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The Changing Perception of the Five Senses

Abstract

This article examines the changing approach towards the representation of the senses in 17th-century Flemish painting. These changes are related to the cultural politics and courtly culture of the Spanish sovereigns of the Southern Netherlands, the Archdukes Albert and Isabella. The 1617–18 painting-series of the *Five Senses* by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens as well as the pendant paintings on the subject are analyzed in relation to the iconography of the five senses, and in regard to Flemish genre themes. In this context, the excess of objects, paintings, scientific instruments, animals, and plants in the *Five Senses* are read as an expansion of the iconography of the senses as well as a reference to the courtly material culture of the Archdukes. Framing the senses as part of a cultural web of artifacts, Brueghel and Rubens refer both to elite lived experience and traditional iconography. The article examines the continuity between the iconography of the senses from 1600 onwards, as developed by Georg Pencz, Frans Floris, and Maerten de Vos, and the representation of the senses in the series. In addition, the article shows how certain elements in the paintings are influenced by genre paintings of the courtly company and collector's cabinet, by Frans Francken, Lucas van Valckenborch and Louis de Caullery. Through the synthesis of these two traditions the subject of the five senses is reinvented in a courtly context.

Keywords: Jan Brueghel the Elder, Peter Paul Rubens, Flanders, 17th century, five senses, courtly company, collector's cabinet, archdukes, early-modern

In 1617 the Antwerp based artists Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens worked on a series of the five senses. The series was signed by Jan Brueghel the Elder, who was also responsible for the design; Rubens painted the figures in each of the paintings.¹ A few years after this series, the two collaborated again, along with ten

¹ It is unclear whether the series was commissioned by the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, or another patron. For the different theories on the subject see J. Müller Hofstede, "‘Non Saturatur Oculus Visu’ – Zur ‘Allegorie des Gesichts von Peter Paul Rubens und Jan Brueghel d. Ä.’",

other Antwerp masters, to create the pendant paintings of *Sight and Smell* and *Taste, Hearing and Touch*, which were commissioned by the Archdukes of the Netherlands, Albert and Isabella.

Both series of the senses show personifications of Sight, Smell, Touch, Taste and Hearing, portrayed in courtly settings, surrounded by paintings, sculptures, luxury objects of different sorts, as well as symbolic animals. Relying on the Flemish iconography of the senses, on the one hand, and on new genre subjects which developed at the time, on the other, the paintings show an appreciation of courtly life, and of the peaceful times that were achieved during the reign of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella.

Flanders, the “Spanish Netherlands”, knew times of prosperity alongside political instability and conflict. Between 1550 and 1584 Antwerp was an economic center of trade and scientific development.² With the Sack of Antwerp in 1576, its prominent role began to decline, and finally came to an end in 1584–85 with its fall to Spanish rule.³ From then on, The Spanish crown appointed a governor to rule over the Flemish territories. In 1599 the Archduke of Austria, Albert, and his wife, Isabella Clara Eugenia, the daughter of Philip II, were made sovereigns of Flanders. They aspired to rebuild Flanders after many years of wars, allocating funds towards the replacement of churches and altarpieces destroyed or damaged during the preceding years of war and iconoclasm. They also participated in common festivities, weddings and celebrations, promoting a vision of unity and prosperity.⁴ In addition, the signing of the Twelve Years Truce in 1609 between the Hapsburg rulers of Spain and Southern Netherlands, and the Northern provinces, brought about renewed hopes for financial and cultural flourishing during the time of peace. In this context,

in: *Wort und Bild in der niederländischen Kunst und Literatur des 16. Und 17. Jh.*, eds. H. Bekeman, J. Müller Hofstede, Erfstadt, 1984, pp. 243–245; K. Ertz, *Jan Brueghel der Ältere (1568–1625). Die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog*, Köln, 1979, pp. 336–337; A. T. Woollett, A. van Suchtelen, *Rubens and Brueghel: A Working Friendship*, Los Angeles, 2006, p. 94.

