

# Politics as Painting



# Politics as Paintings

HENDRICK DE CLERCK (1560-1630)

*and the Archducal Enterprise of Empire*

KATHARINA VAN CAUTEREN

*Et essendo interrogato della cagione,  
per la quale tanto s'affaticava, rispondeva,  
per resuscitare i morti.*

**Leandro Alberti** (1479-1552)

*Ad imperatores duos, archiducem et sanctum, corde et anima.*

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
<i>Foreword by Fernand Huts</i>	9
<i>Introduction</i>	29
Chapter I - Saviour of the Netherlands	67
Chapter II - Virtue as a Campaign Strategy	91
<i>1 Divine Virtues</i>	93
<i>2 A Golden Age</i>	123
<i>3 The Forest of Chastity</i>	151
<i>4 The Road to Immortality</i>	179
Chapter III - Crossroads between Heaven and Earth	233
<i>1 The Last World Emperor</i>	235
<i>2 Waiting for a Miracle</i>	263
<i>3 The New Temple</i>	297
Chapter IV - The New Eden	333
Chapter V - The Habsburg Canon	367
<i>Conclusion</i>	393
<i>Bibliography</i>	397
<i>Photo Credits</i>	413
<i>About the Author</i>	415



**Hendrick De Clerck**  
*The Suicide of Lucretia*, c.1600  
Oil on canvas, 112 x 92 cm  
Private collection

# Acknowledgements

There are certain moments that change a person's life. I first encountered Hendrick De Clerck in the autumn of 1999 and it was far from love at first sight. It was a marriage of convenience, which oddly enough flared into passion, then settled down into cosy routine and maybe even a bit of a rut. Next came a baby in the form of this book. And now it seems to be time for widowhood. Sorry if that sounds a bit harsh. But Hendrick has been dead a while, after all.

The insights, views and weird ideas in this book are the re-translation of the thesis I defended at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in 2010. At the time, everyone who helped to keep me (reasonably) sane was gratefully thanked in the acknowledgments of that magnum opus, with a particular curtsy to my supervisor, Katlijne Van der Stighelen. Here I want to add my very heartfelt thanks to Jan Van der Stock, in his capacity as a personal career coach, and Marc Adang and Bart Van Damme as the long-suffering but consistently conscientious readers on whom I tried out my text. I am equally indebted to Luc Demeester and Beatrice De Keyzer of Lannoo, to Paul Boudens with his magical graphic designer's touch, to Lee Preedy who gleefully transmuted my words into ebullient English, and to Elisabeth Bracke, because without her there would be no pictures in this book.

Then there are several people who really deserve extra points. Because they never fled away screaming when yet again I started muttering about Hendrick this, Hendrick that and Hendrick the other. Because they repeatedly pushed me just that one intellectual step further or managed to keep me down to earth, feet fixed firmly on the ground. Because they bore with my lows as equanimously as my highs. And simply because they exist.

Above all, flowers, bouquets, whole herbaceous borders for my dear parents. Because they are who they are and made me who I am. Mum, Dad, it's all your own fault. For Nele and Bart, as treasured rocks to cling to in a sometimes crazy surf. And because I've known you longer than Hendrick. For Patrick, if only because he compared me to Bruce Springsteen. For Tara, because a person needs self-appointed sisters in life. And, last but not least, for Simon, Jozef and the strawberry.

Certain moments change a person's life. It may be a lecture that you walk into all unsuspecting. A lecture that leads to a viva voce and friends for life. It may be a phone call that leads to exhibitions, books and intellectual fireworks. Or it may be a lost bet, a long walk through a deserted city, and the simple knowledge that I've come home. And home is a journey full of adventures.

There would be no book at all without the confidence and casual brilliance, the encouragement, comments, additions, reassuring phone calls, reviving slugs of wine, reading sessions and papers penguins of Paul Huvenne and Bernard Aikema. It is written, however, for Fernand Huts, who taught me the value of things that can't be bought: a chubby musician, ten centimetres of snow, simply being yourself, and always *always* being young at heart - and I hope fate holds many more adventures in store. It is to Fernand, with warmest gratitude, that I dedicate this book.

