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# CULTURES DU SPECTACLE BAROQUE

## Cadres, expériences et représentations des solennités religieuses entre Italie et anciens Pays-Bas

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# Creating Heaven on Earth: Ephemeral Altar Ornamentation in the Early Modern Southern Low Countries

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The ephemeral ornamentation of the altar in the Southern Low Countries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has remained until now a largely unexplored field of study. Even Ulrich Becker, in his seminal monograph on the altar published in 1990, paid only indirect attention to these intriguing *macchinae*[1]. In Italy, on the contrary, this is not the case. Thanks to the involvement of major artists as Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Carlo Rainaldi (1611-1691) or Andrea Pozzo (1642-1709) in creating these temporary projects, the phenomenon there has already attracted considerable attention.

In what follows I will present an overview of the iconographic sources illustrating this ornamentation that I have examined in the course of my research into the early modern altarpiece in the Low Countries[2]. In addition to making some general observations, I will use the findings regarding the Italian examples to explore their Southern-Netherlandish counterparts. Most interestingly, in many instances a single ephemeral decoration, or even a cluster of them, can be linked to one identified altar. Except for the main altar of the Brussels Jesuit church, these examples all involves the high altars of important Antwerp churches: the Cathedral of our Lady (fig. 6), the parish church of St. Walburgis (fig. 2), the church of the Jesuit professed house (fig. 1), and the altars of the churches of the Augustinians (fig. 4), the Franciscans (fig. 3), the Norbertines (fig. 7) and the Calced Carmelites (fig. 5.1 & 5.2)[3]. Other examples concern unidentified altars or temporary altars (fig. 8-16).

## 1. Different kinds of Occasions and Representations

The first observation to make is the diversified nature of the occasions for the emergence of this ornamentation. In addition to the obvious instance of the Canonization of a Saint (fig. 3a, 3b)[4], these occasions concerned different kinds of events following which a general communion was organized (fig. 1a, 1c), common feast days of saints (fig. 2a, 5b) and even centennials of the death of a saint (fig. 5a), the elevation of relics (fig. 4a-4b) or the public consecration of a bigot (fig. 1b), a so called *filia devota*. Although relatively few visual sources seem to have survived, this variety suggests

1 Ulrich Becker, *Studien zum Flämischen Altarbau im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Brussel, Paleis der Academiën, (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België. Klasse der Schone Kunsten, 49, 52), 1990, p. 101-119. The only example explicitly discussed is the temporary altar of the Brussels Miraculous Sacrament (p. 117-119 and ill. 34) (cf. *infra*).

2 Valerie Herremans, *"Eenen loffelycken ende hoffelycken aultaer": retabelplastiek in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, ca. 1585-1685*, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2007.

3 For the main altar of the Brussels Jesuit church see: Alain Deneef and Xavier Rousseaux eds., *Vier eeuwen jezuïeten te Brussel / Quatre siècles de présence jésuite à Bruxelles*, Brussel, Prosopon (Jésuitica, 1), 2012, p. 156, fig. 4, p. 189 fig. 28.

4 See also the example referred to in note 3.

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that the use of these ephemeral decorations must have been widespread in the Southern Low Countries.

Furthermore the corpus includes two kinds of visual representations of these *apparati*: on the one hand, the designs, dated or not, created prior to the event; and on the other hand, the commemorative depictions, highlighting the altar as the centrepiece of the sacred festivity. Each of them has its own pictorial strategy in depicting the *theatrum sacrum*. While the first focuses on the artistic outlines of the project, the second is far more determined by ideological motives. Designs therefore tend to omit artistically irrelevant representative elements (e.g. the depiction of the public, inscriptions, practical elements) while commemorative depictions sometimes show non-documentary elements (at the time of existence of the decoration non extant elements), but iconographically relevant imaginary elements (e.g. the addition of medallions depicting scenes from the lives of the saints celebrated (fig. 3a).

Both kinds of sources, designs and commemorative depictions, share a limitation that is connected to their status as two-dimensional media. Whether drawing, engraving or painting, all are restricted in their means of representing such an overwhelming and complex sensory experience, one that was often determined by optical illusions created by using light and different artistic media. When analyzing the representations of these constructions and their relationship with the existing altarpiece, this restriction presents us with a methodological problem. Indeed, it is not always possible to determine what precisely is being reproduced: a reality (e.g. a person, an existing architectural element, painting or sculpture) or a representation forming part of the decoration. In other words, it is not always possible to distinguish the representation of painted architecture from the representation of real architecture or, for instance, the depiction of a *schoreersel* from the depiction of a sculpture.

## 2. The means to create a "Heaven on Earth"

### 1. *Evoking a holistic experience by nourishing body, mind and soul*

While keeping in mind these limits of interpretation, together with the founding insights on contemporary Italian *apparati* formulated by authors such as Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, Karl Noehles and Mark Weil, we will analyze ephemeral decorations from the Southern Low Countries in order to identify the means by which *heaven was created on earth*[5].

One of the earliest examples, a depiction by Abraham Dircksz van Santvoort (1614/1634-1669) after Alexander van Fornenberg (1581/1601-1663/1683) of the Feast of Saint Dorothy at the Calced Carmelites church in Brussels, illustrates the early phase of ephemeral altar ornamentation in the southern Low

5 Maurizio Fagiolo dell' Arco and Silvia Carandini, *L'Effimero barocco: strutture della festa nella Roma del '600*, Roma, Bulzoni (Biblioteca di storia dell'arte, 10), 1978; Karl Nöhles, "Scenografie per le quarant'ore e altari barocchi", in Antoine Schnapper ed., *La scenografia barocca = Scénographie baroque = Stage Design during the Baroque*, Bologna, CLUEB (Atti del XXIV Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell'Arte , 5), 1982, p. 151-155; *Id*., "Teatri per le Quarant'ore e altari barocchi", in Marcello Fagiolo and Maria Luisa Madonna eds., *Barocco romano e barocco italiano: il teatro, l'effimero, l'allegoria*, Roma, Gangemi Editore (Roma storia cultura immagine, 1), 1984, p. 88-99; *Id*., "Visualisierte Eucharistietheologie", *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 1978, p. 92-116; *Id*., "Apparati Berniniani per Canonizzazioni", in Fagiolo dell' Arco and Madonna, *Barocco romano e barocco italiano…*, p. 100-108; Mark S. Weil, "Ludovico Bornacini and the Migration of the Forty Hours Style from Rome to Vienna", in Schnapper ed., *La scenografia barocca…*, p. 157-162; *Id*., "The Devotion of the Forty Hours and Roman Baroque Illusions", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXXVII (1974), p. 218-48.

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Countries, prior to the introduction of theatrical means[6]. The engraving depicts the high altar, erected in 1640 and enclosing two paintings by Brussels court painter Gaspar de Crayer (1584-1669), decorated on the occasion of the solemn festivity in honour of the patron saint of gardeners' guild[7]. The *apparatus* perfectly illustrates the basic elements used to create a holistic religious experience in which the senses, as well as the mind and the soul, were addressed.

The first thing that strikes the viewer is the omnipresence of flowers and flowering plants. This is of course an element that can be specifically related to the saint being celebrated, Dorothy, whose familiar attribute consists of a basket filled with roses and apples, here depicted on the side walls of the church. But it is also a fact that this vegetal ornamentation is a more widespread feature, as several other examples in the corpus show (fig. 1c, 2a, 3a, 5a). Numerous other instances in ephemeral religious decoration illustrate that nature during the so-called baroque period was considered to be a metaphor for the divine and an image for the omnipresence of God himself (fig. 3c, 5c 10)[8]. Moreover, and this is an aspect that the reproduction cannot illustrate, the delicate fragrances of the flowers in addition to the opulent smell of the incense burnt during the ceremonies, must have had an overwhelming sensory effect.

But the sense of sight was also addressed with a thrilling experience when the *apparatus*, provided with numerous burning candles, was unveiled in the darkened church interior. This usually happened by means of a curtain that hid the installation. Conical or pyramidal structures were used to enhance the number of candles involved (fig. 6a, 14). The lighting effects were reinforced by reflections produced by the reflectors accompanying the hanging candles and by all the other gilded and silvered attributes with which the altar was temporarily provided. These comprised candlesticks, vases and, of course, the abundantly present reliquaries, to which I shall return later on.

The senses of sight and of smell were not the only ones to be addressed. Literary descriptions of the festivities invariably mention the omnipresence of music in these occasional ceremonies. The dazzle accompanying these rites appealed not only to the senses, it also offered an additional opportunity to put into practice the concept of *sententia* and address the mind of the faithful. The legitimacy of the instructive purpose of the holy images or the so-called idea of *sententia*, was indeed confirmed at the Council of Trent[9]. While in some cases, as for instance at the Brussels Calced Carmelites' high altar, the altarpiece that ordinarily formed part of the altar retable was integrated in the ephemeral decoration, in other instances a new image, adapted to the specific circumstances of the festivity, was created.

This was the case on the occasion of this general communion in the Antwerp Jesuit church (fig. 1a). The event must have taken place before 1657 as the sculptures in niches flanking the altar are still lacking[10]. Here we

6 Eelco Nagelsmit, *Venite & Videte: Art and Architecture in Brussels as Agents of Change during the Counter Reformation, c. 1609-1659*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leiden, Leiden, 2014, p. 130-134.

7 *Ibid*., p. 138-142.

8 Fagiolo dell'Arco and Carandini, *L'Effimero barocco...*, p. 163-164.

9 Valerie Herremans, "Iconographic Typology of the Southern Netherlandish Retable (c.1585-1685)", in Brigitte D'Hainaut-Zveny and Ralph Dekoninck eds., Machinae spirituales. *Les retables baroques dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux et en Europe. Contributions à une histoire formelle du sentiment religieux au 17e siècle*, Brussel, Institut royal du patrimoine artistique (Scientia Artis, 10), 2014, p. 104-131.

10 Carl Van De Velde, "Rubens, de gebroeders Quellin en de beelden van Sint-Ignatius en Sint-Franciscus in het koor van de Jezuïetenkerk te Antwerpen", in *Rubens and his World. Bijdragen-Études-Studies-Beiträge opgedragen aan Prof. Dr. Ir. R.-A. d'Hulst naar aanleiding van het vijfentwintigjarig bestaan van het Nationaal Centrum voor de Plastische*

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see a painting that is not part of the series of four paintings that is known to have been executed for the high altar retable[11]. As the theme, Christ as the source of Redemption, is appropriate for the occasion of a general communion, it was most probably a painting related to the ceremony. In later examples this kind of visual instruction would sometimes be reinforced by the use of textual references, in most cases written on cartouches or banderoles (fig. 5b).

