Barbara A. Kamińska
SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

| Pieter Aertsen's *Seven Works of Mercy* Charity and Salvation in the Age of Reform[1]

"Indeed, you ought to wish, for the sake of your neighbour, that there would come a time when none would need the wealth of the others; for your own sake, you should hope that you would never lack the opportunity of such great profit to yourself, securing eternal blessings in exchange for things liable to varying fortunes and passing fancies."[2] This opinion on poverty voiced by Juan Luis Vives – a Spanish-Dutch humanist, theologian, and pedagogue settled in Bruges – aptly captures the 16th-century conundrum regarding charity: on the one hand, humanists and administrators alike recognized the necessity to reduce poverty through reforming the poor relief system, on the other, the status quo was convenient, as it allowed the wealthy to make up for their sins by giving alms. This dilemma involves the distinction between the perspectives of the two parties: recipients and givers. Among the latter, one would count not only individuals donating to collection boxes and giving coin to beggars, but also members of charitable organizations. One such organization was Amsterdam *Tafel van den Huisarmen* (Table of the Resident Poor, also known as *Huiszittenmeesters*, Masters of the Resident Poor), responsible for supporting those poor who lived in their own dwellings, but could not support their families. It was most likely this organization that commissioned from Pieter Aertsen what turned out to be his last painting – the *Seven Works of Mercy*, now in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (**fig. 1**).[3] The subject matter of the panel

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[1] I presented a shorter version of this paper at the Sixteenth Century Society Conference in Milwaukee, WI, in October 2017. For the expanded version for the purpose of the *Journal*, I took into account the bibliographic and in-text citations suggested by Antoni Ziemba, to whom I would like to give thanks. I would also like to thank Piotr Borusowski for his assistance with the preparation of this essay.

[2] Juan Luis Vives, *On Assistance to the Poor*, transl. Alice Tobriner (Toronto–Buffalo–London, 1999), pp. 49–50. For the first edition of the treatise see Ioannis Lodovici Vivis Valentini, *De subventione pauperum sive de humanis necessitatibus* (Bruges, 1526).

[3] For the provenance of the painting see Hanna Benesz, Maria Kluk, *Early Netherlandish, Dutch, Flemish and Belgian Paintings 1494–1983 in the Collections of the National Museum in Warsaw and the Palace at Nieborów. Complete Illustrated Summary Catalogue* (Warsaw, 2016), vol. 1, pp. 20–21, cat. no. 4. The auctioning of the *Seven Works of Mercy* in Amsterdam in 1716 and 1734, listed in the catalogue, is also mentioned by Nicolaas de Roever among Aertsen's known works. The note for the auction on 6 May 1716 characterizes the panel as "seer konstig" [very artful] and gives the price of 48 guldens. The value of the work dropped significantly over the next two decades, as in 1734 it sold for only 10 guldens. Nicolaas de Roever, "Pieter Aertsz: gezegd Lange Pier, Vermaard Schilder," *Oud Holland*, 7 (1889), p. 22. While the commission by the *Huiszittenmeesters* is highly likely, Hans Buijs has alternatively suggested that the panel can be identified with the anonymous "1 stuck van de 7 wercken van barmhertichs[heden]" [a piece with 7 works of mercy] listed in 1612 in the collection of Claes Rauwaert, son of a notable collector and friend of Pieter Aertsen, Jacob Rauwaert. Jan Piet Filedt Kok, Willy Halsema-Kubes, Wouter Kloek, *Kunst voor de beelden-storm. Noordnederlandse kunst 1525–1580*, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1986 (s'Gravenhage, 1986), p. 408, cat. no. 298. Further on the collection of Jacob Rauwaert see Marion Boers, *De Noord-Nederlandse kunsthandel in de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum, 2012), pp. 77–78. For the inventory record see Gemeentearchief

has been clearly indicated above the arch to the right, where we find the biblical reference: *MAT XXV* (**fig. 2**). However, the painting's composition, orchestrated with Sebastiano Serlio's architecture, is complex and surprising, as Aertsen creates an imaginary urban setting, amidst which he subtly charts a path of deeds whose performance leads to salvation.

In this essay, I focus on three themes which are central to an understanding of Pieter Aertsen's *Seven Works of Mercy*. First, I analyse this painting in the context of 16th-century discourses of charity and attempts at reforming poor relief. Second, I link the panel to the Protestant image debate and the 1566 Iconoclasm, during which many of Aertsen's own altarpieces were destroyed. And third, I explore the ambivalence of Aertsen's use of Serlian architecture. I propose that the architectural background, on the one hand, serves as a compositional device which helps to construct a persuasive argument on the importance of charity, but, on the other hand, can also be understood as a pictorial response to the contemporary iconoclastic threat. The analysis of these three topics leads me to an interpretation of the Warsaw panel as at once iconographically and compositionally innovative, and conventional in its theological message.

