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Politics as Painting

Hendrick De Clerck (1560-1630) and the Archducal Enterprise of Empire

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- First overview of the works of this 'forgotten' painter - Hendrick De Clerck (1560-1630)

Apart from a handful of art historians no one has ever heard of the Brussels painter Hendrick De Clerck (1560-1630). Nevertheless, De Clerck was a contemporary of Peter Paul Rubens – the latter having gone down in history as an artistic trailblazer and painting powerhouse, while Hendrick De Clerck has quietly faded into oblivion. Yet the subtly coded, vibrantly colored pictures that De Clerck painted for Archduke Albert of Austria and his wife Isabella are political propaganda of the highest order. In creating a mode of archducal representation that could help to gain an empire, the sky is quite literally the limit. De Clerck represents Isabella as wise Minerva, chaste Diana, the Virgin Mary. And that's nothing compared to her husband, for in De Clerck's paintings Albert is transformed into the sun god Apollo or even into Jesus Christ himself. Hendrick De Clerck's mastery of ingenious pictorial strategy made him a leading player in one of the most ambitious projects history has ever seen. For those who know how to read them, his paintings tell a story of power, political promises, and grandiose ambition. Most of all, they are supreme examples of image-building; for as the Archdukes were well aware, even as a monarch you're only as important as you make yourself. Text in English and Dutch.

Katharina Van Cauteren (1981) is an art historian specialising in the early modern period. With irresistible enthusiasm leavened with insightful perspective she brings the paintings and their patrons back to fascinating life. The result is sometimes funny, sometimes tragic and often surprisingly topical, for in the enterprise of empire, some things just don't change.

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