As well as the senses and the mind, a third aspect was addressed: the soul of the faithful. Another basic element of an ephemeral altar decoration was the reliquary. To intensify the sacred nature of the occasion, the altar was adorned with lavishly decorated reliquaries. As well as reliquary towers with a pyramidal or a decorative shape, shrines in the form of sarcophagi and reliquary busts were omnipresent (fig. 3a, 5c, 5d, 8, 16). In these multiform receptacles many relics had their resting place, each individually being a *pars pro toto* for the saint whose body it was part of. To stay with the same example of the high altar of the Antwerp Jesuit church: an inventory of the sacristy of the church from 1708 mentions no less than 10 extremely costly reliquary busts (fig. 1b)[12].

The reliquary, and more specifically its anthropomorphic variant, perfectly illustrates the post-Tridentine function of the image in the Roman Catholic context: the image as *reference* to the Saint, in this instance materially present by means of the relic[13]. On the occasion of the Feast of the patron saint of the Saint Walburgis Church of Antwerp, a reliquary sarcophagus was surmounted by a full-length figure of the Saint (fig. 2a). In many other instances, it was a bust on top of the sarcophagus instead of a full-life figure that represented the saint (fig. 1b, 16).

The engraving representing the Feast of Saint Walburgis also sheds light on the difficulties in interpreting depictions of ephemeral decorations (fig. 2a). Was it a statue decorating the reliquary or was a so-called *schoreersel*? What is clearly evident is the difference between the depiction of Saint Walburgis in the centre and the depictions on either side of her representing her parents, her two brothers Willibald and Wunibald, and SS Bonifatius and Servatius. The latter two saints are related to the Christianization of the southern Low Countries. All stand on pedestals and form a guard of honour leading towards the altar.

The positioning of these kinds of statues or painted reproductions of statues on the altar or next to the altar seems to have been a common feature of both southern Netherlandish and Italian ephemeral altar ornamentation. The "painted statues" or *schoreersels*, in particular, were a common element in Italian altar decoration. These *cartelami* or *apparati effemeri* have recently become the object of renewed attention from art historians. In 2013 they were the subject of the exhibition *Il Gran Teatro dei Cartelami* at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa[14].

## 2. *The topos of the centralized plan*

The only concrete example of an ephemeral construction discussed by Ulrich Becker is the so-called temporary altar of the Brussels Miraculous Sacrament dating from 1670[15]. This free-standing construction was reused for the

*Kunsten van de 16de en de 17de Eeuw*, Antwerpen, Het Gulden Cabinet, 1985, p. 297-306.

11 Two by Peter Paul Rubens (The Miracles of St. Ignace of Loyola & The Miracles of St. Francis Xaverius, 1617-1618), one by Gerard Seghers (Deposition, 1624) and one by Cornelis Schut (Coronation of Mary, 1613).

12 Claire Baisier, *De documentaire waarde van de kerkinterieurs van de Antwerpse School in de Spaanse tijd (1585-1713)*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Louvain, Leuven, 2008, p. 75-77.

13 Valerie Herremans, "The Legitimate Use of Images: Depiction, Retable and Veneration in Post-Tridentine Flanders", *Simiolus-Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 2016, in print.

14 <http://www.cartelami.eu/> as of 31.12.2015.

15 See note 1.

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centennial of 1770 and stands somewhere between an altar canopy (bottom part) and an ephemeral structure with a centralized plan (top part). The structure was supported by herms representing Christian virtues. Left and right on the volutes sit the patron saints of Brussels Cathedral and the multisided crowing is carried by seraphs.

Two other examples (fig. 11, 12) show that the motif of the centralized plan is recurrent in designs for ceremonies related to the exposition of the Holy Sacrament or the Entombment of Christ during the Easter liturgy. The underlying idea is that of the so-called *novum sepulchrum Christi*: the new sepulchre of Christ, as is indicated by the inscription on the plaquette on the entablature of the first example, a design by Hendrik Frans Verbruggen (1654-1724): *erit sepulchrum eius gloriosum*[16]. The epithet *novum sepulchrum* is also used in relation to tabernacles which are literally the new grave of Christ and which during this period commonly also have multisided ground plans referring to the architecture of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem[17].

### 3. *Crossing the threshold between the material and the immaterial world by theatrical means*

The axial scenography leading the attention of the faithful to the focal point of the ceremony in Antwerp at the church of St. Walburgis (fig. 2a), announces the growing influence of contemporary theatrical stage design. Towards the last decades of the seventeenth century various theatrical means were introduced to enhance the holistic experience of the faithful and cross the threshold between the material and immaterial world.

Following earlier Italian examples, the creation of scenery consisting of naturalistic and/or architectural elements becomes a common feature of ephemeral altar ornamentation. The use of *trompe-l'œil* effects emerges. These are created by combining painted and sculpted elements and by using knowledge of perspective and light effects. In his book on perspective, *La perspective pratique* (1642-1648), the French Jesuit Jean Dubreuil (1602-1670) published two engravings illustrating how these principles could be applied on the altar retable[18]. Not only *schoreersels* but also the use of the motif of the curtain played an important part in the transformation of the altarpiece into a *theatrum sacrum*, often evoking a *tableau vivant* (fig. 3c, 4a-b, 5c, 10).

An undated design attributed to Hendrik-Frans Verbruggen not only features the curtain as a striking element, it also reflects a specific type of *trompe-l'œil* effect: the so-called *Berninian* glory, called after its inventor Gianlorenzo Bernini (fig. 13). This combination

16 Hans Caspary, *Das Sakramentstabernakel in Italien bis zum Konzil von Trient: Gestalt Ikonographie und Symbolik kultische Funktion*, Munchen, "Uni"-Druck, 1965, p. 97. The inscription refers to a verse from the prophet Isaiah predicting the Resurrection: 11,10: "*in die illa radix Iesse qui stat in signum populorum ipsum gentes deprecabuntur et erit sepulchrum eius gloriosum*".

17 According to the dogma of the Real Presence, Christ is actually present in the consecrated host and consequently every place were the host, whether or not in a monstrance, is placed can be regarded as the resting place of the Body of Christ. Christiane Claerr, Marie-France Jacops and Joël Perrin, "L'autel et le tabernacle, de la fin du XVI^e siècle au milieu du XIX^e siècle", *Revue de l'art*, 71 (1986), p. 47-70; Frédéric Cousinié, "La constitution d'un système dévotionnel : le maître-autel de l'église de la maison professe des Jésuites de Paris au XVII^e siècle", in Wessel Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel eds., *Memory & Oblivion*, proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art, Amsterdam, 1-7/09/1996, Dordrecht, Springer, 1999, p. 611, fig. 2; Joseph Masheck, "The Original High Altar Tabernacle of the Gesù Rediscovered", *The Burlington Magazine*, 803 (1970), p. 110-113; Walter Prutscher, *Das Tabernakel: Geschichte, Vorschriften, Ausführung*, Wenen, Wiener Katholische Akademie (Miscellanea Wiener Katholische Akademie. Arbeitskreis für Kirchliche Zeit- und Wiener Diözesangeschichte, Neue Reihe, 8), 1980.

18 Fagiolo dell' Arco and Carandini, *L'Effimero barocco...*, p. 392, ill. 510-11.

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of a nimbus, the effects of hidden light sources, cloud-imitating representations and a floating monstrance was intended to evoke a heavenly setting for the exposed Body of Christ.

### 3. The apotheosis and the victory of true faith

Alongside the ubiquitous glorification of the Eucharist, two subjects seem to predominate in the iconography of ephemeral altar decoration during the early modern period. An example from the Antwerp Calced Carmelite church dated 1684 illustrates the first of these: the apotheosis (fig. 5a).

The apotheosis was another theatrical principle that became an important feature of ephemeral altar ornamentation. In the classical tradition, the apotheosis was not only the culmination of the stage performance, it also meant the deification of a mortal man. In the Roman Catholic tradition the concept was transformed into the glorification of a saint. It was visualized by the elevation of the saint by angels to the heavenly realm where he or she was welcomed and honoured by the Holy Trinity, sometimes accompanied by the Holy Virgin (fig. 3b, 3c, 5a, 5d).

The second common theme was the victory of true faith. Joseph Imorde, and Nils Holger Petersen more recently, have shown that the ceremony of the Quarant'ore in the Italian context had a polemic side, directed against the heresies of the Protestants and the Turks[19]. Similarly, in the southern Low Countries the militant and justificatory nature of the iconography of some of the *apparati* is obvious. The first example depicts a decoration in the Antwerp Jesuit church on the occasion of the general Communion on October 7th 1691, in commemoration of the Victory of Louis of Baden over the Turks at Salem Kamen (fig. 1c). Two large piles of trophies captured from the Turks form a substantial part of the decoration.

The second example concerns the celebration of the Canonization of SS John of Capistrano and Pascal Baylon in 1691 at the Antwerp Franciscan church. St. John of Capistrano, depicted on top of the construction and surrounded by trophies and cannons, died during the battle against Sultan Mehmet II at Belgrade (fig. 3a). The Sultan had attacked the Hungarian kingdom, referred to by the statues (or *schoreersels*?) of the personification of Hungary and of Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary, both in front of the altar on the left. St. Pascal Baylon, depicted in the centre celebrating Holy Mass, defended the dogma of the Real Presence, while he was attacked by a Calvinist preacher. To him refer the statues (or *schoreersels*?) of the personification of Austria and of Charles II, King of Spain and the Habsburg territories.

In addition, it must be noted that the theme of the apotheosis also had a controversial dimension involving another dispute with the Protestants, namely the veneration of Saints. Here the justificatory nature of the iconography is even more obvious. Can anyone doubt the legitimate character of the veneration of Saints when they are honoured by the Holy Trinity and the Holy Virgin themselves?

19 Joseph Imorde, *Präsenz und Repräsentanz, oder: Die Kunst, den Leib Christi auszustellen: (das Vierzigstündige Gebet von den Anfängen bis in das Pontifikat Innocenz X*, Emsdetten, Imorde, 1997, p. 26-27; Nils Holger Petersen, "The Quarant'Ore: Early Modern Ritual and Performativity", in Peter Gillgren and Marten Snickare eds., *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, Farnham, Ashgate (Visual Culture in Early Modernity, 5), 2012, p. 115-117.

