciis (sic) gignens florem referum gratiie". H. ITERBEKE, "Enclosed Garden with Calvary and Hunt for the Unicorn", in: J. VAN DER STOCK, *op. cit.*, 2016, pp. 214-217; E. ANTOINE, *Sur la terre comme au ciel: jardin d'Occident à la fin du Moyen Âge*, E. ANTOINE (ed.), Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002, pp. 52-53.
- 16 The original Latin inscription reads: "Reynosceron forti imperio Egressus de celi palatio Virginis mansuescit in gremio nos veneni purgans a vicio". H. ITERBEKE, "Enclosed Garden with Calvary and Hunt for the Unicorn", in: J. VAN DER STOCK, *op. cit.*, 2016, pp. 214-217; E. ANTOINE, *op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 52-53.
- 17 The visual prototype of this reading is generally identified by J.W. Einhorn as a 15<sup>th</sup>-century devotional manuscript (Göttingen, Staats- und Univ.-Bibl. cod. theol. 291) made for nuns. This image is accompanied by a text identifying and clarifying the image. J.W. EINHORN, *Spiritualis unicornis: das Einhorn als Bedeutungsträger in Literatur und Kunst des Mittelalters*, Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976, pp. 288-305. See also; P. VANDENBROECK, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 93.
- 18 For more information on these symbolic references see: Y. HIRN, *The Sacred Shrine: A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church*, Boston, Beacon, 1912, pp. 435-470.
- 19 These pilgrim badges are from the site of Little Walsingham (UK). They were used as pilgrim souvenir around 1500-1540. The traces of colour seem to suggest that some of these badges have been painted in the past. B. SPENCER, *Medieval finds from excavations in London, Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges*, vol. 7, London, Boydell & Brewer, 1998, p. 143, no. 151a.
- 20 This same mould can also be found in the collection of the Musée national suisse in Zurich (inv. LM6767), the Landesmuseums in Mainz and Musée national d'Histoire et d'Art in Luxembourg. The seal has also been cast in the church bells of Spielberg (1521) and Pleismar (1522). C. POUPEYE, *op. cit.*, 1912, p. 65; W. GODENNE, "Notes concernant les Waghevens, fondeurs malinois de cloches", in: *Bulletin du Cercle archéologique, littéraire et artistique de Malines*, vol. 79, 1975, pp. 133-139; E. ANTOINE, *op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 55-56.
- 21 This is not to say that this seal was cast by the *Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Gasthuiszusters* of Mechelen.
- 22 I would like to thank professor Jan Van der Stock (KU Leuven) for pointing out this miniature of the Holy Hunt. This miniature has been sold at the Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts auction in July 2016 at Sotheby's London (lot 17). See: ANONYMOUS, "The Holy Hunt: a complex allegorical miniature [southern Germany (Augsburg), c.1480-1500]", <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/medieval-renaissance-manuscripts-116240/lot.17.html>, 2016 (accessed 29 October 2016).
- 23 There is one more motif of a figure in an enclosed space that I was unable to identify. Whether this is a representation of Daniel in the lions' den, a veiled nun within the walls of her convent or something else is unclear. The Sotheby's catalogue entry fails to mention this figure.
- 24 Y. HIRN, *op. cit.*, 1912, pp. 438-440; R.L. FALKENBURG, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 10; J.F. HAMBURGER, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 63-94; R. FULTON, "The Virgin in the Garden, or Why Flowers Make Better Prayers", in: *Spiritus. A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-23.
- 25 A. GRUBER, *Fleur: Les motifs floraux au naturel dans les arts textiles du moyen-âge au XIXe siècle*, Riggisberg, Abegg-Stiftung, 1986; E. HARLIZIUS-KLÜCK, "Postscript", in: B. BAERT, *op. cit.*, 2016a, pp. 77-84.
- 26 T. COLSHORN, *Deutsche Mythologie fürs deutsche Volk: Vorhalle zum wissenschaftlichen Studium derselben*, Hannover, Carl Rümpler, 1853, pp. 336-337.
- 27 See note 44.