Transformation of Charity in the 16th-Century Low Countries

Pieter Aertsen's panel in the National Museum in Warsaw is signed with a trident on the white shirt held by the man in the centre of the composition (**fig. 3**),[4] and dated *1575 29 ME* (29 May 1575) on the cartouche above the Doric gate to the left (**fig. 4**).[5] The painting was completed only four days before Aertsen's death on 2 June. He was buried the next day in the Oude Kerk, the parish of St. Niclaas, with which the *Huiszittenmeesters* – the likely commissioners of the *Seven Works of Mercy* – were affiliated until 1655.

Amsterdam, WK 5073/944. The painting was sold to B. van Someren for 505 guldens on 28 August 1612. See also *The Montias Database of 17th Century Dutch Art Inventories*, Inv. Lot 605.0154 [online], at: <http://research.frick.org/montiasart/recordlist.php>, [retrieved: 20 July 2017]; and Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des sechszehnten, siebzehnten und achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, [8 vols], vol. 5 (Haag, 1918), p. 1740. If this is indeed the same painting, it was probably bought by Rauwaerts from the *Huiszittenmeesters* – there is no evidence that the picture was originally commissioned by that family – and, as I discuss later in the essay, Works of Mercy had been a theme typically chosen by charitable institutions rather than private patrons. Unfortunately, there is no record of Aertsen's work – its commission nor sale – in the documents of the *Huiszittenmeesters* either. This, however, may be due to two factors: the incompleteness of the archive and/or its focus on the donations made to the organization. See *Archief van het Nieuwezijds en het Oudezijds Huiszittenhuis en van de Regenten over de Huiszittende Stadsarmen, for the period 1382–1870* [online], at: <https://archief.amsterdam/inventarissen/overzicht/349.nl.html>, [retrieved: 10 July 2017]. Finally, there exists one more 18th-century mention of a piece depicting seven works of mercy by Aertsen, which appears to have been overlooked by scholars so far. In a document with taxation of paintings belonging to the widow Joan van Waveren, prepared in 1716 and copied by Abraham Bredius, the notary lists "Het werck van barmherticheyt van Lange Pier" and ascribes the panel the value of 70 guldens. Bredius, op. cit., vol. 4, no. 1252. "Lange Pier" – "long" or "tall" Pier, also spelled as "Peer" – was a commonly used nickname for Aertsen.

   ⁴ On Aertsen's signature, and those of his sons, Pieter Pietersz. and Aert Pietersz., see De Roever, op. cit., p. 13.

   ⁵ Much of the older literature on Aertsen gives the date 1573. The explanation of this mistake is simple: the original date had been retouched and the number "5" painted over with "3," which was only removed in the 1980s during the panel's restoration at the Rijksmuseum for the exhibition *Kunst voor de Beeldenstoorm*. It has been suggested that the date was retouched because, following Karel van Mander, Pieter Aertsen was long believed to have died in 1573. Martijn Bijl, Manja Zeldenrust, Wouter Kloek, "Pieter Aertsen in het restauratie-atelier van het Rijksmuseum," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek / Netherlandish Yearbook for History of Art*, 40 (1989), pp. 217–18, p. 233. See also Wouter Kloek, "Een Aertsen tussen de Surrealisten," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 51 (2003), p. 306. It is worth mentioning, though, that the correct date of Aertsen's death – 2 June 1575 – had already been given in De Roever, op. cit., p. 9.

Table of the Resident Poor was established around 1382 by the town government, which also appointed its six regents.[6] They were put in charge of all the funds donated to the poor, and offered assistance to those who lived in their own homes within the parish. Their activities were supported by the rent from real estate properties bestowed to the organization, various types of private bonds, collections at Thursday and Sunday services, money gathered by a *wijkmeester* (district master), and, in the 1600s and 1700s, from the city's subsidies.[7] Colleges of *Huiszittenmeesters* became common in the late Middle Ages when civic and Church authorities recognized that besides the itinerant poor and those who were admitted to hospitals, there existed a large group of impoverished burghers who had their own dwellings, but lacked sufficient means to live, and were unwilling to beg in the streets.[8] The "house poor" were generally regarded as honourable, honest citizens who fell into poverty because of some misfortune, and were thus considered to be worthy of public assistance.