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### 4. The relationship of the ephemeral structure with the permanent retable

How did these ephemeral ornamentations of an altar[20] relate to its daily decoration, essentially the retable (or altarpiece in a broad sense, generally including an architectural frame)? Because it is not always easy to distinguish between a real object and a represented object in depictions of decorated altars, it is not obvious how to figure this out.

Fortunately, for seven examples the regular appearance of the decorated retable is still known, either because it still exists, or because an iconographic source has been preserved. The comparison between these retables and the design for or reproduction of their decorations shows that there exist three kinds of dependencies. In the first, the portico is used as the basic structure for the decorative elements, while the painting is sometimes hidden or replaced by a specific, suitable subject (fig. 1a, 5b, 5d, 6a, 7a)[21]. Sometimes the daily retable remains clearly recognizable. For an unknown occasion related to the adoration of the Holy Sacrament which is present in a monstrance on the altar table, the high altar retable of Antwerp Cathedral (Robrecht Colyns de Nole, 1621-1626) was decorated with reflectors and candles, several of which are supported by large conical or pyramidal reliquaries (fig. 6a). The altarpiece however, remained the same: we can easily recognize Peter Paul Rubens' *Assumption of the Virgin* (1625-1626).

Nevertheless, in several other instances the altarpiece was replaced by a painting adapted to a specific circumstance. For instance, the high altarpiece for the church of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites, *The Triumph of the Eucharist* by Gerard Seghers, was replaced by a painting depicting a scene from the life of St. Peter on the occasion of the feast dedicated to this saint (fig. 5b).[22] Undoubtedly in honour of an unidentifiable saint, the same daily altarpiece was replaced by an *Apotheosis*, the Holy Trinity awaiting the saint in the heavenly realm (fig. 5d). One last example related to the same retable, possibly (the scenes are difficult to identify) illustrates the theme of the celebrated event, perhaps the Ascension (fig. 5c). On the occasion of a general communion at the church of the Antwerp Jesuit professed house, a scene in the centre represented Christ as the *Fountain of Salvation*. As far as we know, this depiction was not part of the series of four altarpieces that formed the daily decoration of the high altar[23]. The monumental *Adoration of the Magi* Rubens (c. 1624) painted for the high altar of the abbey of St. Michael is invisible on a design for a decoration on the occasion of a Marian Feast. At the centre of the portico stands instead a statue of the Holy Virgin, against the background of what seems to be an architectural niche. This three-dimensional space is emphasized by the presence of a kind of curtain hanging from the top the pediment. Against both pillars of the portico stand two other unidentifiable figures. They also were not part of the standard appearance of the retable.

The second kind of dependency is in fact one of no interference at all with the permanent altar decoration, as the latter is completely hidden behind a curtain or the ephemeral construction itself (fig. 2a, 3b-c). This was the case at the church of St. Walburgis, where the decoration on the occasion of the feast of the church patron completely conceals Rubens' magnificent altarpiece *The Raising of the Cross* (1610-1611). While in this case it is certain that the ephemeral ornaments were installed in the

20 Sometimes temporary altars provided with a portable altar stone were erected for a special occasion and provided with an ephemeral decoration or retable.

21 See also the example referred to in note 3.

22 It is possible the scene represents the primacy of St. Peter.

23 X. Van Eck, "De jezuïeten en het wervende altaarstuk", in *De Zeventiende eeuw*, 14, 1998, p. 86-89.

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presbytery, easily recognizable by the specific steps leading up to it, in some cases it cannot be excluded that the ephemeral structure was erected elsewhere in the church, which may also explain the absence of any reference to the high altar retable. Indeed, two structures for the Antwerp recollect church offer no view of the monumental high altar retable, enclosed once again by a masterpiece by the Antwerp Apelles: the so called *Coup de lance* (1620). Both have in common a representation of the *Apotheosis* of a saint. In contrast, and on closer inspection, the decoration erected on the occasion of the canonization of SS John of Capistrano and Pascal Baylon in 1691 does offer a glimpse of the daily appearance of the high altar retable of the Antwerp Franciscan church. We can see both the parts of the broken fronton and on both sides the statues standing on top of the doors providing access to the back of the portico flanking the altar. They represent SS Francis, founder of the order and Anthony of Padua, holding the Christ child (fig. 3-3a). Another example dating from the same year also shows one small element derived from the actual retable: the decoration of the high altar of the church of the Antwerp Jesuit professed house on the occasion of the general communion in commemoration of the victory of Luis of Baden over the Turks at Salem Kamen. Here, the small cartouche in the center of the frieze of the entablature is left visible (fig. 1-1c). An appropriate text was applied onto the cartouche.

Finally, the most interesting relationship is the one in which the dialogue between the existing structure and the ephemeral ornamentation is used to create a vision of an immaterial event, such as the apotheosis of a saint or his appearance[24]. In the case of the creation of the ephemeral ornamentation of the high altar of the Antwerp Augustinian church to celebrate the solemn Elevation of the Blood of St. Nicolas of Tolentino on January 4th 1709, the central part of the portico is used to create a visual "passageway" to the immaterial world in the form of a gate that opens its doors (fig. 4-4a-4b). With the exception of the altarpiece, the retable of the high altar of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites is clearly discernible in the decoration for the celebration of the centennial of the death of St. Charles Borromeo in 1684. But from the centre of the altarpiece rises an apotheosis scene that extends high above the upper part of the portico to the ceiling of the church (fig. 5-5a.). In this way, it seems that the saint literally leaves behind the material world.

## 5. The influence of ephemeral structures on retable design

When comparing designs of ephemeral structures with permanent altarpieces erected at the end of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth century, a number of similarities stand out. It seems that certain elements that we have shown to be essential for temporary altar ornamentation gradually trickled into the designs for the actual altar retables. Design practice for ephemeral constructions certainly must have been a fertile ground for experimentation and the introduction of novelties, for instance inspired by Italian examples. Apparently, some of these new features were subsequently echoed in the construction of daily retables.

We will illustrate this phenomenon, which certainly needs further examination, with two specific examples. The first one is the rise of the use of the theatrical motif of the curtain in retable design[25]. The drapery is mostly applied in the central part of the portico so that it literally takes on the character of a *theatrum*

24 See also the example referred to in note 3.

25 Ulrich Becker also pays attention to the topic, but does not see any connection with the ephemeral altar decorations. Becker, *Studien zum Flämischen…*, p. 138-141.

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*sacrum*, which is emphasized by the presence of the flanking columns. With the use of the curtain as a formally and strongly determining element, the sculpted central scene of the retable acquires a very stage-like setting (fig. 7a-17).

Of much greater importance for the development of altarpiece architecture in the eighteenth century was the spread of the iconographic motif of the *apotheosis* of the patron saint of the altar. One of the earliest and most notable examples is the high altar retable of the Antwerp church of St. James (Artus II Quellinus, Lodewijk Willemssens, Willem Kerrickx, Norbert Herry, Antwerp, 1685). At the centre of the portico the statue of St. James seems to be lifted heavenwards by a group of angels. Above, in the upper part of the structure, the Holy Trinity is awaiting the saint in the heavenly realm (fig. 5a-18). In a slightly different and more modest sculptural variant instead of the (sculpted) saint himself, a (sculpted) image of the saint is being carried to heaven (fig. 19)[26].

## 6. Conclusion

In view of the fact that the occasions for the construction of the selected examples of temporary altar decorations seem to have been manifold, ephemeral altar ornamentation must have a been prevalent phenomenon in the early modern southern Low Countries. These *apparati* were designed to address the faithful in different ways and convince them of the "staged" points of doctrine in which together with the omnipresent Eucharist, the apotheosis of a saint and the victory of true faith took a prominent place. Fragrant flowers, music, light and other theatrical means such as *trompe l'œil* effects were used to appeal to the different senses. *Sententia*, the instructive purpose of the holy image, was served by the creation of occasional representations whether or not accompanied by explanatory inscriptions. The presence of reliquaries containing relics of numerous saints dramatically reinforced the sacral density of the instance. In some cases parts of the retable were used to create the occasional "*theatrum sacrum*". In other instances the ephemeral apparatus seems to have been an independent structure, hiding the solid altar decoration. Finally, it seems that some important features of retable design at the end of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth century, such as the visualization of the *apotheosis* of a saint, were derived from ephemeral altar decoration practice.

26 Compare to the example referred to in note 3.

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*Fig. 1. Hans van Mildert (?), Andries de Nole (?), High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Jesuit Professed House (nowadays St. Charles Borromeo), 1619-1621. Photo: author.*

*Fig. 1a. Anonymous, Generaele communie met vollen aflaet […], undated, picture of an engraving, KADOC, Leuven, Archief jezuïeten, Fonds Droeshout, 24,2, p. 469. Photo: author.*

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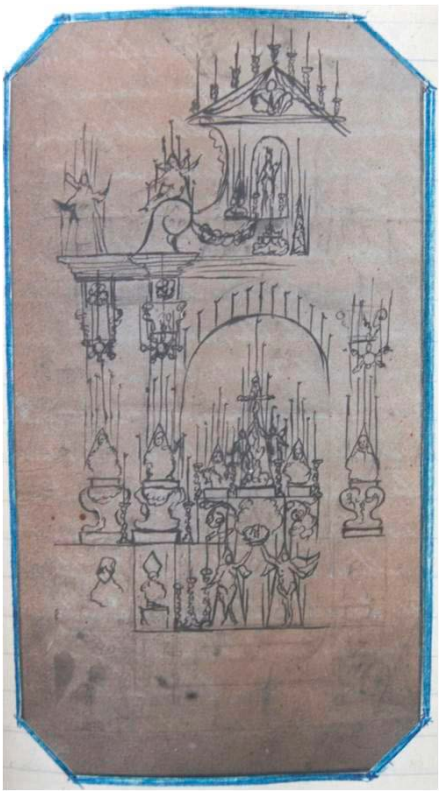

*Fig. 1b. Anonymous, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Jesuit Professed House, undated, picture of a drawing, KADOC, Leuven, Archief jezuïeten, Fonds Droeshout, 24,5, p. 83. Photo: author.*