- 2 Regarding luxury trade see A. K. L. Thijs, “De Antwerpse luxenijverheid: winstbejag en kunstzin”, in: *Antwerpen. Verhaal van een metropool*, ed. J. van der Stock, Ghent, 1993. On the growing middle-class clientele see B. Timmermans, “The Elite as Collectors and Middlemen in the Antwerp Art World of the Seventeenth Century”, in: *Munuscula Amicorum*, ed. K. van der Stighelen, Turnhout, 2006, vol. 2, pp. 343–362. Regarding the scientific advancement see G. Vanpaemel, “Science for Sale: The Metropolitan Stimulus for Scientific Achievements in Sixteenth-century Antwerp”, in: *Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe*, ed. P. O’Brien, Cambridge, 2001, p. 292.
- 3 In 1575 the Spanish Crown declared bankruptcy and was unable to pay the Spanish soldiers in Flanders. The soldiers consequently sacked Antwerp, killing citizens and destroying parts of the city. This is described in a report by the Council of State, see J. Cowans ed., *Early Modern Spain. A Documentary History*, Philadelphia, 2003, pp. 110–111; For Spain’s battles in the Netherlands and Flanders see G. Parker, *Spain and the Netherlands*, Glasgow, 1979, pp. 44–63.
- 4 J. I. Israel, *Conflicts of Empires. Spain, the Low Countries and the Struggle for World Supremacy 1585–1713*, London, 1997, pp. 7–12. All over Europe, peace allowed for expenditure previously used for military aims, to be spent on courtly banquets, festivities, clothing, and food, see J. H. Elliott, *Spain, Europe and the Wider World 1500–1800*, New Haven, 2009, pp. 264–265.

Albert and Isabella practiced cultural politics, in which peace and prosperity were seen as an ideal goal and the arts were considered a useful tool that helped to demonstrate the power and flourishing of the Southern Netherlands.⁵

The paintings of the five senses are very much an outcome of this vision, visually expressing the prosperity of Flanders under a peaceful reign. In what follows I will analyze the paintings of the five senses in relation to the iconography of the subject, on the one hand, and in regard to the arising genre themes, on the other. This analysis will highlight the changing approach towards the senses in 17th century Flanders, as an outcome of the Archdukes' cultural politics and courtly culture.⁶

The *Sense of Sight* shows a nude personification of the sense of sight sitting beside a table (Fig. 1). She is looking at a painting of Christ healing the blind man (John 9:1–7), held up by a winged putto. She gestures towards the painting, and leans her head on her other arm, contemplating it. Jewelry made of precious stones, as well as medals and a magnifying glass are laid out on the table before her. The room she is sitting in is a collector's cabinet, a *Kunstkamer*. It is full of magnificent objects: paintings are hung on the walls, propped up on stands and on each other; antique busts of famous rulers such as Alexander the Great and Augustus stand on shelves in the rear of the room; replicas of statues by Michelangelo stand above the busts; optical instruments such as the telescope, lay scattered at the personification's feet, along with measuring instruments, tapestries, and more. The room is so full it is hard to account for all that is in it. Through an arched doorway we see a terrace with a fountain, and beyond that the Archdukes' residence on the Coudenberg, the palace from which the sovereigns of Flanders ruled since the 11th century.⁷

The fullness and variety of objects is characteristic of the five paintings in the series. In *Sense of Hearing* the nude female personification is busy playing the lute and singing (Fig. 2). She is accompanied by the putto, as in the *Sense of Sight*, and her symbolic animal, the stag. In the left foreground a variety of musical instruments and notes can be seen, while on the right there are clocks, identified with hearing

5 J. H. Elliott, op. cit., pp. 269–270.

6 The tradition of the five senses in the Christian West is a long one, spanning from early Christianity and into the modern age. While the early Church fathers and medieval theologians viewed the senses in a moralizing light, as a gateway to sin, changes to this approach can be traced back to the beginning of the 16th century. The Flemish visual tradition of the senses referred to throughout this article is already influenced by this change of appreciation, and thus views the senses in a more positive light. For the history of the senses and the medieval tradition see C. Nordenfalk, "The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1985, 48, pp. 1–22. For the history of the senses in the Flemish Renaissance see C. Nordenfalk, "The Five Senses in Flemish Art before 1600", in: *Netherlandish Mannerism: Papers Given at a Symposium in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm, Sept. 21–22, 1984*, ed. G. Cavalli-Björkman, Stockholm, 1985, pp. 135–154.

7 A. T. Woollett, A. van Suchtelen, op. cit., p. 96.



Fig. 1. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, *The Sense of Sight*, 1617, oil on panel, 64.7x109.5 cm, Prado, Madrid. Photo: Public Domain



Fig. 2. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, *The Sense of Hearing*, 1617–1618, oil on panel, 64x109.5 cm, Prado, Madrid. Photo: Public Domain

due to the sounds they make. To the left of the triple-arched opening hangs a painting of the *Concert of the Muses*,⁸ which stood as an antithesis to war.⁹ In the left rear room, a company of men and women play music. The opening in the center shows a far-reaching landscape with the castle of Mariemoont, the summer castle of the Archdukes.¹⁰

The *Sense of Smell* (1617–1618, Prado, Madrid) shows the female personification and her putto in a garden full of beautiful flowers. The *Sense of Taste* shows the personification, dressed, by a laden table. A satyr pours wine into her glass (Fig. 3). In the *Sense of Touch* (1618, Prado, Madrid) the personification kisses the putto beside her. The armor on the left and the paintings on the right allude to the collection of the Archdukes. The forge in the left background shows the making of armor.