The works of mercy had long been the favorite iconographic subject of charitable organizations, allowing them to showcase the support that the parish poor received from the local burghers. Unfortunately, as Sheila Muller has pointed out, despite the popularity of such paintings, the specific location of their original display is usually impossible to determine.[9] A rare exception is an anonymous composition completed in 1562 for the church of Saint James in Utrecht, into which was fitted a box for collections for the poor[10]; this precedent indicates that images of the works of mercy promoted practical cultivation of the virtues of Misericordia and Caritas. On the one hand, such paintings provided donors with a universal example of Christian behaviour, on the other, they urged them to more immediate action. In the case of Aertsen's panel, this message would have been reinforced by the inscription above the entrance to the *Huiszittenmeesters*' office in the Oude Kerk: "Hout Gods gebod en geeft den armen om Gods wil" ['Keep God's commandment and give to the poor according to God's will'].[11] In spite of the lack of written documents confirming that it was indeed the *Huiszittenmeesters* who commissioned the Warsaw panel, the traditional usage of similar images by charitable institutions strongly suggests their patronage.[12] In addition, around the time when Aertsen completed his painting, the theme of the works of mercy was enjoying a renewed popularity, thanks to the Council of Trent's reaffirmation that good works strengthen faith and unite man with Christ.[13]

[6] The identity of regents in Aertsen's painting is difficult to ascertain because, to my knowledge, no pictorial representations nor specific descriptions of *Huiszittenmeesters*' costumes in the 16th century survive.

[7] *Archief van het Nieuwezijds en het Oudezijds Huiszittenhuis*, op. cit., pp. 349-4, 349-5.

[8] The term "house poor" was first introduced in the late 13th century. Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity. Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis, 1993), p. 42. On *Tafels van den Huisarmen* in general see, e.g., Ad Tervoort, "'To the Honour of God, for Concord and the Common Good.' Developments in Social Care and Education in Dutch Town (1300–1625)," in *Serving the Urban Community: The Rise of Public Facilities in the Low Countries*, Manon van Heijden, ed. (Amsterdam, 2009), pp. 93–97, and Sheila D. Muller, *Charity in the Dutch Republic: Pictures of Rich and Poor for Charitable Institutions* (Ann Arbor, 1985), p. 56.

[9] Muller, op. cit., pp. 51–68.

[10] Ibid., p. 68.

[11] Jacob van Lennep, Johannes ter Gouw, *Het Boek der Opschriften. Een bijdrage tot de Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Volksleven* (Amsterdam, 1869), p. 114.

[12] For the provenance of the painting see n. 2.

[13] Keith Moxey, "Reflections on Some Unusual Subjects in the Work of Pieter Aertsen," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 18 (1976), p. 79. See also Ralf van Bühren, *Die Werke der Barmharzigkeit in der Kunst des 12–18 Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim–Zürich–New York, 1998), p. 85.

Pieter Aertsen's approach to charity can be regarded as quintessentially Catholic. It follows closely the biblical exhortation to charitable behaviour, which in Matthew 25 is presented strictly in the context of the Last Judgment. In the Warsaw painting, the performance of the good deeds begins in the background with the scenes of visiting the sick and burying the dead, then follows a semi-circular line to the left with the illustration of giving drink to the thirsty and ransoming the captive, continues from left to right in the foreground with the distribution of clothing and bread, and concludes in a domestic interior, into which a woman invites two wanderers, where others have already found shelter by a fireplace. Some of the depicted actions correspond with the actual assistance offered by the Amsterdam *Huiszittenmeesters* – e.g., the distribution of food, drink, and coffins, which can be related to the burying of the dead – but overall Aertsen presented his patrons with a metaphorical *exemplum* of charitable behaviour rather than a realistic depiction of their actions. By conflating the *Huiszittenmeesters'* activities with the seven works of mercy, the panel reassures benefactors about the value of their assistance, which will secure them a place in Heaven. The composition devised by Aertsen strengthens such an interpretation. The arrangement of charitable scenes along a circular line makes the depiction of benefactors and beneficiaries appear as if they were participating in a procession. As the procession moves from the scene of the burial of the dead through the representation of other meritorious acts towards a welcoming, warm domestic interior, the figures move from death to a comfortable rest. Entering the cosy shelter, they pass under the arch with three openings, two of which are visible in the image. Underneath the image of the Last Judgment that decorates the opening to the left we can see the distribution of food to the hungry; in other words, right before entering the house to the right, the poor receive bread. For any Catholic viewer, this would be a clear reference to the Eucharist. We can thus understand Aertsen's composition as delineating a path to salvation. The funeral in the background represents both the burial of the dead as one of the corporal deeds of mercy and death itself. The concluding scene of sheltering the homeless can be related to the relief of the Last Judgment, and thus similarly read both in a literal and a metaphorical manner, as a meritorious action and as entering the eternal house of God, *Domicilium Salutis* – the place of salvation and eternal happiness (*beatitudo aeterna*). Following Catholic tradition, Christ's words "I was a stranger, and you took me in," were sometimes applied to the homeless, and sometimes to pilgrims (e.g., in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's drawing of *Charity* from ca. 1560 we see two pilgrims being welcomed into a house).[14] We can expand on the eschatological meaning of Aertsen's painting, and include in it the ubiquitous late medieval and early modern metaphor of the pilgrimage of life. In such a reading, the distribution of bread to the poor just before the entrance to this eternal shelter indicates that in order to achieve salvation, one should not only be charitable towards one's neighbour, but also participate in the sacraments of the Church.