**KATHARINA VAN CAUTEREN**

**Hendrick De Clerck**

*Presumed Self-Portrait as John  
the Apostle, c.1595-1605*

Oil on panel, 75 x 57 cm

Opwijk, Church of St Paul

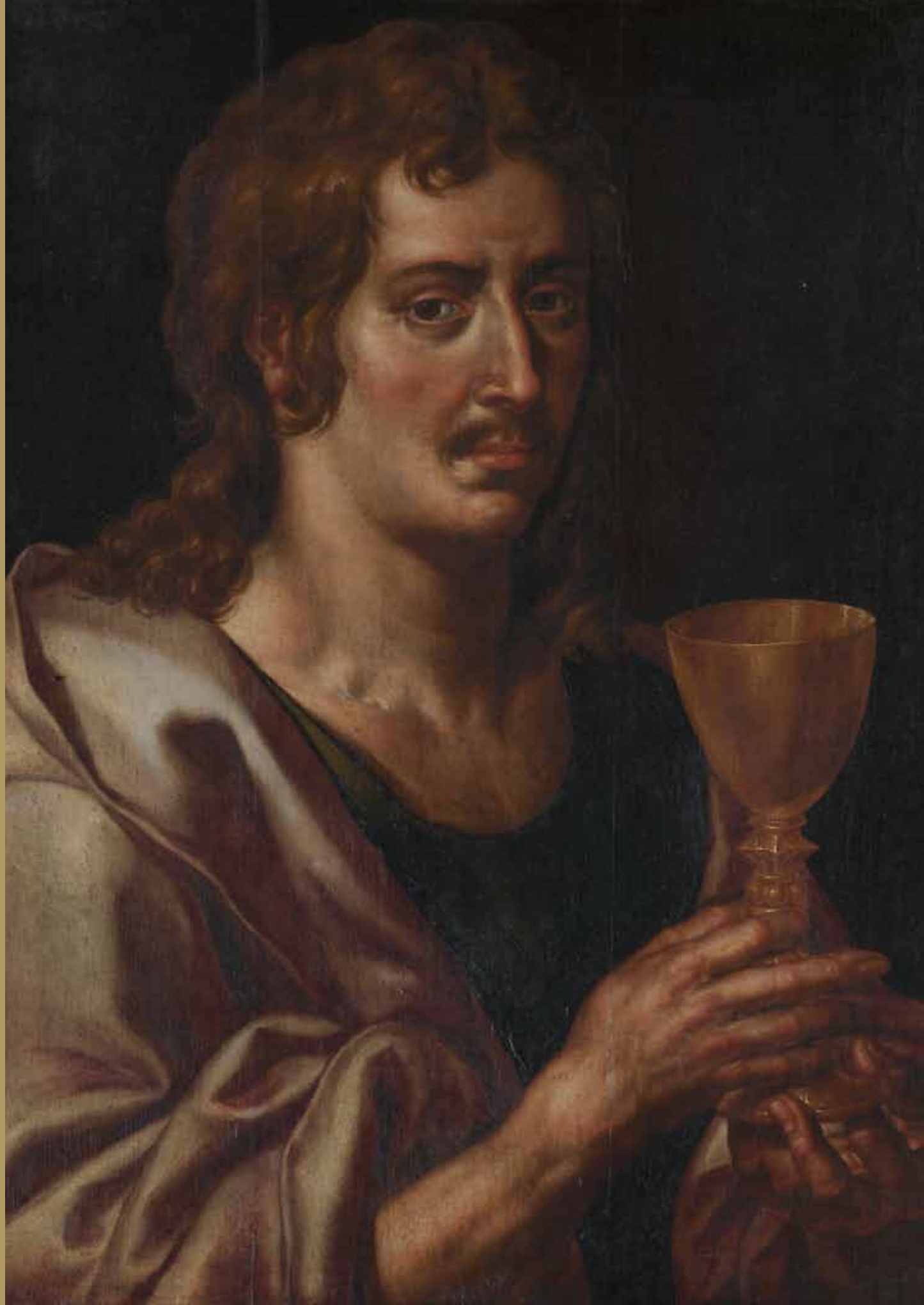
**Artist unknown >>>**

*Victory Stela of Naram-Sin,*

c.2270 BCE

Limestone, 200 x 150 cm

Paris, Musée du Louvre





## THE ARTIST AND HIS MILIEU

Art does not exist in a vacuum. Nor is it created by artists working in idealized ivory-towerish seclusion. The artist is part of his environment and society. He takes part in social life. Through the medium of his works and creations he gives expression to aspects of the milieu in which he lives and labours.

The Brussels painter Hendrick De Clerck was one such artist. He chose to exercise his talent in the service of polity and politics, using his brush to subtly delineate the dynastic ambitions and imperial aspirations of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, sovereign rulers of the Spanish Netherlands at the start of the seventeenth century.