- 28 As previously noted by Jan Gerchow and Susan Marti, the complicated study of *Nonnenarbeit* and *Nonnenmalerei* is often reduced to a gender issue. Furthermore, the terminology is sometimes used as an aesthetic category to define



- "modest" looking artefacts. In most cases, the author is not studied as an individual in a specific historical situation but rather in terms of his or her biologically determined gender. We might therefore employ the term *Klosterarbeit* (gender neutral), because even though gender must be taken into consideration when studying these arts and their production circumstances, this is only in addition to other cultural and social influences. J. GERCHOW-S. MARTI, "Nuns' work,'Care-taker Institution,' and 'Women's Movements': Some Thoughts about a Modern Historiography of Medieval Monasticism", in: *Crown and Veil*, J.F. HAMBURGER-S. MARTI (eds.), *op. cit.*, 2008, pp. 133-137; J.F. HAMBURGER, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 1-6.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 181-183.
- 30 The original manuscript states: "Item en selen die sustere(n) nemermeer ledich / syn. Maer selen hen houden en(ne) wachten vand / ledicheyt als voer fenyn der sielen.ende alder / quaetheyt.En(ne) om daer af te bat behuedt re sy / -ne selen sy tallen tyden als sy inde oratorie niet / syn en moeten oft metten siecken beco()mert i(s) / een camere daer toe genoeght vergaderen.en(ne) / selen daer byder moeder gracelic ende gestich / -telycke selenau() houdende.eenich werck toen / voer den gemeyne(n) orbore het sy spynen oft naey / en oft anders.daer mede hen elck best behulpe(n) / can ende daer toe elck van hen byder moeder ge / -ordineert en(ne) sal worden.ende nye /-mant en sal hem daer inne te suecken make(n)". J. STANDONCK, *Statuten en ordonnantiën*, fols. 19r.-19v., 1509. Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels (Belgium), Fonds Kloosters, Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Gasthuiszusters.
- 31 As stated in the above mentioned regulations: "Item nyemant vanden susteren / en sal haer verolledigen in yet eygens wercx / oft yet voer haer selven doen tyde en(ne) termpte / als tyt is int gemeyn werck te syne sonder or / lof en(de) weten vander moeder. Item nyemant vanden sustere(n) en sal eenich heymelic werck / voer van buyten huise aenveerden / te make(n) sonder orlof vanden moeder." J. STANDONCK, *op. cit.*, 1509, fol. 19v. Yet, it would be unjust to say that there was no economical side to these practices. In his *Short Chronicles of the Memorable Histories*, Gerardus Azevedo cites a 16<sup>th</sup>-century imposition which mentions that many monasteries and the Beguines Mechelen were involved in the making of sheets, linen and other small things which they sold. The profit they made was handed over to the superintendent. "[...] Uyt de selve Impositie blyckt oock, dat de Religieusen der Vrouwe Cloosters van Betanien, Thabor, Blyenberge, Leliendael ende Muysene, Lyne laeckens oft lynwaerten verkochten oft penneweerden, de welcke sy oock waerschynelijck selfs maeckten, ende de Overdracht van het gene sy verkochten, deden aen hunnen Rent-meester ofte Voorganger van't Clooster, elck in't sijne: als oock de Begynnen, de welcke alsdan meest alle Lyne-laeckenen oste Lynwaerten maeckten, moesten van alles dat sy daer van verkochten overleren aen eenige van hunne Groote-meesteressen [...]". G. AZEVEDO, *Korte Chronycke van vele gedenckweerdige geschiedenissen soo in de principaele steden van het hertogdom Brabant als in de Stad ende Provincie van Mechelen*, vol. 3, Leuven, Joan Jacobs, 1747, pp. 96-97.
- 32 This same ideology is reflected in the Latin word *operor*. Jeffrey F. Hamburger states: "The Latin verb *operor* means 'to keep busy,' and this is the primary sense in which statutes understood manual labour. At the same time, however, it signified 'to be engaged in worship,' a meaning medieval monasticism took seriously. In the handiwork of nuns, the two meanings converged: work itself was a form of worship." See: J.F. HAMBURGER, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 184.