Many among Aertsen's figures are involved in the distribution of charity, according to their abilities. An elderly couple in the lower left corner dresses two children in the received clothes, while an orthopedically impaired man with a pair of crutches watches over them. Aertsen reminds his viewers that charity is everyone's duty. This admonition corresponds with the so-called secularization of the poor relief in the 16th century. Secularization in this case means that it was laymen and laywomen, and the local civic government, rather than

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[14] Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Caritas*, 1559, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. The drawing was created for the series of the *Seven Virtues* by Philips Galle, published by Hieronymus Cock in 1559.

the Church, that became responsible for assisting the poor. The "desacralization" of charity was stimulated by new regulations implemented in some cities – most famously in Ypres/Ieper in late 1525 – and the pragmatic sanction issued by Charles V on 6 October 1531, as well as writings of humanists such as Juan Luis Vives quoted at the beginning of this essay. In *De subventione pauperum*, Vives argued that it was the obligation of the city government to look after the poor, since the community and its head are like body and soul, and it is unwise to care only for the wealthy, causing the neglected poor to fall into crime. Although Christianity exhorts all believers to charity, this exhortation was not effective enough as a practical rule that would lead to the elimination of poverty. Practical solutions were needed, enforced by the government, and administered by the laity. Those proposals were formulated by Vives based on different categories of the poor, each of which he recommended dealing with differently. The three groups distinguished by Vives were: the elderly and handicapped, who needed to be looked after in proper shelters, and children, who were to be educated at public schools; resident poor, who were entitled to help, but only after a careful investigation of their circumstances and morals; and finally, vagabonds, peddlers, and other itinerant poor who were to be watched closely by the city and jailed if necessary, but who nonetheless were entitled to medical help.[15] It is also necessary, Vives argues, that everyone should be put to work. In his classification of the poor as belonging to one of three groups, Vives elaborated on the older differentiation between those poor who were responsible for their circumstances because of their own idleness or other careless actions ("the undeserving poor"), and those whose destitution was a result of unfortunate circumstances ("the deserving poor"). This distinction was first made in the 14th century,[16] but it became more emphatic in the Renaissance, including, shortly before Vives' treatise, in the Ypres reform. The practice of discriminating between the genuine and the undeserving poor had practical implications for the almsgivers, who essentially had the obligation of knowing whom their contribution supported.[17] Poor relief administered by institutions such as the *Huiszittenmeesters* came with a soothing guarantee that donations and other gifts would support those who truly needed and deserved them. In Aertsen, the recipients of assistance are doubtlessly "the deserving poor": the elderly, the crippled, pregnant women, and mothers of small children. At the same time, Aertsen does not allow the recipients of assistance to remain idle – and so the elderly couple helps to dress two small children.

Simultaneously with 16th-century solutions aimed at the secularization of the poor relief, the understanding of poverty began to be secularized as well. It would not be too much of a simplification to say that the Middle Ages sanctified poverty, which encouraged the main-

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[15]   Ioannis Lodovici Vivis... [J.L. Vives], *De subventione pauperum...*, op. cit., pp. 44r–46r.

[16]   See, e.g., Bronisław Geremek, *Litość i szubienica. Dzieje nędzy i miłosierdzia* (Warsaw, 1989), chapter 1; Giovanni Ricci, "Naissance du pauvre honteux. Entre l'histoire des idées et l'histoire sociale," *Annales*, 38 (1983), s. 158–77; Bronisław Geremek, "Człowiek marginesu w średniowieczu," *Przegląd Historyczny*, 80, no. 4 (1989), pp. 705–27, esp. 724. See also: *Formen der Armenfürsorge in hoch- und spätmittelalterlichen Zentren nördlich und südlich der Alpen*, Lukas Clemens, Alfred Haverkamp, Romy Kunert, eds (Trier, 2011).