Fig. 3. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, *The Sense of Taste*, 1618, oil on panel, 64x109 cm, Prado, Madrid. Photo: Public Domain

⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

⁹ In a painting of *Apollo and the Muses* by Maerten de Vos, one of the muses plays a virginal with a battle scene on it. On the side of the virginal are the words “Musae Loco Belli”, meaning the muses stand instead of war, see A. P. de Mirimonde, “Les Concerts des Muses chez les Maitres du Nord”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1964, 63, pp. 144–145 and Fig. 14. The production of art was perceived as an inclination towards peace, rather than war. Such a view was clearly stated by Karel van Mander who said that despite Mars’s constant threat and presence in the Netherlands, so many great men are still to be found applying themselves to the culture of the peaceful art of painting, see K. van Mander, *Het Schilderboek*, (Facsimile from the first edition, Haarlem, 1604), Utrecht, 1969, 299v.

¹⁰ A. T. Woollett, A. van Suchtelen, op.cit., pp. 96–97.

Associating the senses with courtly life and values of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, these paintings are ground-breaking. However, when examined closely, in regard to the visual history of the senses, it becomes clear that many elements have been adopted and developed from earlier iconography of the subject.

The use of nude female figures for the personification of the senses, and their accompaniment by symbolic animals, stems from the first prints dedicated to the five senses, by the German artist Georg Pencz.¹¹ In Pencz's engravings the senses sit in front of an opaque window, on which the Latin name of the sense is written. Thus, for example, Sight is a female personification looking up to the heavens, symbolized as the sun, stars, and moon. She is accompanied by a lynx, an animal which can see well at night (Fig. 4).¹² In *Tactus* (*Touch*, 1500–1550, Metropolitan Museum, New York) the personification sits in front of the window on which the Latin word *Tactus* is written. She is busy with the loom, a handicraft related to touch since it is done with the hands. The symbolic animal, the spider, is seen in the left corner, weaving its web, which is compared to the work done by the personification.

The 16th century prints by Pencz were a novelty at the time, associating the senses with positive symbols contrary to a long medieval tradition associating them with sin. There was no formal formula for this association, rather the five senses were conceived as stemming from lust, or from the Seven Deadly sins, and condemned as sinful.¹³ Pencz's novelty was thus not only in the portrayal of the senses as a subject in its own right, but also in the composition he proposed, which showed nude female personifications accompanied by symbolic animals.

These modest beginnings of the theme were developed in 16th century Antwerp by artists who added noble characteristics to the female allegories and their symbolic attendants and scenery. First among the Antwerp artists to do this was Frans Floris, who ennobled the senses, and made them to look like goddesses. In this first depiction of the subject in the Antwerp School, known from a print after his design, Floris added elements associating the senses with abundance and prosperity. In *Sense of Sight* the personification sits next to a column, peering into a mirror (1561, Harvard Museum). The blaring sun in the background testifies to

11 One of the earliest representations of the allegorical figure of the senses as a female is found in the medieval tapestry *Lady with the Unicorn* from 1500, today in the Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris. In this tapestry the senses are related to the notion of love and pleasure, paving the way towards a more positive depiction of the senses. Another early positive example of the female allegorical figures of the senses is found in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* from 1499. An additional prominent example showing the personifications of the five senses as women is found in Jodocus Badius's *Stultiferae naves*, published as a supplement to Sebastian Brant's *Narren-Scheyff* of 1494. However, as opposed to the former two examples, Badius presents the senses as sinful, thus adhering to a traditional medieval view. The earliest examples relating the senses to five different animals are found in an early Gothic encyclopedia by Thomas de Cantimpré, *Liber de naturis rerum*, and following that in the *Bestiaire d'amours* of Richard de Fournival. Pencz was the first artist to unite these two representations, see C. Nordenfalk, "The Five Senses...", pp. 1–4, 7–15.