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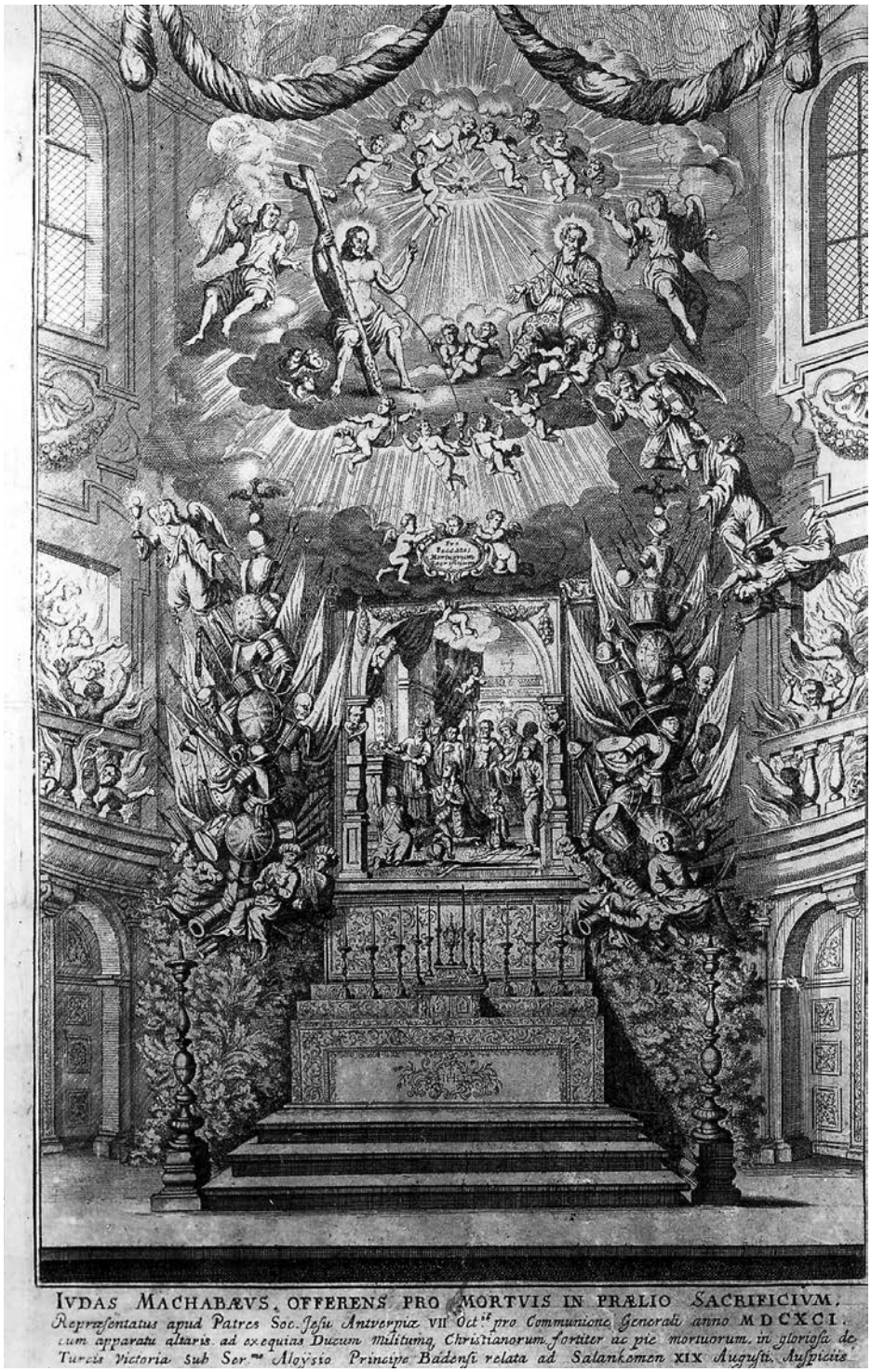


*Fig. 1c. Gaspar Bouttats, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Jesuit Professed House at the Occasion of the General Communion in Commemoration of the Victory of Luis of Baden over the Turks at Salem Kamen, 1691, engraving, 34.5 x 22 cm, Antwerp, Church of St. Charles Borromeo. Photo: KIK-IRPA a76447.*

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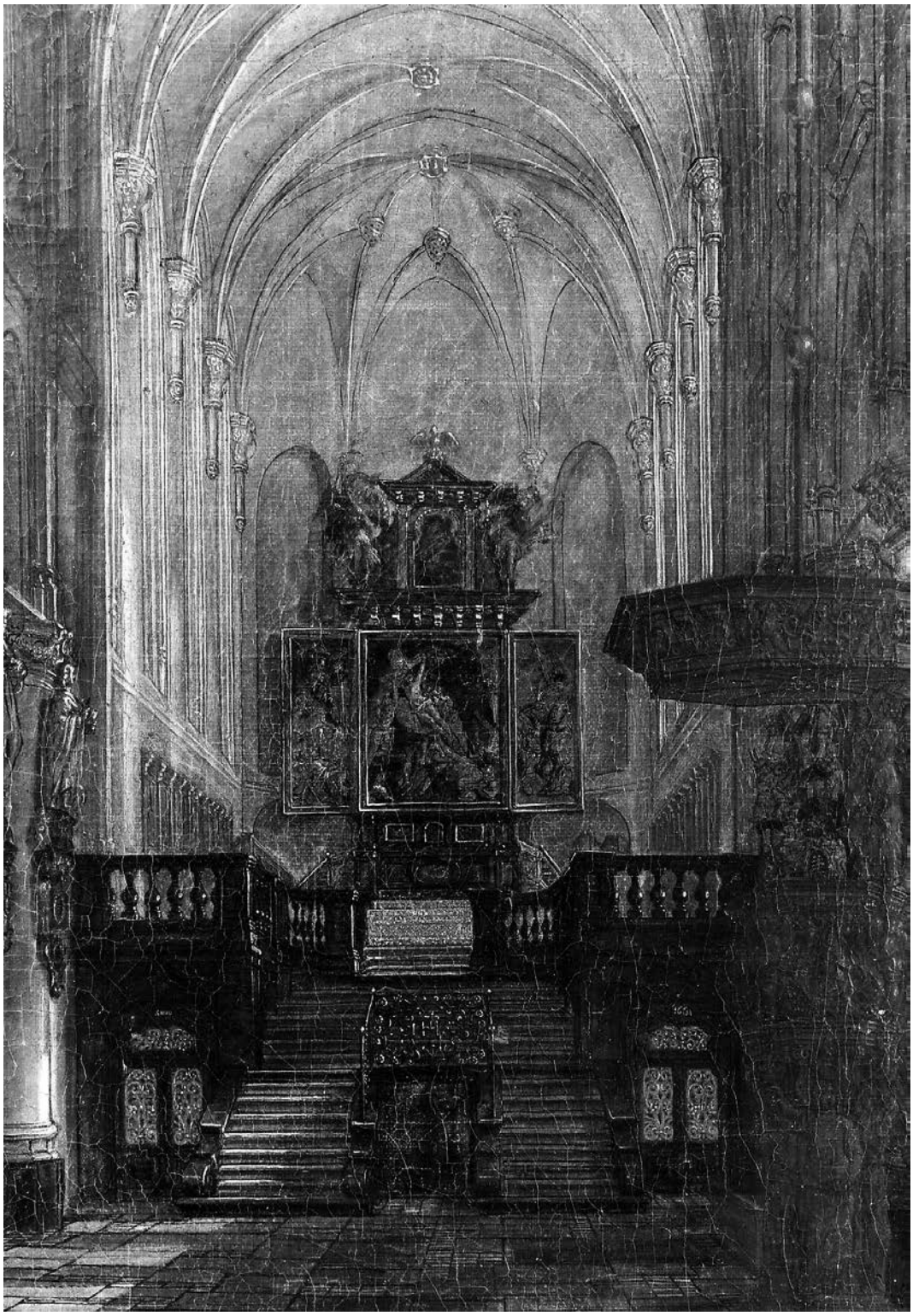

*Fig. 2. Anton Gunther Ghering, Interior of the Former Antwerp Church of Saint Walburgis (detail), undated, oil on canvas, 115 x 141 cm, Antwerp, Church of St. Paul. Photo: KIK-IRPA M193020.*

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*Fig. 2a. Gaspar Bouttats, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of St. Walburgis Antwerp, 1676, drawing on parchment, 50 x 37 cm, Antwerp, MAS (Vleeshuis collection), KIK-IRPA M107379.*

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*Fig. 3. J. H. Altenrath, Survey Drawing of the High Altar of the former Antwerp Franciscan Church before its Demolition, ink on paper, 614 x 383 mm, King Baudouin Foundation, Collection Charles Van Herck on permanent loan to the Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. CVH 423. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 3a. Gaspar Maes, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Franciscans at the Occasion of the Canonization of St. John of Capistrano and St. Pascal Baylon, 1691, engraving, Antwerp, Felixarchief, ICO_3_6_f. Photo: Felixarchief.*

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*Fig. 3b. Baltazar Bouttats after Michiel Vandervoort, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Franciscans for the Feast of the Canonization SS Jacobus a Marchia and Franciscus Solanus, 1726, engraving, 651 × 415 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. RP-P-OB-82.786. Photo: Rijksmuseum.*