[17]   The relationship between almsgivers' chances for salvation and the status of the beneficiaries was a complicated matter in late medieval and Early Modern thought. What we may call "the beggar literature" (most famously, sections of Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* from 1494 and Matthias Hütlin's *Liber Vagatorum* from 1510), warned against the tricks of professional beggars not as much out of socio-economic concern, but, as Lindberg argues, for theological reasons. Giving alms to frauds did not constitute a meritorious act in the eyes of God; instead, the gift went to the Kingdom of Devil. It was thus of outmost importance to know that the recipients were genuine poor. Lindberg, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

tenance of the *status quo* as described by Vives in the passage I quoted at the beginning. In medieval theology, the poor were essentially the wealthy citizens' instrument of securing salvation through meritorious almsgiving.[18] In contrast, in the early modern period, the presence of beggars, of sick, of orphaned children, etc. on the streets became a social problem, and both humanist writers and administrators decided to address it as such. In this respect, the composition of Aertsen's painting offers somewhat of a paradox, reflective of its time and the shifting ideologies surrounding the status of the poor relief. As has been already mentioned, the composition is based on the shape of a circle, along which the almsgivers move together with the recipients of their assistance towards the arch decorated with the scene of the Last Judgment. Thus, it may seem that the poor are indispensable for the wealthy burghers in achieving eternal salvation, much as in the case of medieval charity. But it can also be argued that the idealized city, inhabited by the orderly society depicted by Aertsen, conforms to Vives' vision of a harmonious community, in which the wealthy care for the poor because together they form one social organism.

As the new administrative solutions in the realm of social welfare began to be implemented, the motivation behind almsgiving remained largely religious, as did the rhetoric of exhortations to giving. This was true for Protestants as well. Although both Martin Luther and John Calvin rejected the notion that salvation could be obtained by the individual's own merit, including the performance of charitable deeds, the Sunday homiletics of parish preachers did not necessarily reflect this belief. Protestant sermons, municipal decrees, and charters of charitable organizations continued to argue that generosity in almsgiving would help the givers to obtain eternal life, while greed could put their afterlives in serious jeopardy.[19] The old habits of thought never died in the early modern Low Countries, no matter how fervently Calvin criticized them in his doctrinal writings. Quantitative data confirms that religious motivation and, even more so, clerical supervision of the assistance given to the poor were the most efficacious models of charity. Donors' preference for this model of assistance affected the *Huiszittenmeesters*, who, as a nondenominational organization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were increasingly reliant on city subsidies for their activities, and drew only 22 per cent of their funds from collections, in contrast to 77 per cent gathered by the Reformed charities.[20] These circumstances indicate that Aertsen's *Seven Works of Mercy* might not have been necessarily as indigestible for Protestants as it may have seemed at first. In fact, although in the past scholars would argue that images of works of mercy were frequently targeted by iconoclasts,[21] there has never been any real evidence to support such a claim.[22]

[18] Catherine Lis, Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Atlantic Highlands, 1979), p. 22.

[19] Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, "Amsterdam en de Armenzorg tijdens de Republiek," *NEHA-Jaarboek*, 95 (1996), pp. 139–43, and Daniëlle Teeuwen, *Financing Poor Relief through Charitable Collections in Dutch Towns, c. 1600–1800* (Amsterdam, 2015), passim, esp. p. 101.

[20] Van Leeuwen, op. cit., pp. 139–43.

[21] Van Bühren, op. cit., p. 79.

[22] The example that has been typically invoked in this context was the attack on Master of Alkmaar's *Seven Works of* Mercy, which has been believed to have occurred in 1566. See, e.g., Larry Silver and Henry Luttikhuizen, "The Quality of Mercy: Representations of Charity in Early Netherlandish Art," *Studies in Iconography*, vol. 29 (2008), p. 231. However, more recently John Decker has persuasively argued that Master of Alkmaar's panel was destroyed by the Frisian Army in 1517. John R. Decker, "Civic Charity, Civic Virtue: The Master of Alkmaar's 'Seven Works of Mercy,'" *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 41 (2010), pp. 27–28.

Pieter Aertsen and Iconoclasm

Still, conditions of artistic production in mid-1570s Amsterdam were complicated. The memory of the 1566 Iconoclastic Fury was still fresh, especially for Pieter Aertsen. According to Karel van Mander, "Pieter was often disgruntled that his works, which he intended to leave as a memorial to the world, were destroyed in this way and he spoke out rudely against such enemies of art – at risk and peril to himself."[23] The political and religious situation in the Netherlands was unstable: the Habsburgs strengthened their power in the South, while the campaign of William of Orange advanced in the Northern Provinces, where more and more towns adopted Calvinism. Even though Amsterdam remained a Catholic city until the 1578 Alteration, it would have only been natural for artists to feel concerned about the future of religious art. If William wins, is one to expect another wave of image-breaking? If Alba manages to successfully reconquer the territories in the North, will the images featuring any, supposed or actual, heterodox motifs be used as evidence of confessional dissent, following Charles V's ordinances that prohibited heretical pictures?