12 Ibid., p. 19.

13 Ibid., pp. 1–22 for this history.



Fig. 4. Georg Pencz, *Visus (Sight)*, 1544, engraving, 78x51 mm, British Museum, London. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum

the truthfulness of vision. Also the eagle, the mythological attribute of Jupiter, shows the nobility of the sight, and replaces Pencz's lynx. While a woman peering into a mirror was previously associated with the sin of vanity (*vanitas*), here it is an instrument aiding the senses to better view the world. Another addition by Floris is the perspectival landscape, showing a castle far out in the distant left side of the engraving. Thus, the sense of sight is characterized as a noble lady, examining herself in broad daylight, with the Jovial eagle and an aristocratic castle in the background. The column, seen at half-length, was commonly used in portraits of nobility, thus adding another touch of esteem to the depiction of the sense of sight. The caption accompanying the engraving is taken from Juan Luis Vives's *De anima et vita* (Of the Soul and Life), and is quite literal. It reads: "The outer organs of Sight are the eyes, the inner ones are two nerves leading from the brain to the eyes".¹⁴

In a similar manner Floris's *Sense of Touch* sits in front of a sea landscape (Fig. 5). While the symbolic spider, known from Pencz, is seen in the upper left corner, Floris gives more prominence to the bird, perched on the personification's left hand, which is seen biting her finger. The bite draws attention to the hand, associated with the sense of touch, but also suggests pain. Relying on medieval iconography in which a bird perched on a hand was symbolic of sexual relations, Floris relates touch to

¹⁴ Translated by C. Nordenfalk, C. Nordenfalk, "The Five Senses...", p. 138.



Fig. 5. Cornelis Cort after Frans Floris, *Tactus* (Touch), 1561, engraving, 20.8x27 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Robert Bradford Wheaton and Barbara Ketcham Wheaton in honour of Mrs. Arthur K. Solomon, Cambridge, MA. Photo: Harvard Art Museums

pain and love.¹⁵ Alongside the bird and the spider, Floris also adds the tortoise, relating to the sea landscape in the background, and symbolizing the love of a faithful wife.¹⁶ While Pencz had used only one symbolic animal and action, Floris multiplied the number of attributes, enriching the symbolic meaning of his designs.

The augmentation of objects and symbolic attributes related to the senses can be seen in relation to the other senses as well. Whereas Pencz's *Sense of Hearing* sat with a lute hanging on the wall in back of her, and only three other musical instruments on the ground in front of her,¹⁷ Floris's personification sits amidst ten musical instruments. She is busy tuning her lute, while leaning on a drum (1561, Harvard Museum). An organ stands behind her, while on the ground there are a variety of string and wind instruments. The boar, standing beside *Hearing* in Pencz's print, has been replaced by the stag, showing, again, Floris's aim to ennoble the depiction

¹⁵ Ibid. For the symbolism of the bird perched on a hand see E. de Jongh, "Erotica en vogelperspectief", *Simiolus*, 1968–69, 3, p. 26.

¹⁶ C. Nordenfalk, "The Five Senses...", p. 137.

¹⁷ For Pencz's engraving see *ibid.*, plate 8b.

of the senses.¹⁸ The setting in which the senses pose has also changed: as opposed to Pencz's figure which sits in front of an opaque window, Floris's figure sits in a landscape stretching into the distance.

In the later design of *Sense of Taste* by the Flemish artist Maerten de Vos, engraved by Raphael Sadeler I, the scene is even more elaborate (Fig. 6). While Pencz had previously shown Taste eating alongside a nibbling monkey, De Vos's print shows the personification sitting beside a basket of fruit, to the left is a wine jug and a wine cup, and to the right is another basket of fruit, with a nibbling monkey next to it. In back of the figure, on the left, there is a field of wheat, and an apple tree. On the right is an orchard, drawn in perspective, in which a labourer climbs up a ladder to pick the fruit. While Floris had expanded on Pencz's design, showing two baskets of fruit and a wine cup and adding the landscape, De Vos has added the wine jug, and the comparison of "naturally" growing plants – such as the wheat and apples on the left, and the artificially planned orchard on the right.



Fig. 6. Raphael Sadeler after Maerten de Vos, *Taste*, 1600, engraving, 101x133 millimeters, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 136–137.

In another series of the senses by De Vos, engraved by Peter Cool, he adds a lavish background to each, paving the way for the Brueghel and Rubens compositions. Moreover, the scenes in the background are taken from the Old and New Testaments.¹⁹ Thus, the religious exemplum is added to the landscapes developed by Floris and the earlier designs by De Vos.