De Clerck was smart. He neither questioned, challenged nor criticized the sovereigns' world. On the contrary. He pleased his patrons and so earned a living, becoming a man of substance, an affluent citizen. A pragmatic independent savvy entrepreneur, De Clerck established his place in society by creating art that was serviceable to power. The more lustre his paintings added to the Archdukes' policy and image, the pleasanter his social position and the more comfortable his circumstances.

## ART AND ITS PART IN THE POWER GAME

From earliest times those in authority have demonstrated a need to surround themselves with signs and symbols of their power. In 2270 BCE the Assyrian general Naram-Sin had himself portrayed on a victory stela. There we see him still, trampling his enemies as he ascends to the sun. In Tutankhamen's tomb a footstool was found with the pharaoh's enemies depicted on it, bound and captive - quite literally beneath his feet.

Power symbols like these are also devices that rulers use to create a distance between themselves and the commonalty. Exercisers of authority like their subjects to be very clear about their subordinate status. Any means and media will do as long as they manifest the power and authority with which the ruler governs. A canny ruler will also attempt to endue himself with an extra dimension: he will try to transcend the present and blazon his importance for all eternity.

This book is primarily about power. It's a story about the use of art as an agent of propaganda, about the Habsburg rulers Albert and Isabella, who used painting to attain, emanate and exert power. Art was intended to help them achieve their primary aims: fostering an obedient and submissive populace, founding a dynasty, acquiring the imperial crown, and upholding the Catholic faith.

## THE BACKSTORY

### *Philip II Tries to Get it Right*

Albert and Isabella were the export product of Philip II of Spain. Philip himself became sovereign ruler of the Netherlands on the abdication of his father, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, in 1555. He got little joy from the government of his northern provinces, however. Religious conflict and political strife led to a massive revolt against his rule. Despite the flow of gold and silver from South America, the costly war in the Netherlands often left the Spanish treasury's coffers empty.

Towards the end of his life, Philip began to consider that he may have gone about things the wrong way. Resolving the situation in the Netherlands from his power base in distant Madrid was clearly impracticable. The political answer, he thought, could lie in a decentralized and delegated sovereignty, supported, of course, by the guidance of a firm Spanish hand. To which end he arranged a double wedding. His son, the future Philip III, would marry Margaret of Austria (a granddaughter of his Uncle Ferdinand). His daughter, the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, would wed her first cousin, Archduke Albert, a younger son of Emperor Maximilian II and Philip's sister Mary. Philip III would rule the Spanish empire from Madrid,





**Artist unknown**

*Albert and Isabella in a Sleigh, c.1610*

Oil on copper, diameter 6 cm

The Phoebus Foundation



Boëtius Adamsz. Bolswert  
after David Vinckboons  
*Boerenverdriet* (*Distress of the*  
*Peasantry*), 1610  
Engraving,  
c.206 x 286 mm each



Hou boer deel op niet dat yf heeft.  
Doet ghy niet op so vrank men mocht

Boerenverdriet

Dreghet so ghy wilt met schijde of beem  
Ghy het alre houten en jaer aan byten



Die schijmen so, sa vrecht en vreden heer.  
Die vrecht en vreden en vreden heer

So wijf so, mecht v dapper inde wech.  
Die wijf so, mecht v dapper inde wech

Et vringhen ghiet, niet sal v reughel lange.  
Et vringhen ghiet, niet sal v reughel lange



*Ja verstoffelden boer, orgen inden brastbroech.  
Meenig ons son met een vrischgen te payen.*

*Stux, bringe capontgens, ras hacht is gellit wt den hoock.  
Of de gaiter deen, en daer sal geen haen re oragen.*

*Och lief bedenckt v hiet d'onde min lere.  
Hy sal t'brongen al en ons t'wynge gien core.*



*Set nu hoe den trefes alles vreshuren gaet.  
Die manvilligen trefes ons hi den trefen kanten.*

*Tis ick bringe v lanchrecht, avous cameract.  
Men ick trefe v in avous in een liden liden kanten.*

*Com legt een blaetgen om v'igt v by ons wile schroufen.  
Stuuyt v liden kanten v'igt v by ons wile schroufen.*

Workshop of  
Frans II Pourbus

*Philip III of Spain, c.1600*  
Oil on panel, 67 x 51 cm  
The Phoebus Foundation

Workshop of  
Frans II Pourbus

*Margaret of Austria, c.1600*  
Oil on panel, 67 x 51 cm  
The Phoebus Foundation



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HISPANICAE REGINA



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*The Judgement of Paris, c.1600-1610*  
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