To better understand Aertsen's position amidst those uncertain times and the debates about the validity of religious art, let us turn to his other works. While in the past scholars often interpreted his compositions combining still-life imagery and market scenes with religious iconography as an attempt to evade the Iconoclastic controversy,[24] there is one painting which may be seen as Aertsen's more direct comment on the question of images. In the early 1560s, Aertsen completed the *Worship of the Statue of Nebuchadnezzar* (**fig. 5**), a rare subject from the Book of Daniel. Three young Jewish officials, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refused to bow down to the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. As a punishment, they were thrown into a furnace, which the King commanded to be "heated seven times more than it had been accustomed to be heated" (Dan. 3: 19). But while the blazing fire killed the King's servants, the three youths were not harmed. Eventually, the fourth figure – the Son of God or God's angel – was spotted inside the furnace. Having recognized the miracle, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that all his subjects should worship the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The episode was quoted both by Protestant and Catholic authors in the Iconoclastic controversy. For the former, it supported the absolute prohibition of the worship of images, while for the latter, it merely illustrated the distinction between the pagan idols and images of the true God.[25] For instance, in the Second Zurich Disputation on 26–27 October 1523 (organized after the image-breaking that occurred in the city in September), Catholics used Daniel 3 to defend the innocent nature of images and argued that the Jewish officials – representing the true believers – kept their faith even though they lived in the midst of idols. This position, however, was refuted by Ulrich Zwingli, according to whom Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were forced to live among idols under specific political circumstances, but now people were free to remove images. For John Calvin and Philips Marnix van Aldegonde, the story

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[23] Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, translated and edited by Hessel Miedema, [6 vols] (Davaco, 1994–1999), vol. 1, p. 237, fol. 244v.

[24] See, e.g., Keith Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting in the Context of Reformation* (New York–London, 1977) and David Freedberg, "Image and Interdiction in the Netherlands in the Sixteenth Century," *Art History*, 5 (1982), pp. 133–53.

[25] Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen...*, op. cit., pp. 243–49.

illustrated the sinful behavior of believers serving two masters and extended to other types of idolatrous behaviour. The Catholic position was summarized by Nicholas Harpsfield in *Dialogi sex* (1566), in which the author explained that the story is about the worship of idols, while in their veneration of images, Christians pay honour to the prototype. Thus, the apologist concluded, by refusing to worship the statue, the Three Hebrews refused to worship the gods of Nebuchadnezzar.[26]

In Aertsen's pictorial interpretation of the story, a crowd is kneeling in front of the gigantic statue of Nebuchadnezzar, and musicians are glorifying the King and his image, as Nebuchadnezzar arrives at the monument in a golden chariot. The statue, albeit monochromatic, looks strikingly lifelike. Its left foot protruding from the pedestal, its mouth half-open, and its gaze directed at the prototype, i.e., the living Nebuchadnezzar, the statue exudes an impression that it is about to step down. Aertsen alludes here to one of the central arguments of the iconoclastic controversy, namely, that people tend to approach images as if they were living persons. This argument is interwoven with another frequently raised question: are the images themselves to blame or is their idolatrous veneration born in the eyes and heart of the beholder? In Aertsen's composition, it is the firmly fixed gazes of worshippers that activate the sculpted Nebuchadnezzar and bring him to life, as it/he fixes his own gaze at the real King. The act of looking idolizes the monument, and the Three Hebrews, shown in the middle-ground to the right, at the curve of a winding road, are the only ones among the multitudes who avert their eyes from the statue. They stretch their arms and look towards the heavens and their true God, refusing to risk any idolatrous engagement with the statue.

In 1575 – the year of the completion of the *Seven Works of Mercy* and the death of Pieter Aertsen – his son, Pieter Pietersz., painted his own version of the same story, an altarpiece *Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace*, for the Haarlem Bakers' Guild, now in the Frans Hals Museum (**fig. 6**).[27] In contrast to Aertsen, his son presents his audience with a close-up view of the moment when King Nebuchadnezzar gives the order to throw the youths into the fiery furnace, shown behind his chariot to the right. The worshipping Babylonians and musicians are sketchily painted in the background. The figure of the living King and the golden statue, less majestic in its size than the one imagined by Aertsen, are juxtaposed side by side, and the two bodies are almost mirror images. We see the body of Nebuchadnezzar from behind, twisted to the left, and his head slightly tilted as he orders the three Hebrews to be thrown into the furnace. The statue opposite him is shown frontally, leaning in the same direction as Nebuchadnezzar, the sculpted head raised and looking upwards. Only the arms of the living and the sculpted Kings differ significantly. Choosing such a close-up view, Pietersz. focuses on the figures of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to depict three different reactions to images, or three stages "in the awakening to idolatry."[28]

[26] [Nicholas Harpsfield, publishing under the name of his friend Alan Cope] Alanus Copus Anglus, *Dialogi sex contra summi pontificatus, monasticae vitae, sanctorum, sacrarum imaginum oppugnatores, et pseudomartyres*, Antwerpia 1566, dialogue IV and V, pp. 450–737, esp. pp. 716–17.