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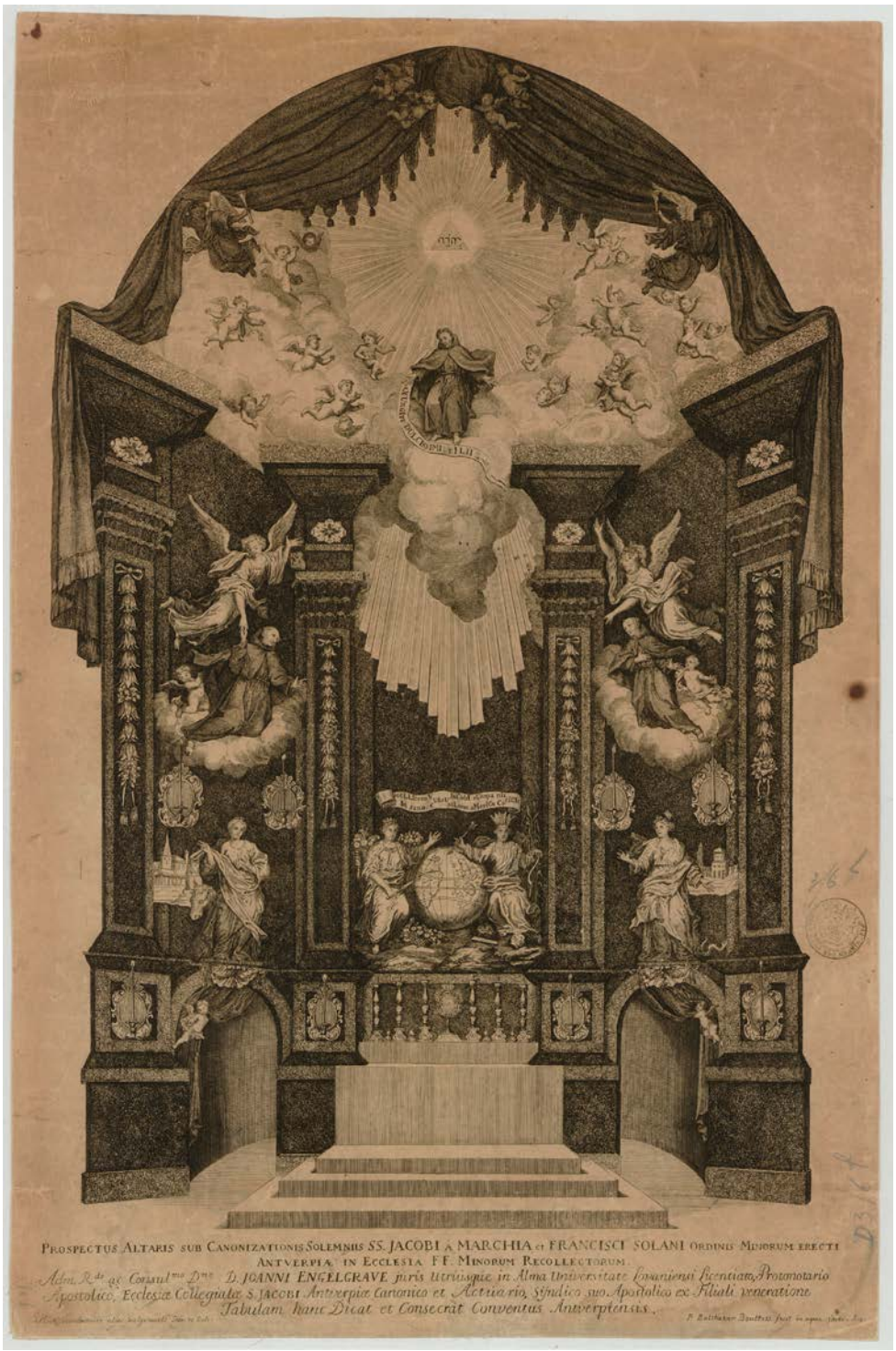


*Fig. 3c. Willem Ignatius Kerrickx, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Franciscans for an Unknown Event, ink on paper, washed, 545 x 428 mm, King Baudouin Foundation, Collection Charles Van Herck on permanent loan to the Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. CVH177. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 4. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for the High Altar of the Former Antwerp Augustinian Church, before 1701, ink on paper, washed, 355 x 233 mm, King Baudouin Foundation, Collection Charles Van Herck on permanent loan to the Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. CVH377. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 4a. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Augustinians, ink on paper, 563 x 344 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02173 | A.63.1. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 4b. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Augustinians for the Solemn Elevation of the Blood of St. Nicolas of Tolentino on January 4th 1709, 1707, ink and pencil on paper, 491 mm × 326 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. RP-T-1987-31. Photo: Rijksmuseum.*

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*Fig. 5.1. Reconstruction of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites: Peter Paul Rubens, Design for the Upper Part of an Altarpiece, oil on panel, 62 x 80 cm, Antwerp, Rubenshuis, inv. S194. Photo: Collectie Antwerpen.*

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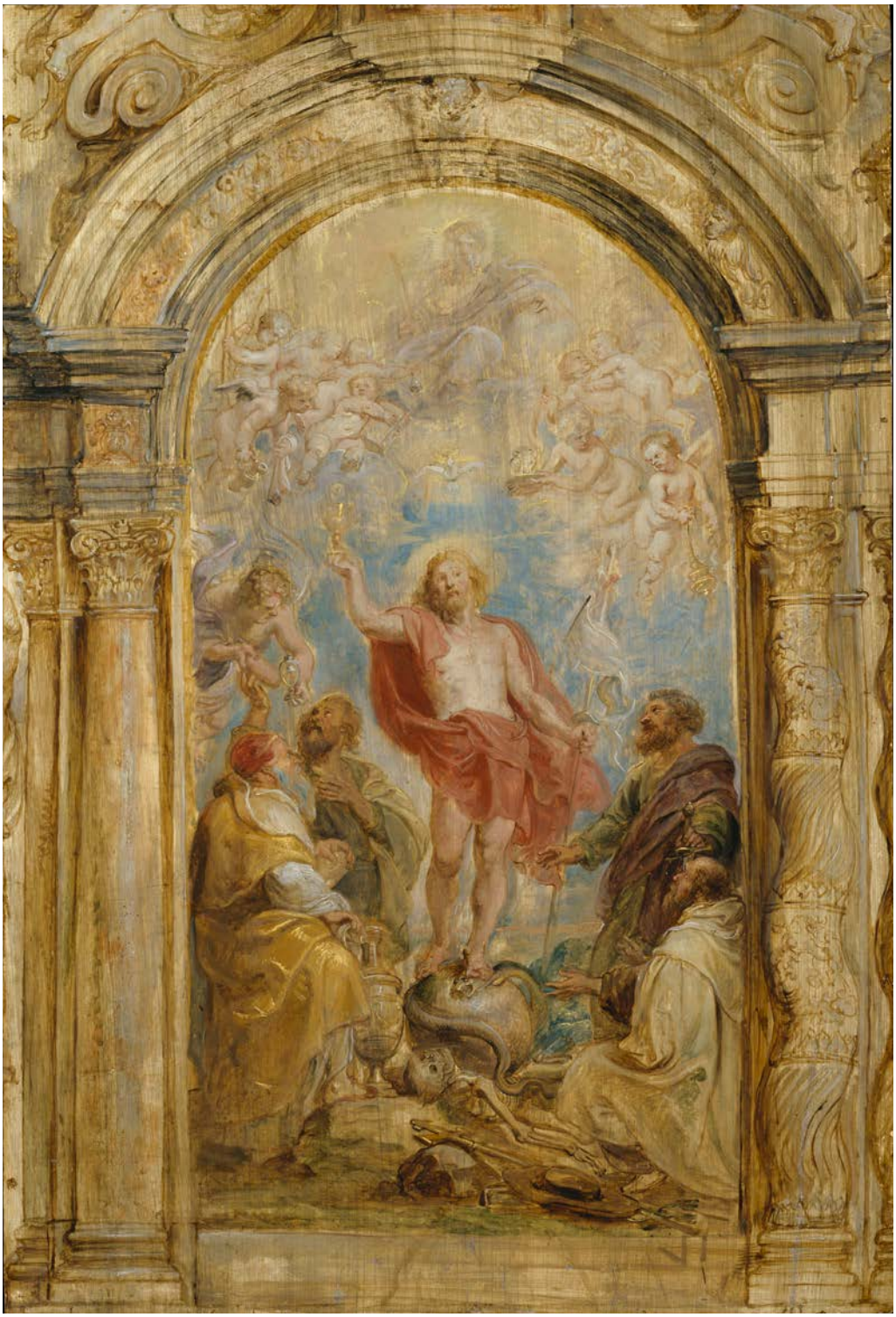

*Fig. 5.1. Peter Paul Rubens, The Glorification of the Eucharist, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, probably ca. 1630, oil on panel, 71.1 x 48.3 cm, inv. 37.160.12. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

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*Fig. 5a. Gaspar Bouttats, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites for the Centennial of the Death of St. Charles Borromeo, 1684, engraving, Felixarchief, Antwerp, 12#532. Photo: Felixarchief.*

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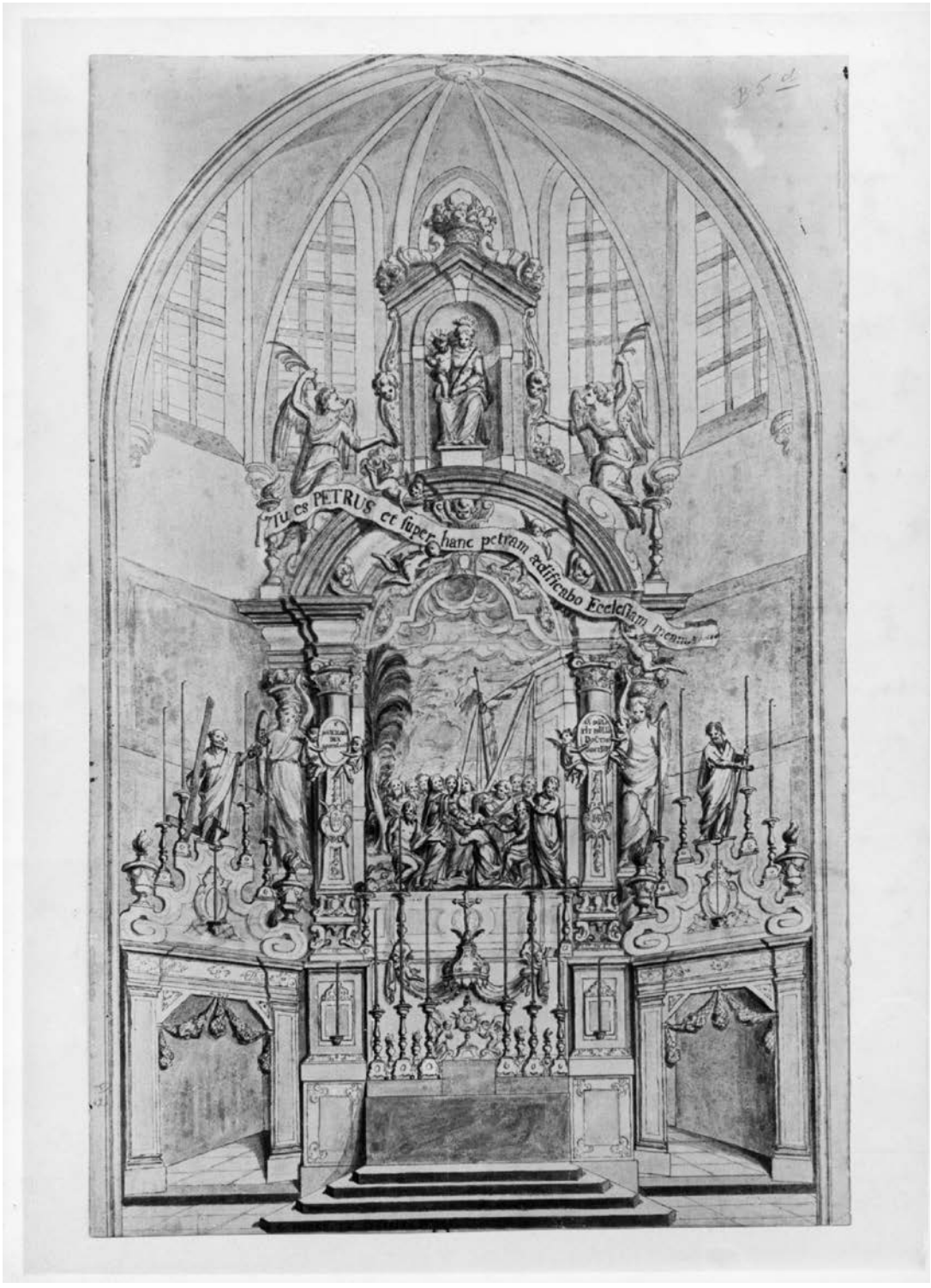