- 33 Philippen suggests that this painting dates from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Considering that the bird's-eye view is based on a map of Mechelen, made by Jan Van Hanswijck in 1594, even though it portrays the city before it's religious upheaval in 1570, it seems improbable that this piece was in fact painted in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and is therefore more likely to have been painted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Cfr. L.J.M. PHILIPPEN, "Begijnen-werkzaamheden naar een schilderij in 't Mechelsch Begijnhof," in *Prosper Verheyden gehuldigd ter gelegenheid van zijn zeventigsten verjaardag 23 october 1943*, Antwerpen, Nederlandsche boekhandel, 1943, pp. 51-70. The first known description of the painting dates from 1776 by Gerardus Azevedo in his *Historical dialogue of the city of Mechelen* as follows: "ick hebbe besonder plaisier gehad van aldaer [in the Hospital] te sien eene oude Schilderye, van ontrent vyf voeten in 't vierkant, verdeelt in sesen-veertich kleyne quartellen, waer in verbeldt wort het Hantwerck ende levens maniere van den Begyntiens, waer van de figuerkens constig uytgewerckt zyn in 't midden van dit stuck schynt te zyn verbeldt den grondt van het oudt Begyn Hof buyten de Antwerpsche poorte." See: G. AZEVEDO, *Historische saemen spraeke over de stad van Mechelen, tusschen Pipinus ende Ludolphus de selve stad door wandelende*, Mechelen, Ioannes Franciscus van der Elst, 1776, p. 168; see also: X. VAN ECK, "Between Restraint and Excess: The Decoration of the Church of the Great Beguinage at Mechelen in the Seventeenth Century", in: *Simiolus, Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2000-2001, pp. 129-162, 134-135; P. VANDENBROECK, *op. cit.*, 1994, pp. 28, 254-255; see also: W. SIMONS, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200 -1565*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003; K. OVERLAET,

- "Replacing the family? Beguinages in early modern western European cities: an analysis of the family networks of beguines living in Mechelen (1532-1591)", in: *Continuity and Change*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2014, pp. 325-347.
- 34 G. MCMURRAY GIBSON, "The Thread of Life in the Hand of the Virgin", in: *Equally in God's image: women in the Middle Ages*, New York, Peter Lang, 1990, pp. 46-47.
- 35 A. WALTER, *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts and Revelations*, Edinburgh, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 1870, pp. 23-24.
- 36 M. RUBIN, *Emotion and Devotion: The Meaning of Mary in Medieval Religious Cultures*, New York, Central European University Press, 1999, pp. 81-82.
- 37 R. HALE, "Imitatio Mariae: Motherhood Motifs in Devotional Memoirs", in: *Mystics Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1990, pp. 193-203; M. WEHRLI JOHNS, "Haushaelterin Gottes: Zur Mariennachfolge der Beginnen", in: *Maria, Abbild oder Vorbild? Zur Sozialgeschichte mittelalterlicher Marienverehrung*, H. ROCKELEIN-C. OPITZ-D.R. BAUER (eds.), Tübingen, Diskord, 1990, pp. 147-167; J.F. HAMBURGER, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland Circa 1300*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 88-104; C.M. MOONEY, "Imitatio Christi or 'Imitatio Mariae'? Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters", in: *Gendered voices: medieval saints and their interpreters*, C.M. MOONEY (ed.), Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, pp. 52-77.
- 38 D. FREEDBERG, *The power of images: studies in the history and theory of response*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 174-175.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 40 "Dit is't ghene dat wy 't Clooster van Leliendael verloren hebben aenghaende 't ciersel van der Kercken. [...] Dit es ons Abyt aengaende. [...] Item ons tafereel uyt ins werc-huys oft Spincamer, daer int middel ghemaect t'Heylich Cruys en voorts met Heylichdom, gestoffeert met syde en ander cieraet es teelemael uytgenomen, en die casse es blyven staende." G. AZEVEDO, *op. cit.*, 1747, pp. 294-296. For an extensive resource, see: *Monasticon Belge, Province d'Anvers*, vol. 8, no. 1, Liège, Centre National de Recherches d'Histoire Religieuse, 2000, pp. 397-418.