In Brueghel and Rubens's allegories of the senses the artists have multiplied the number of objects associated with each sense, expanding even more the setting in which they are to be contemplated. Not only do the paintings refer to the symbolic animals, the landscape, and the biblical sources, but they also allude to the abundance of objects usually found in princely collections. These objects expand the depiction of the senses. In *Sense of Sight* the personification sits in front of a painting showing *Christ Curing the Blind Man* (John 9: 1–7; Mark 10:46–52).²⁰ While De Vos had introduced the New Testament scene into the iconography of sight, he had kept it in the background. Here, Brueghel foregrounds the religious example of sight, but changes its placement and context: it is no longer shown in the background, and it is represented in a painting. The artists create a comparison between Sight's figure and that of Christ as they are both wearing blue mantles.²¹ In the right background, diagonally positioned to the painting she is looking at, we see a version of the *Blind Leading the Blind*, a known composition by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the father of Jan Brueghel, which exemplifies the dire outcome of shutting one's eyes. The subject was based on Matthew 15:14 "And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the pit," but was also part of Netherlandish lore.²² The positive portrayal of sight, as by example of Christ's miracle, is thus highlighted by the negative depiction of not-seeing shown in the painting behind.²³ Both these examples are given through paintings, drawing attention to its varied subject matter, and making the viewer question whether what he is seeing is a good or a bad example. While the abundance of objects in *Sense of Sight* has been interpreted as a reflection of anxiety over the new forms of knowledge and science,²⁴ it seems that the personification's attention to the positive exemplum of the sense of sight, through the image of Christ, highlights the valuation of the sense, in this context.

19 Ibid., pp. 142–143.

20 This scene was first added to the sense of sight by Maerten de Vos, see H. Kauffmann, "Die Fünfsinne in der Niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts", in: *Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Dagobert Frey*, Wrocław, 1943, p. 137; J. Müller Hofstede, op. cit., p. 248.

21 Ibid., p. 247.

22 On Bruegel the Elder's painting and its precedents see W. Gibson, *Figures of Speech. Picturing Proverbs in Renaissance Netherlands*, Berkeley, 2010, pp. 88–90.

23 Müller Hofstede has interpreted this as a positioning of faith, seen in the *Christ healing the blind man*, and blindness, in *Blind leading the blind*. In this light the whole painting is interpreted as good and bad examples of seeing. J. Müller Hofstede, op. cit., p. 249.

24 This interpretation was first offered by Müller Hofstede, who recognized the posture of Sight as an expression of melancholy, based on Dürer's known print of the subject, see *ibid.*, p. 247; O. Gal, R. Chen-Morris, *Baroque Science*, Chicago, 2013, pp. 2–4.

The antique busts on the wall in the center of the composition, are juxtaposed with the contemporary painting of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, seen on the left of the allegory, thus showing past and present portrayal of rulers. In the right foreground, Rubens's painting *Bacchanal* is propped up against a painting of the Madonna and Child in a garland of flowers, by Brueghel. The *Bacchanal*, which was part of the Archduke's collection,²⁵ is diagonally positioned to the painting above the arched doorway, showing Bacchus, Venus, and Ceres, assumed to be after Titian.²⁶ The comparison raises questions of precedence and influence, again challenging the viewer to look well and question what he sees.

Brueghel's *Madonna and Child in a Garland of Flowers*, a novel genre, is juxtaposed with the real flowers in a blue vase, before the arched doorway on the left, referring to the contest between art and nature, in which art wins.²⁷ A terrestrial globe in the mid-right ground is negated with an astrolabe, showing the heavenly spheres, standing on the cupboard on the left, thus alluding to vision of the earthly and heavenly. The instruments for such vision are laid out on the ground at the personification's feet. These different comparisons define "seeing" as varied and changing.

The same can be said of the other paintings in the series, though the parallels drawn are fewer. In *The Sense of Taste* the two paintings in the left background show the *Wedding at Cana*, on the right, and the *Fat Kitchen*, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, on the left. While the *Wedding at Cana* shows Christ's miraculous changing of water into wine, alluding to the traditional association of the sense of taste with wine,²⁸ the *Fat Kitchen* is an expression of gluttony.²⁹ The personification of Taste is purposely placed under the figure of Christ in the *Wedding at Cana*, thus visually associating the courtly taste depicted with Christ's miracle.

Another comparison is made between the *Wedding at Cana*, and the painting of *Fruit Garland with Offering to Ceres* by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Hendrik van Balen, leaning on the wall in the left foreground. While the former relies on the New Testament, the latter relies on Pagan mythology. Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture and fertility, symbolically stands for the fruit of the earth, thus alluding to taste.³⁰ The still life of hunted game and birds in the foreground is positioned in comparison

25 M. Díaz Padrón, M. Royo-Villanova, *David Teniers, Jan Brueghel y los Gabinetes de Pinturas*, Madrid, 1992, p. 124.

26 Díaz Padrón and Royo-Villanova identify the painting as *Venus and Psyche* by Titian. Ibid., p. 117. However, it is more likely that the subject is *Bacchus, Venus and Ceres*, known from a copy after Titian in the Munich Alte Pinakothek.