*Fig. 5b. Gaspar Moens, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites for the Feast of SS Peter & Paul, 1732, ink on paper, 655 mm x 413 mm, MAS, Antwerp (Vleeshuis Collection). Photo: KIK-IRPA m107057.*

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*Fig. 5c. Anonymous, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites for an Unknown Event, 1736, ink on paper, 305 mm x 188 mm, King Baudouin Foundation, Collection Charles Van Herck on permanent loan to the Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. CVH 522. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 5d. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites for an Unknown Event, drawing on paper, 407 x 287 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02141 | A.63.22. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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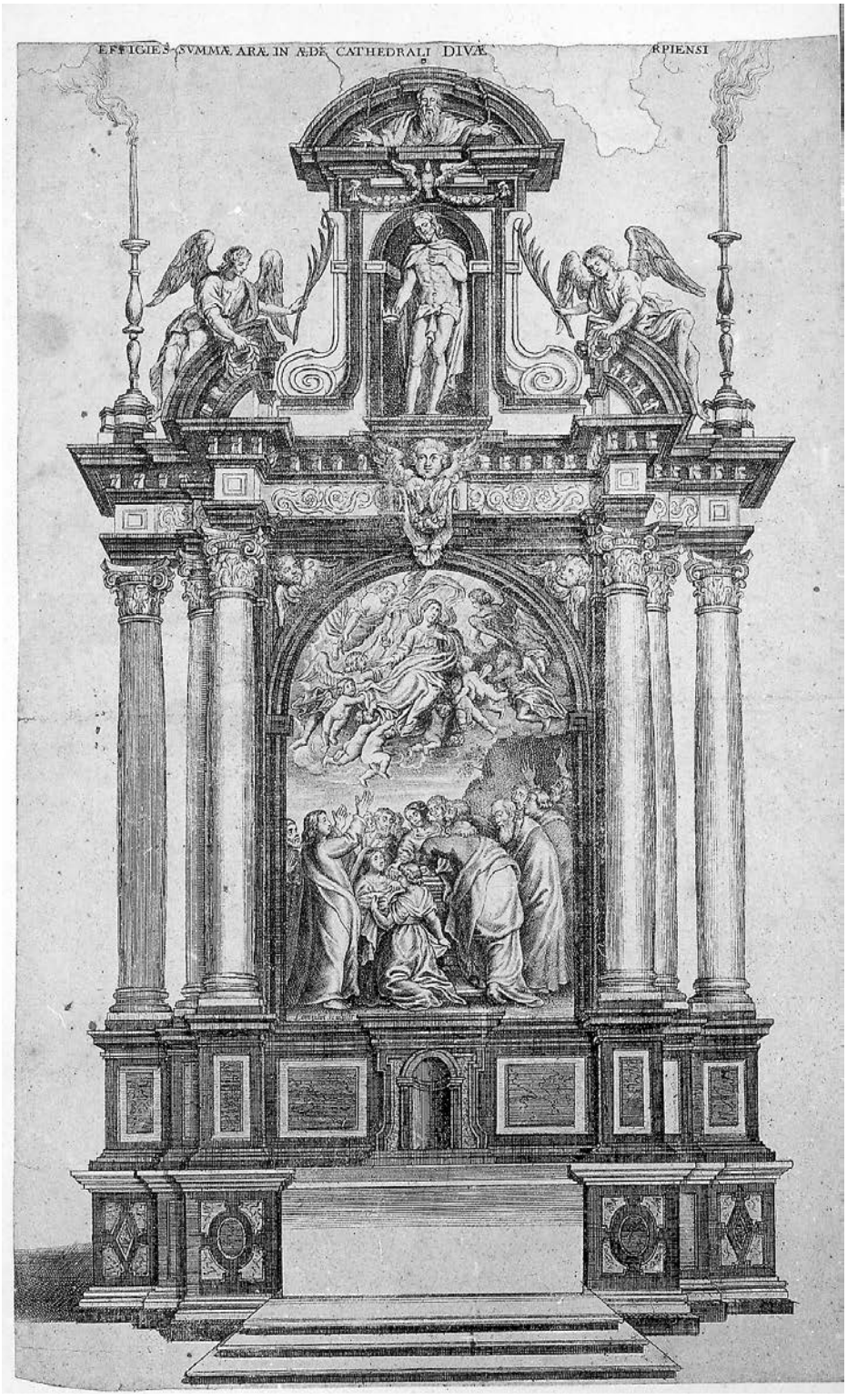


*Fig. 6. A. Lommelin, Former High Altar of the Antwerp Cathedral, 1631, engraving, 47 x 29.5 cm, Antwerp, Cathedral of Our Lady. Photo: KIK-IRPA M203366.*

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*Fig. 6a. Anonymous, Miniature in the Gulden Boek van Broederschap van Veertiendaagse Berechting illustrating an Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Antwerp Cathedral, ink and oil on paper, Antwerp, Cathedral of Our Lady. Photo: KIK-IRPA M204118.*

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*Fig. 7. Anonymous (Hans van Mildert?), Former High Altar of the Norbertine Abbey of St. Michael, Zundert, Church of St. Trudo, situation before 1927. Photo: Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed.*

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*Fig. 7a. Gaspar Moens, Occasional Decoration of the High Altar of the Church of the Norbertine Abbey of St. Michael for an Unknown Event, drawing on paper, 331 x 211 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.01856 | A.65.47. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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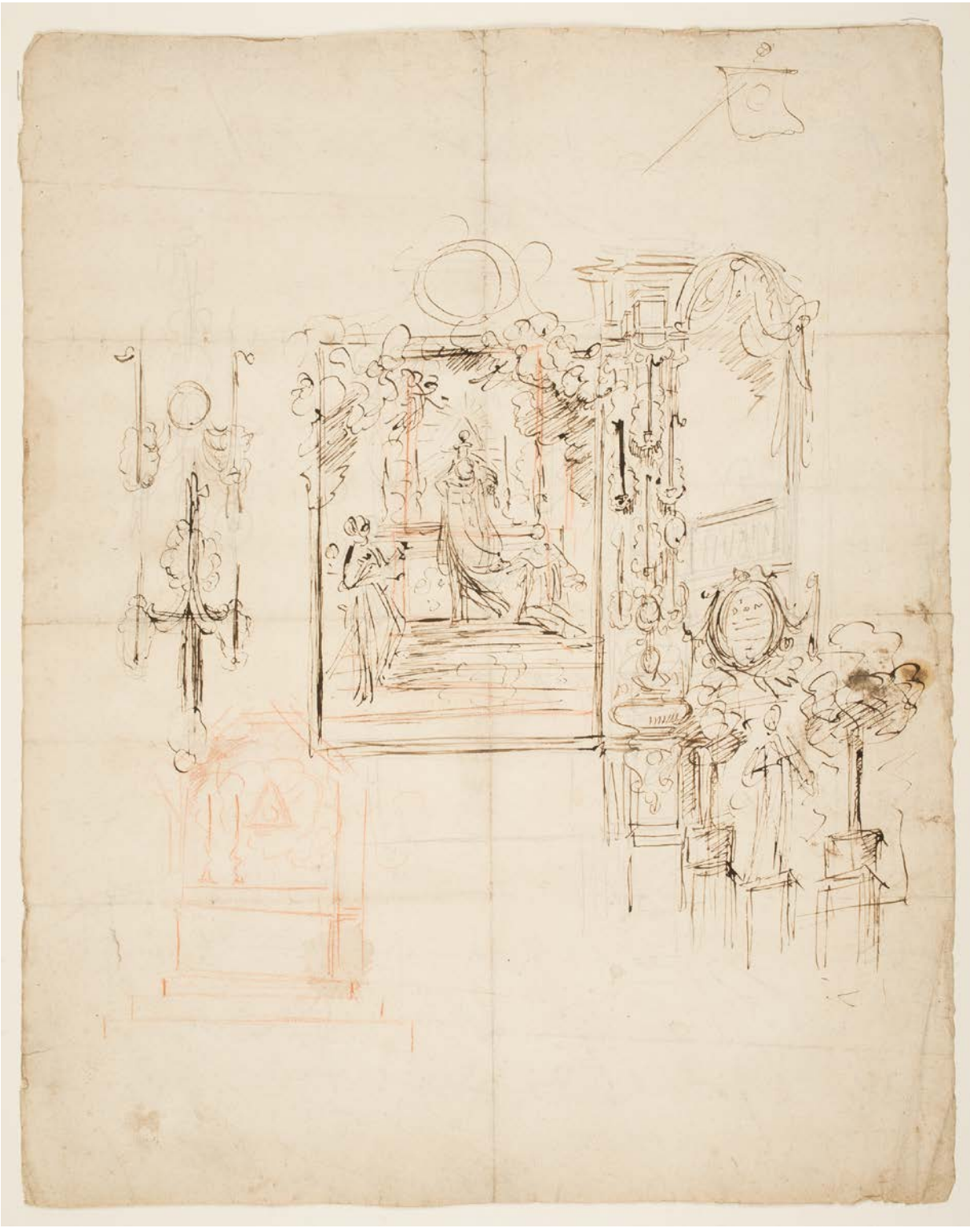