[27] On Pieter Pietersz see Peter van den Brink, "Het Petrus en Paulus altaarstuk van Pieter Pietersz in Gouda. Verslag van een natuurwetenschappelijk onderzoek," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek / Netherlandish Yearbook for History of Art*, 40 (1989), pp. 235–62, and Margreet Wolters, "'Met kool en crijt.' De functie van de ondertekening in de schilderijen van Joachim Beuckelaer," doctoral dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (Groningen, 2011).

[28] Koenraad Jonckheere, *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm: Experiments in Decorum, 1566–1585* (Brussels–New Haven 2012), p. 182.

A similar visual argument is also presented by Philips Galle in his series of four prints from 1565, based on the drawings of Maarten van Heemskerck (**figs 7–10**).[29] The cycle opens with multitudes worshipping the statue, shown frontally to the left of the composition, and the three Hebrews speaking to the King, shown to the right, who orders them to bow down in front of the monument. As the story progresses to the punishment of the youths, and eventually reaches their supernatural delivery from danger and Nebuchadnezzar's recognition of the miracle, the statue rotates by 180 degrees, as Heemskerck changes the angle from which we observe the consecutive scenes. Such a transitioning from one view to another offers an opportunity to demonstrate one's artistic skills, but, more importantly, it serves to construct a theological argument. While Pietersz. pictured different stages of rejecting idolatry in the poses of the three youths, Heemskerck expresses the same idea by gradually diminishing the importance of Nebuchadnezzar's statue within the composition. As the idol fades into the distance, and we see it from behind rather than frontally, the majesty of the true God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is revealed, and He is to be venerated from now on.

However, one significant difference between Aertsen's and Pietersz.' compositions, and the Heemskerck–Galle prints must be noted: neither Aertsen nor Pietersz. include the final episode of the story. They show the youths' faithfulness to the one true God as they turn away from the idol and towards heaven, but their faith does not become sanctioned by Nebuchadnezzar. This omission has crucial implications for the 1560s and 1570s Low Countries, because it suggests that the earthly government is of secondary importance in authorizing religious practices. Thus, amidst the socio-political and religious uncertainty, Aertsen and Pietersz. question the relevance of earthly rule for religious worship altogether, including the worship of images.

Architectural Discourse in the *Seven Works of Mercy*

At the same time, Aertsen becomes increasingly interested in Serlian architecture, which, albeit already used in the background of some of his 1550s paintings, in the 1570s begins to dominate the composition.[30] Indeed, Aertsen's consistency in creating a fictitious Serlian cityscape is certainly one of the Warsaw painting's most distinguishable and original features. The only non-Serlian structure in the entire composition is the Gothic church far in the background, a glimpse of which we can see behind the burial scene. Monochromatically painted, it differs from the Classical architecture painted in full colour, as if belonging to a different realm.

Serlio's architectural treatise sparked the interest of the Netherlandish public early on. A Dutch translation of Book IV – the first part of the treatise that was published in Venice in 1537 – had already been published in Antwerp by Pieter Coecke van Aelst in 1539 under the title *Generale Reglen der Architecturen* [General rules of architecture]. Given its folio format, the volume must have been quite expensive, which suggests that rather than being intended as a manual for architects, builders, masons and other craftsmen, its target audience would have been educated and wealthy burghers with humanistic aspirations, of whom there was

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[29] *The New Hollstein. Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450–1700*, Ilja M. Veldman, Ger Luijten, eds, vol. 1, part 1 (Roosendal, 1993), pp. 147–49, nos 170–73.

[30] Mark A. Meadow, *Aertsen's 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,' Serlio's Architecture and the Meaning of Location*, in *Rhetoric – Rhétoriqueurs – Rederijkers*, Jelle Koopman, ed. (Amsterdam, 1995), pp. 175–96.

certainly no scarcity in Antwerp. Coecke van Aelst's introduction to *Generale Reglen...* confirms this theory: it was addressed to "Aenden liefhebbers der Architecturen" [To the lovers of architecture], a phrase which suggests a learned, connoisseur interest in visual arts. Over the next few years, Coecke van Aelst published French and German translations of Book IV, as well as a Dutch version of Book III, *Die alder vermaertste antique edificien* [The most famous buildings of the Antiquity, 1546). Books I and II, and Book V were published by his widow, Mayken Verhulst, in 1553 and again in 1558. The first complete Dutch edition of Book I through Book V, with content identical to that of the volumes prepared by Coecke van Aelst and Verhulst, was published by Cornelis Claesz in Amsterdam in 1606.[31]