27 B. Welzel, "Wettstreit zwischen Kunst und Natur. Die Blumenstilleben von Jan Brueghel d. Ä. als Triumph des Bildes", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2002, 65, no. 2, p. 332. Welzel explains that in the rivalry between art and nature, art always wins.

28 A wine cup appears in all the engravings of taste by Floris and De Vos.

29 The *Fat Kitchen* is a pendant piece to the *Thin Kitchen*, both designed by Bruegel. For these engravings see M. Sellink, *Bruegel. The Complete Paintings, Drawing and Prints*, Ghent, 2007, cat. nos. 121–122.

30 A. T. Woollett, A. van Suchtelen, op. cit., cat. no. 21

to the cooked, baked, and stylized food on the table. The natural source of the food is compared to the artisanal preparation of it. Moreover, the two forms of still life refer to genre paintings of the time: the pile of hunted game in the foreground reminds the viewer of paintings by Frans Snyders, and of the produce presented in the market scene paintings by Joachim Bueckelaer and Pieter Aertsen. The food on the table is reminiscent of the still life paintings of meals, a genre developed in the Netherlands. As in *Sense of Sight*, the many connotations alluded to in *Sense of Taste*, show it to be a varied and cultured subject.

Sense of Touch is set in an armory, and some of the pieces of armor on the left have been recognized as belonging to the princely collection of the Archdukes.³¹ The allusion to pain, previously represented by a bird biting the personification's finger, is here represented through the many pieces of armor, recalling the pains of war and conflict. Some of the paintings hanging on the right reference previous historic and religious wars and moments of pain, such as the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, which refers to an altarpiece in the Escorial collection, and *The Defeat of Sennacherib*, above it, which was in the Archducal collection.³² Above this, the largest painting on the wall, shows a *Last Judgment*, emphasizing the tortures of the damned, on the right, as opposed to the quiet of the blessed. Different kinds of earthly tortures are referenced by the many medical instruments set out on the table to the right, reminding one of the pains of this life as opposed to those of the afterlife, shown in the painting above. However, touch, in this case, is not conceived only as associated with pain. Brueghel adds new, positive meanings to the portrayal of the sense. The figure of touch is caught at the moment of kissing the putto beside her, thus reviving the medieval relation between touch and love relations.³³ However, there is no condemnation in this association, contrary to medieval tradition. The allegorical figure of touch sits below a painting of the *Flagellation of Christ*, which, again, creates a comparison between Christ and the personification of Touch, similarly to that drawn between the personification of Sight and Christ healing the blind man, discussed above.

The series thus positions the senses as part of a complex web of cultural artifacts. The inherence of this web to the elite experience can be learned from other paintings of courtly companies and gallery cabinets, which were two popular genre subjects in Flanders at the time.

In *Banquet in the House of Nicolaas Rockox* by Frans Francken the Younger we see an interior with the collection of the many times mayor of Antwerp, Rockox (Fig. 7). In a similar manner to *Sense of Sight* we see a room hung with paintings, antique busts on the wall to the left, and a table in the left foreground with various precious sculptures and curiosities. Some of the paintings have been identified as paintings which were part of Rockox's collection, such as the large *Samson and*

31 B. Welzel, "Armoury and Archducal Image: The Sense of Touch from the Five Senses of Jan Brueghel and Peter Rubens", in: *Albert and Isabella*, eds. W. Thomas, L. Duerloo, Turnhout, 1998, pp. 99–106.

32 Ibid., p. 103.

33 Examples of this are found in Badius's illustrations to the *Ship of Fools*, which depicts the senses as sinful, see Nordenfalk, "The Five Senses...", pp. 13–15.



Fig. 7. Frans Francken the Younger, *Banquet in the House of Nicolaas Rockox*, 1630–1635, oil on panel, 62.3x96.7 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo: BPK, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen

Delilah over the fireplace, or the *Doubting Thomas*, partially seen through the back door, both painted by Rubens. However, this interior of a collector's home is also an allegory of the five senses. The company seated around the table to the left is dining and drinking, showing the sense of taste. The figures by the fireplace demonstrate the sense of touch, referring to the threat of pain. To the right of the fireplace two men play musical instruments, showing the sense of hearing, while the woman seated between them smells a flower. The only sense not demonstrated is the sense of sight, which, I would propose, is manifest by the viewer him/herself, looking at the painting.³⁴

Such a synthesis of the collector's cabinet genre with the five senses iconography is also seen in another painting by Francken the Younger, *Two Connoisseurs Eating in a Gallery* (Private Collection, Brussels).³⁵ The front room of the gallery shows a variety of paintings, sculptures and luxury objects. In the room to the right, two men are seated at a laden table. One of them holds up a panel and points to it, while the other looks at it over the table. The parallel between the appreciation

34 H. Vlieghe, *Flemish Art and Architecture 1585–1700*, New Haven, 1998, p. 203. According to Vlieghe the senses are shown as positive and negative. Vlieghe does not mention the missing sense of sight.