*Fig. 8. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for a Temporary Altar, drawing on paper, 417 x 331 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02142 | A.63.2.a. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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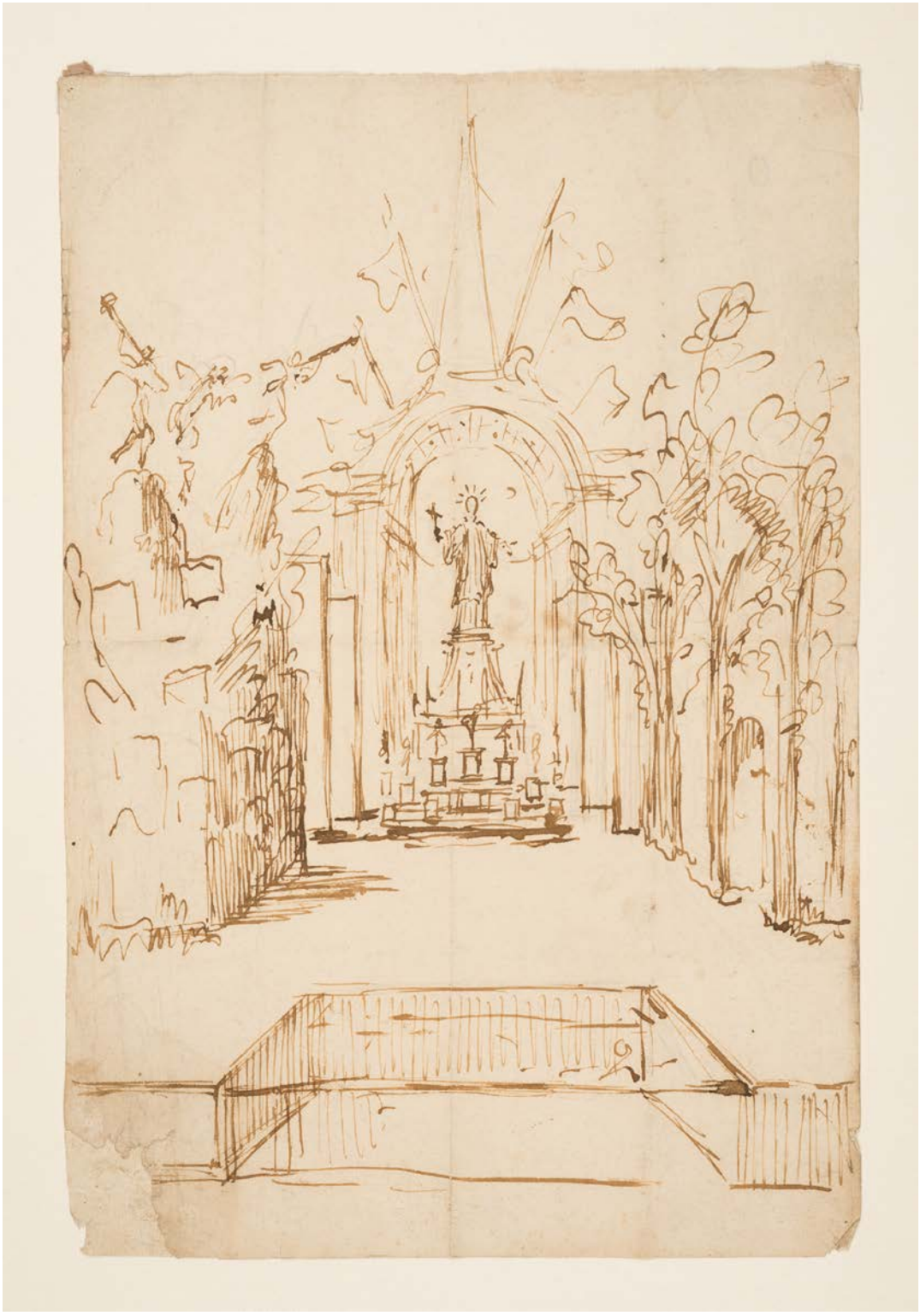

*Fig. 9. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for a Temporary Altar, drawing on paper, 222 x 328 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02068 | A.63.20. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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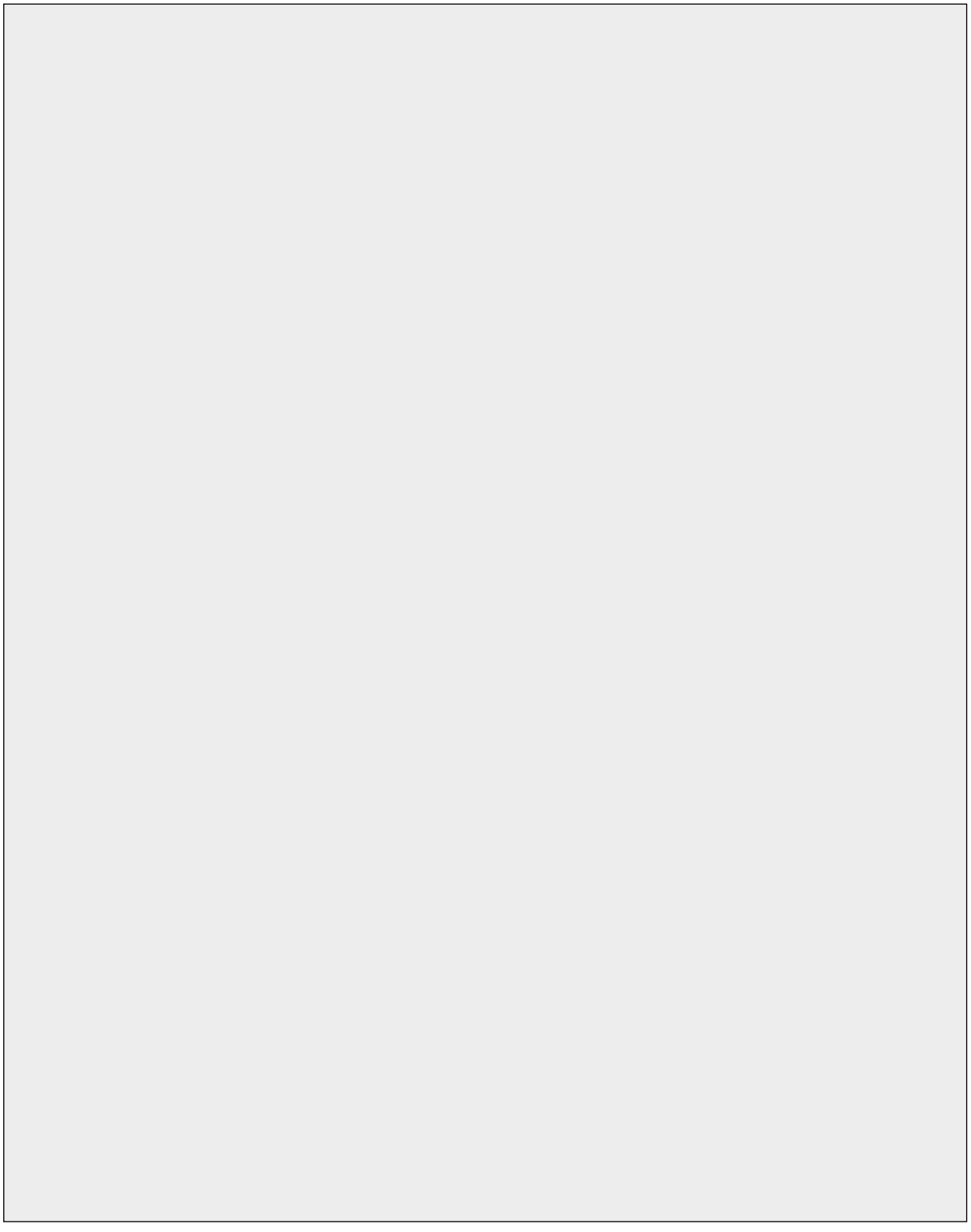

*Fig. 10. Willem Ignatius Kerrickx, Design for an Altarpiece (Design for a Temporary Altar), drawing on paper, 474 x 339 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, PK.OT.01445 | A.61.10.a. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 11. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for a Side Altar with a Tomb (Design for a Temporary Altar), drawing on paper, 311 x 200 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, PK.OT.02070 | A.63.28. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 12. Gaspar Moens, Design for an Altar with the Glorification of the Body of Christ (Temporary altar), drawing on paper, 655 mm x 430 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, PK.OT.01862 | E.1.9. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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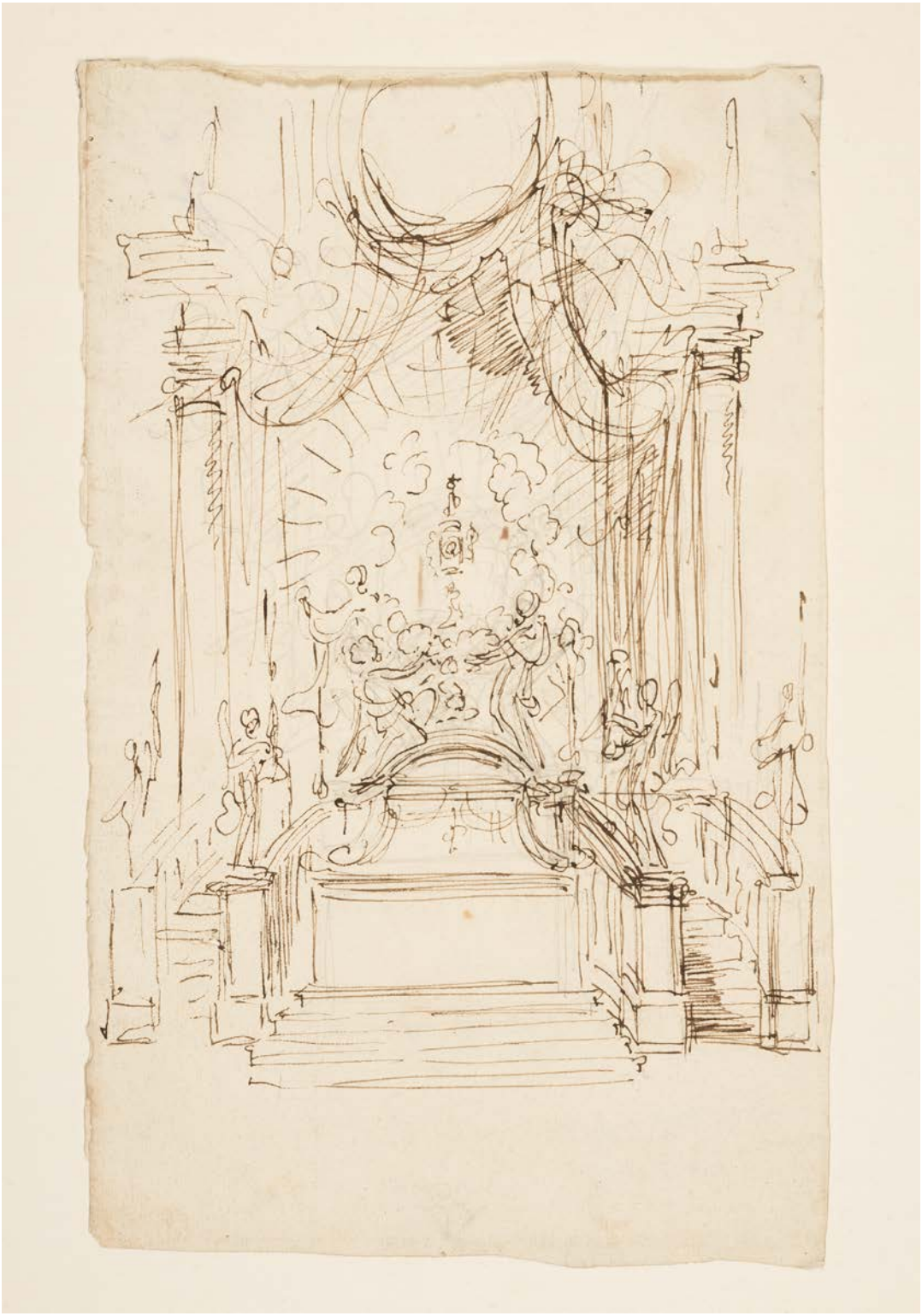