- 41 L. STADELER, "Passementmakers te Mechelen", in: *Mechlinia*, no. 7, 1923, pp. 97-100, 139-142, 162-170, 181-185.
- 42 W.H.TH. KNIPPENBERG, "Stolpen II", in: *Brabants Heem: tweemaandelijks tijdschrift voor Brabantse Heem- en Oudheidkunde*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1971, pp. 66-73; L. STADELER, "L'art de la passementerie", in: *Revue belge de l'ameublement*, 1921, pp. 4-8; G. VAN DOORSLAER, "Notes concernant l'art de la broderie et le commerce de la passementerie à Malines", in: *Mechlinia*, no. 1, 1924, pp. 11-13, 28-31, 38-40, 69; G. VAN DOORSLAER, "Notes concernant l'art de la broderie et le commerce de la passementerie à Malines", in: *Mechlinia*, no. 3, 1924, pp. 59-62, 67-71, 85-91.
- 43 "Anno 1696. Den 16 April is van ons gescheyden ons seer beminde medesuster, zuster magdale de vrintd. [...] Magadalena de Vriendt dat sy veele Jaeren achtereen is custeresse geweest, maer oock een singuliere liefhebberesse van alle Kerckelycke ciraeten, om welcke te besorghen heeft dagh ende nacht gearbeyt en sorchvuldelyck besigh gheweest met printen van belikkend, met meykens te macken en andere frayhey, met welcke aen deen en dander te verkoopen grote somme gelts vergaert heeft, de welcke sy besteeft heeft ten dienste van de Kercke en Godts outear [...].". H. CORDEMANS DE BRUYNE, "Bibliographie malinoise. Histoire de l'art typographique de Malines et bibliographie raisonnée de ses productions", in: *Bulletin du Cercle archéologique, littéraire et artistique de Malines*, vol. 6, 1896, pp. 1-39.
- 44 B. BAERT, *op. cit.*, 2016a, pp. 59-63.
- 45 I would like to thank professor Jan Van der Stock (KU Leuven) for making the transcription of the Dutch text in the *Ordinaries Secreta pro Matre*: "T'maecken van(de) syde blommen sal Mater / belegghen en(de) committeren / int regardt van(de) choorsusteren soo, dat een / ider van hen de selve doer ghehoorsaemhey / maeckende niet weerhouden en(de) belet en / worden om met de ghemeynte ter ghestelder / ure te connen comen tot het ghemeyn ghebedt / officie van choir, en(de) ter tafel van(de) Rifter / Andersins [comment in the margin: alst beyde met den halve connen geschieden] ~~d'een nie(-v(er) draeghende het / ander~~ [this passage was crossed out in the original text], soo sal men / t' voirsch(reven) maecken van blomme eer laten dan / t'gebedt, choir oft Rifter." Anonymous, *Ordinaries Secreta pro Matre*, Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels (Belgium), Fonds Kloosters, Grauwzusters Leuven.
- 46 These complaints were drawn up in visitation reports of the convent Bethlehem in Leuven in 1628 and 1633. I am most grateful to Eelco Nagelsmit for introducing me to the fantastic book on this topic by professor Craig Harline (Brigham Young University) entitled *The Burdens of Sister Margaret* (New York, Doubleday, 1994). More importantly, I would like to thank professor Harline himself for providing me the English translations of the transcript of the visitation letters.

- 47 "Datter imant aen mater sijde datmen te veel tijt hanckt aen alle dee meijkens / ende bloompot te maecken sij soude(n) andtwoorde, datse geerna diet dat onsen lieve heere verchiert is, Ich ooch / maer kaskens die soo cleen sijn dat is alle verloren cost." Cfr. M. SMULDERS, *Vision-letters of June 19-20*, fol. 14, 1628. Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels (Belgium), Fonds Kloosters, Grauwzusters Leuven. Translation to English by C. Harline.