35 U. Härting, *Frans Francken der Jüngere (1581–1642): die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog*, Freren, 1989, no. 646.

of food and the appreciation of art is drawn by the positioning of the table in the gallery, and by the actions of the two men. While sitting beside the table, the one holds a panel and points to it, while the other leans in to get a closer look.

These men are the contemporary connoisseurs, the *liefhebbers*, who gained a formal status in the St. Luke guild, which traditionally housed painters and artists of other sorts.³⁶ The Dutch historian and painter, Karel van Mander, refers to them in his 1604 *Schilderboeck* as lovers of knowledge, supporters, and promoters of art.³⁷ Thus, their portrayal as eating and drinking while discussing a painted panel cannot be viewed as a condemnation of the pleasures of taste.

This positive conception of the senses as part of the pastime of nobility is clearly seen in another emerging genre of 17th century Flemish painting, the courtly company. In paintings of this genre noble ladies and gentlemen are shown dancing or conversing, with references to sensuality.³⁸

An early example is found by the hands of Lucas van Valckenborch, a follower of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.³⁹ In *Landscape in Spring* a company of nobles is seen on a hilltop overlooking the Brussels Palace of Coudenberg (Fig. 8). This same palace appears in the later *Sense of Sight*, discussed earlier. The social interactions of the noble company on the right refer to the five senses. The couple walking on the grass are holding hands, exemplifying the sense of touch. The ladies sitting on the ground on the right are wreathing flowers, as common for the sense of smell. In the left background a cloth is set with plates and food, showing the sense of taste. Behind that, music is played by a band of four men, as typical for the sense of hearing. In the right background, a couple of peasants behind the tree watches the scene, while a group of nobles converses and watches the happenings as well, expressing the sense of sight. The view on the left of the painting shows the noble residence of the Flemish sovereigns, as well as many courtly pastimes, such as walking in a planned garden, right below, or courting, seen in the gentleman kissing the hand of woman on the left, at the entrance to the palace grounds.

In Louis de Caullery's *Five Senses* such a courtly company also references the allegory of the five senses (Fig. 9). In the right background a group sits by the table, exemplifying the sense of taste. A couple sitting in the left background, by the bed,

36 Z. Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp 1550–1700*, New Jersey, 1987, p. 51. On the diverse identities of the *Liefhebbers* see M. Jan Bok, "Art-Lovers and their Paintings", in: *Dawn of the Golden Age*, ed. G. Luijten, Amsterdam, 1993, pp. 136–166.

37 Van Mander refers to the *Liefhebbers* as having knowledge: "Hier is te sien, in wat weerde de Schilder-const by den Ouden, oft by desen haren Liefhebber is gheweest". Van Mander, *Het Schilderboek*, 76r. Van Mander refers to the *Liefhebbers* as promoters of art, much like patrons: "Alsoo men bevindt, dat de Schilder-const van langer handt is opgheclommen tot der volcomenheyt, opghebeurt en verheven door vlijtighe Liefhebbers en oeffenaers der selver.", K. van Mander, op. cit., 105r. The *Liefhebber* was connected to a culture of knowledge and love of wisdom, see L. Prosperetti, *Landscape and Philosophy in the Art of Jan Brueghel the Elder*, England, 2009, pp. 29–33.

38 H. Vlieghe, op. cit., pp. 150–151.

39 Ibid., p. 175.



Fig. 8. Lucas van Valckenborch, *Landscape in Spring*, 1587, oil on canvas, 116x198 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: KHM



Fig. 9. Louis de Caullery, *The Five Senses*, 1620, oil on panel, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Cambrai. Photo: Public Domain

is looking into a mirror the woman holds, as in the first depiction of the sense of sight by Pencz. The foreground shows the sense of smell, touch and hearing, exemplified by a woman offering a flower to her beloved's nose, an embracing couple, and a man playing a lute. In the center background, on the cupboard, is a painting of Venus, who seems to preside over the scene. Thus, the five senses are clearly linked to love and courtship in a courtly setting.