*Fig. 13. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for Temporary Altar, drawing on paper, 243 x 152 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02137 | D.19.27.a. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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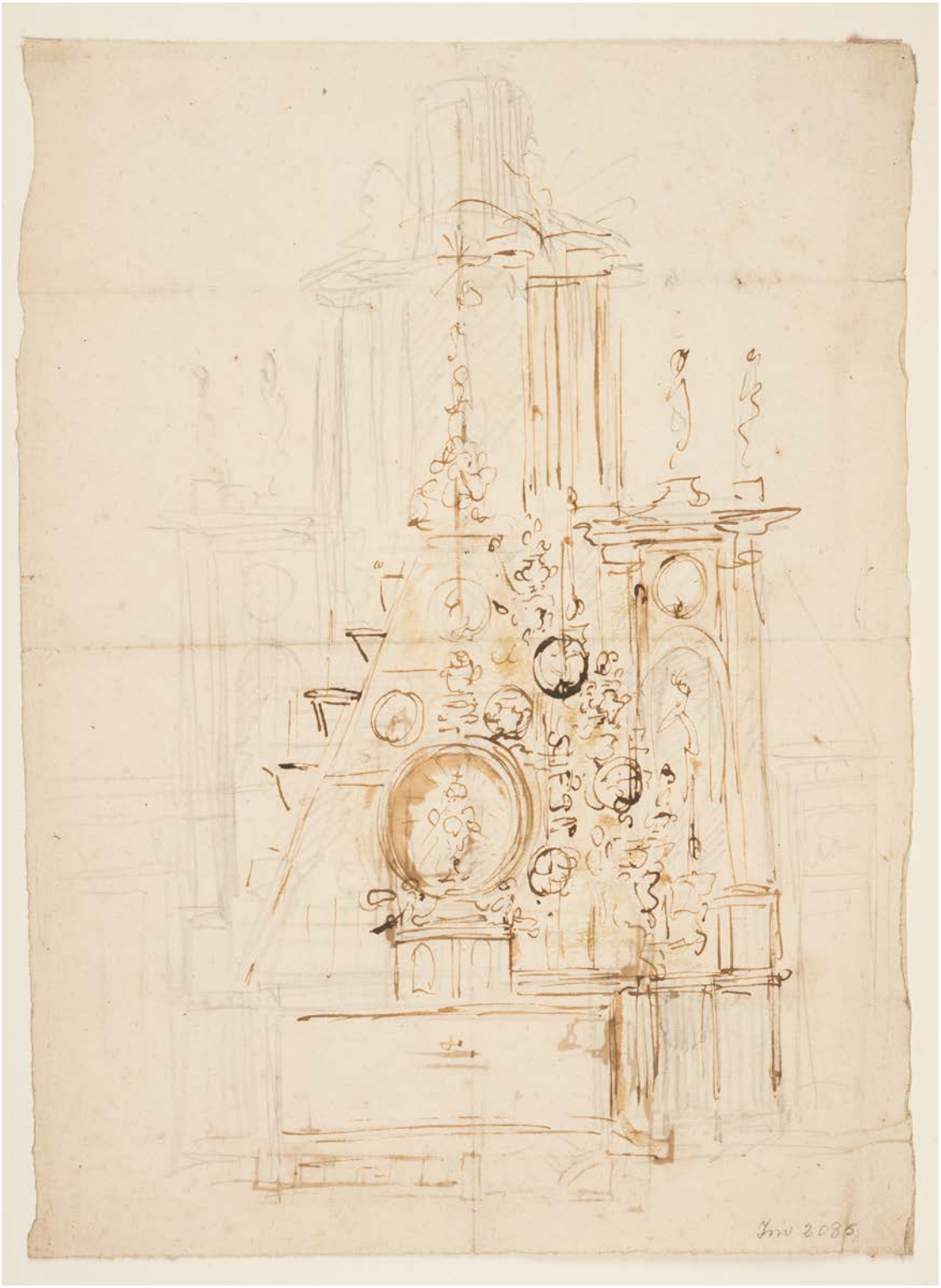


*Fig. 14. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for Temporary Altar, drawing on paper, 313 x 232 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02085 | A.63.36.a. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 15. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for Temporary Altar, drawing on paper, 350 mm x 244 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.02086 | D.19.1. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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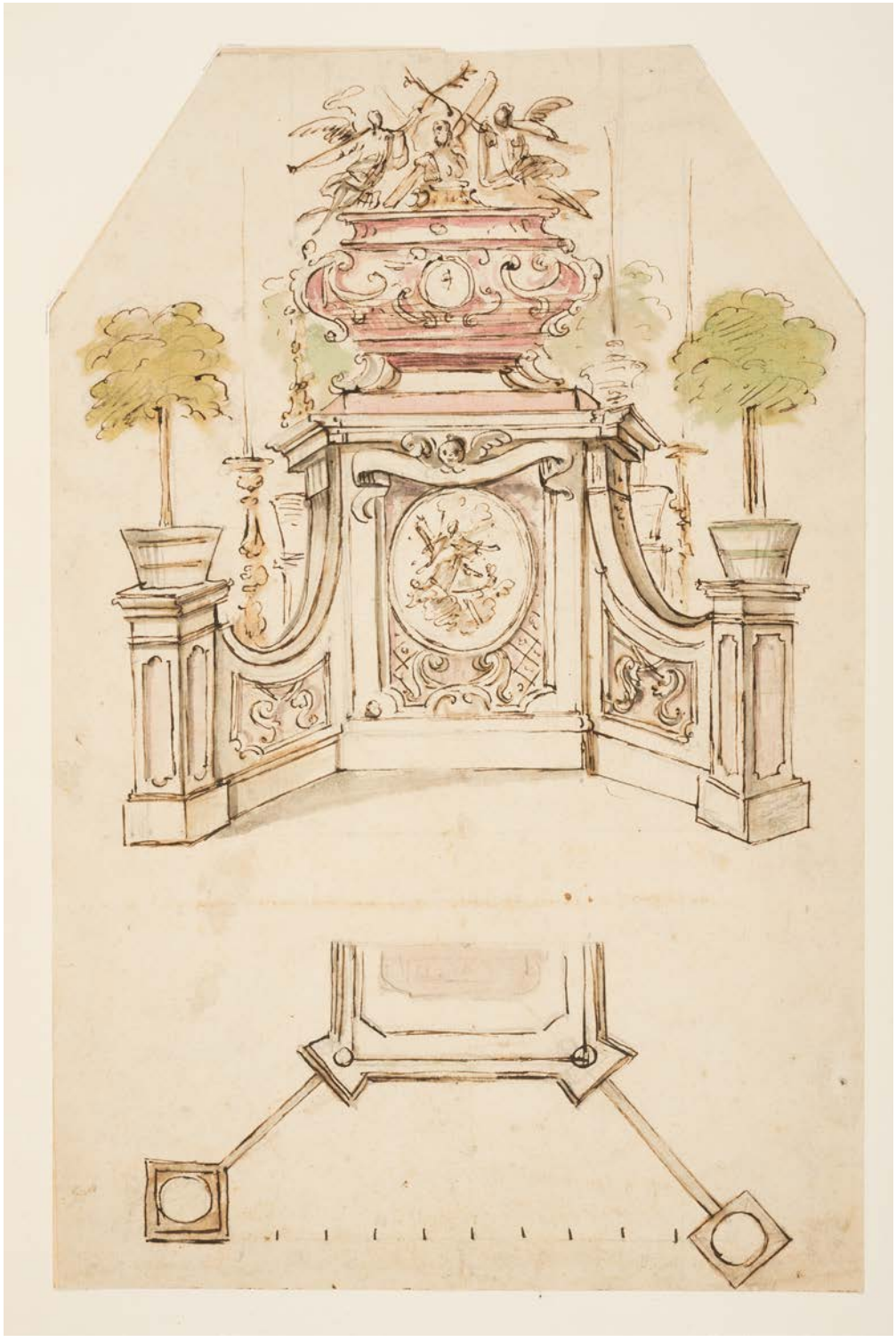

*Fig. 16. Hendrik Frans Verbruggen, Design for Temporary Altar with a Reliquary, drawing and watercolor on paper, 351 x 230 mm, Museum Plantin Moretus, Printroom, inv. PK.OT.01086 | D.32.11. Photo: Museum Plantin Moretus.*

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*Fig. 17. Anonymous, High Altar of the Church of St. Anne, Itterbeek, 18th C. Photo: KIK-IRPA A042630.*

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*Fig. 18. Artus II Quellinus, Lodewijk Willemssens, Willem Kerrickx and Norbert Herry, High Altar of the Church of St. James, Antwerp, 1685. Photo: KIK-IRPA B032169.*

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*Fig. 19. Anonymous, High Altar of the Church of St. Peter in Chains, Erondegem, 18th C. Photo: KIK-IRPA A066153.*

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