- 48 Anna Vignarola is mentioned in the visitation letters by several sisters, all complaining about her making those silk flowers. It seems that she received some special treatment as can be derived from the following passage: "Sister Anna Vignarola has made acquaintance with various beguines, who would come often to gossip the whole afternoon. She goes there with Sister Margaret Geraerts, because she's friends with them too. Though there's common work, that talking can't be missed; it just doesn't edify. Mater would answer, 'Vignarola must often go to the grille because of the flowers she makes. That's true, but it doesn't take long to treat of flowers, and she's there instead making new friends, with everyone who comes, it's unbelievable.'" Cfr. M. SMULDERS, *Vision-letters of October 14-15*, fol. 9, 1633. Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels (Belgium), Fonds Kloosters, Grauwzusters Leuven.
- 49 "desen capelaen weeten wy als dat vinnarola een 'prielken (?)' onderhanden heeft vandie alder costelichster / bloomen die naer het leve(n) gemaect werden om haeren peter schincken daer sijnder sie huys diet *geweets* hebben / maer niet veel [...] godt ga(r)ne datter niemant hier huys wisten sijde bloome en costen / maecken het soude(n) ons profytelyck en(de) oock salligher syn." Cfr. M. SMULDERS, *Vision-letters of June 19-20*, fol. 18, 1628. Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels (Belgium), Fonds Kloosters, Grauwzusters Leuven. Translation to English from professor Harline.

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### Hannah Iterbeke

#### Njegovanje pobožnosti „Zatvoreni vrtovi“ 16. stoljeća iz Nizozemske

Mechelenski „zatvoreni vrtovi“ su iznimni relikvijari 16. stoljeća koji ne sadržavaju samo relikvije, već i *papier-mâché* pečate, nakit, *poupées de Malines*, staklene perle i hodočasničke značke na svilenom podlozi ukrašenoj biljnim ornamentima. Zajedno, ovi predmeti tvore vrt zatvoren vratima kako stoji u *Pjesmi nad Pjesmama*. Sedam od tih „ograđenih vrtova“ je bilo čuvano od časnih sestara Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Gasthuizusters iz Mechelena. U ovom se članku autorica osvrće na vrtove i njihovu marijansku ikonografiju, a potom na pobožnost. Prvi dio ovoga članka prikazuje ikonografiju „vrtova“ na temelju sačuvanih djela s posebnim osvrtom na ikonografsku shemu jednog mechelenskog „ograđenog vrta“ s prikazom lova na jednoroga, primjera koji utjelovljuje marijansku ikonografiju i vjeru na jedinstven način. Drugi dio ove studije istražuje tehnike i materijale korištene u izradi tih vrtova te meditacijsku praksu kojoj su predmeti pripadali. Ovaj esej vrednuje različite načine na koji su povezani ručni rad i koncept *Imitatio Mariae*, ponajprije svileno cvijeće, koje je jedno od najistaknutijih značajki tih vrtova. Slično *Imitatio Christi*, Marijin život i djelovanje nisu bili samo predmet meditacije, već i meditacijska praksa. Ručni rad se na taj način može sagledati kao meditacijska praksa i štovanje Djevice Marije. S obzirom na tehničke poteškoće vezane za izradu umjetnog cvijeća, čini se vjerojatnim da se u Mechelenu nalazilo samo nekoliko ljudi koji su imali znanje i vještine u takvoj umjetnosti. Vjerojatno su te predmete izrađivali obrtnici tzv. *pasementmakersi*, koji su izrađivali svekolike predmete od tekstila. Međutim, čak i ako su obrtnici izrađivali svileno cvijeće, postoji dovoljno elemenata koji potvrđuju da su te artefakte izrađivale i pobožne žene, tako da to nije bio samo ručni rad, već i način da se postane čestit kao Marija. Ovaj članak istražuje eksternalizaciju duhovne hortikulture ženskog samostana koju utjelovljuje marijanska ikonografija. Iako ova ikonografija nije uvijek doslovno prisutna, neki od ovih cvjetnih vrtova bili su izrađeni duhom prožetim marijanskom pobožnošću te ispunjeni prikazima koji simboliziraju Djevicu Mariju.

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Primljeno/Received: 30.10.2016.  
Pregledni rad