That the pleasures of the senses were viewed positively is understood from their incorporation into depictions of the Archdukes themselves. In the *Ball at the Court of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella* by Frans Francken the Younger and Paul Vredeman de Vries, the courtly company is gathered for a dance (Fig. 10). Albert and Isabella sit on a raised stage, under a canopy, in the left side of the painting. They are watching a noble couple dance. On the right side, on a balcony, is a company dining. Thus, allusion to the senses of taste, hearing and touch is made as part of the festive moment hosted by the Archdukes. This moment of festivity is symbolic of the peaceful time enjoyed by the Flemish territories under the Archdukes.⁴⁰

The Archdukes' involvement in the elevation of the senses to a courtly context is also expressed in two pendant paintings on the subject commissioned by them. These two paintings, painted by twelve different masters, were lost, and are known



Fig. 10. Frans Francken the Younger and Paul Vredeman de Vries, *A Ball at the Court of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella*, 1610, oil on panel, 68.6x113.3 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photo: Mauritshuis, The Hague

40 C. Schumann, "Court, City and Countryside: Jan Brueghel's Peasant Weddings as Images of Social Unity under Archducal Sovereignty", in: *Albert and Isabella*, eds. W. Thomas, L. Duerloo, Turnhout, 1998, p. 151.

through Brueghel's copies of the originals.⁴¹ In *Taste, Hearing and Touch* the personifications are seated by a table: Taste, on the right, holds a glass of wine and picks up an oyster from the plate before her, Hearing plays the lute, and Touch holds a mink (Fig. 11). Musical instruments lay around on the floor and lean against the furniture on the left part of the painting, alluding to hearing. The sense of touch is referred to through the painting of the Dentist, above the personification of Touch. The laden table, along with the still life of birds, game, and fruit allude to the sense of taste, as do the paintings of the *Wedding at Cana* on the right and *The Torments of the Rich Man* on the left, above the arched doorway.⁴² The senses form a courtly company, in the manner of van Valckenborch and De Caullery, and are served by the boys on the right.



Fig. 11. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Taste, Hearing and Touch*, 1620, oil on canvas, 176x264 cm, Prado, Madrid. Photo: Prado Museum

In *Sight and Smell* the personification of Sight is seated at the table looking into a mirror, as was depicted by Floris and De Vos (Fig. 12). Her symbolic animal is the lynx, which first appeared in Pencz's rendition of the sense of

41 These works were destroyed by a fire at Coudenberg palace in 1731 and are known through Jan Brueghel's replicas. A. T. Woollett, A. van Suchtelen, op. cit., pp. 94–96; W. Thomas, L. Duerloo, eds., *Albert and Isabella*, Turnhout, 1998, cat. no. 60.

42 M. Diaz Padrón, M. Royo-Villanova, op. cit., p. 173. The scene depicts the torments of the rich man who feasted sumptuously every day, while Lazarus begged for the crumbs from his table, as told in Luke 16: 19–25.



Fig. 12. Jan Brueghel the Elder, Hendrick van Balen and Frans Francken the Younger, *Sight and Smell*, 1620, oil on canvas, 176x264 cm, Prado, Madrid. Photo: Prado, Madrid

sight, seen in the left corner of the room. The figure of Smell is accompanied by a putto who hands her flowers, and by the dog. The New Testament references, first introduced by De Vos, are also incorporated, with Christ healing the blind man on the upper right of the painting, just below a Frans Snyders still life, and Mary Magdalene anointing Christ's feet, symbolic of the sense of smell, on the left side, behind the column. However, alongside the New Testament scenes, clearly alluding to the positive examples of the senses of sight and smell, there are no Old Testament scenes, as in De Vos's engravings. Rather, the Old Testament scenes have been replaced by mythological scenes by Rubens. Rubens's *Judgment of Paris* appears to the side of Christ healing the blind man, expressing a positive evaluation of the sense of sight and its use. On the left of the painting, alongside *Mary Magdalene Anointing the Feet of Christ* is a painting of *Flora*, in which a bare-breasted female holds a vase of flowers.⁴³ The emphasis is thus shifted from the comparison of the good and bad examples of the senses, to a display of their positive uses.

To conclude, the two series of the five senses synthesize the local iconography of the senses, with the genres of the picture gallery and the courtly company. Relying on the tradition of the five senses developed in prints by Pencz, Floris, and De Vos,

⁴³ This may be *Flora*, as can be seen in a number of paintings from the circle of Floris, from the second half of the 16th century. For other similar paintings see Christie's (London, England), 07-07-2006, lot no. 134; Christie's (London, England), 29-10-2010, lot no. 13.

the senses are represented as female personifications, accompanied by a symbolic animal. The addition of a courtly gallery setting as well as a landscape with a princely castle in the background, draws on the Flemish genre paintings by Francken, Van Valckenborch, and De Caullery. Merging these two traditions, Brueghel and his associates reinvented the five senses in a courtly context, in which each sense is experienced through many luxurious objects and provokes contemplation of the different facets of the sense.

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