Publication of Serlio's treatise became one of Coecke van Aelst's most significant claims to fame, and early modern authors praised his legacy as the one who had brought classical architecture to the Netherlands. In the *Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, Karel van Mander wrote about Coecke van Aelst: "[...] in the year 1549, he made the books on architecture, geometry and perspective. And as he was very talented and learned, and versed in Italian he translated the books of Sebastiano Serlio into our language and thus by his strenuous effort brought the light to our Netherlands and helped the lost art of architecture onto the right path so that things obscurely described by Pollio Vitruvius can easily be understood, or even – as far as the orders of architecture are concerned – make reading Vitruvius unnecessary. Thus the correct manner of building was brought about by Pieter Koeck and the modern abandoned."[32] Van Mander recognized Coecke van Aelst's editions of Serlio as a marker of his erudition, and regarded the man himself as the innovator of local architecture. This is an important aspect of van Mander's eulogy, because it indicates that in the contemporary artistic discourse, not only real architecture was considered a locus of invention, but printed (or painted) architecture could have claimed this status as well.

Some of the structures painted by Aertsen can be identified with specific designs from Serlio.[33] The gateway into the churchyard, which frames the scene of the funeral, is based on a classical Roman gateway reproduced in Book III, which according to Serlio was erected on the road from Rome to Foligno (**fig. 11**).[34] Moving forward, the Doric arches behind the scene of giving drink to the thirsty and above, ransoming the captive were described in Chapter V of Serlio's Book IV (**fig. 12**).[35] And finally, the doorway to the left, in front of which one of the burghers gives clothing to the poor, is a precise rendition of a Doric structure depicted in Book IV (**fig. 13**).[36] However, Aertsen's use of Serlio's treatise goes beyond such

[31] For the editions of Serlio in the Netherlands see Herman de la Fontaine Verwey, "Pieter Coecke van Aelst and the publication of Serlio's book on architecture," *Quaerendo*, 6 (1976), pp. 251–71; and the database *Architectura. Architecture, Textes et Images, XVIᵉ–XVIIᵉ siècles* [online], at: <http://architectura.cesr.univ-tours.fr/traite/Auteur/Serlio.asp?param=>, [retrieved: 10 June 2017].

[32] Van Mander, op. cit., p. 133, fol. 218v.

[33] Some, but not all, of these references have been recognized by scholars in the past. See most importantly Moxey, *Reflections on some unusual subjects...*, op. cit., and Samantha Heringuez, "Les peintres flamands du XVIᵉ siècle et les editions coeckiennes des livres d'architecture de Sebastiano Serlio," *Revue de l'art*, 180 (2013), pp. 45–52.

[34] Sebastiano Serlio, *Den eersten [-tweeden en vijfsten] boeck van architecturen Sebastiani Serlij,* [edited and translated by Pieter Coecke van Aelst] (Antwerp, 1553), fol. XXVII.

[35] Id., *Generale Reglen der Architecturen* [edited and translated by Pieter Coecke van Aelst], fol. XIIv.

[36] Ibid., fol. XXIIIv. The architrave above the scene of visiting the poor strongly resembles designs proposed by Serlio in Book VII. However, since this last part of the treatise was only published in 1575, it is difficult to say whether Aertsen here consulted Serlio or perhaps another source, which would have also inspired Sebastiano Serlio. Sebastiano Serlio, *Il settimo libro d'architettura* (Frankfurt, 1575), p. 199.

faithful copying of the printed models, and should be contextualized within the culture of imitation, especially as it pertains to the functions of *Musterbücher*. Their authors routinely reminded practicing artists and architects that provided designs, themselves products of copying and combining older models, should be personally selected and refashioned according to one's purposes. For instance, in the *Underweysung der Messung* (1525), Albrecht Dürer wrote: "I do not put these things down for you to follow exactly, but so that you can take away from them what you require, and use them as a starting point."[37] Likewise, fifty-two years later, Hans Vredeman de Vries considered the legacy of celebrated architectural treatises in the context of local circumstances: "While the famous Vitruvius and Sebastiano Serlio, and the expert Jacques Androuet du Cerceau placed on their façades diverse pediments, frontispieces, and gables, according to the ancient and Italian style and the practice of architecture and building, as we find them in their books and treatises of other masters, [made] according to the fashion, tradition, and custom of their country, without pointed windows which do not give much light but with windows that are wide and not too tall – in these [our] Low Countries we have a very different situation."[38] Furthermore, already in his practical manuals on columns and orders published in 1565, Vredeman de Vries insisted that his designs should be applied across different media and approached as patterns equally useful in different types of architectural designs and in paintings.[39] Christopher Heuer has suggested that it is exactly within the context of such comments that one should understand the purpose and reception of Serlio's books. "Serlio has supplied," Heuer argues, "a repertory of visual forms that were meant to be transferred within the context of the book – dominating the adjacent text and offering the reader the opportunity to "select" premade patterns for use."[40] And Serlio himself acknowledged the exchange between painting and architecture on a yet deeper level, when in Book II, published in 1545, he wrote that the best architects were first painters.[41]

The *Seven Works of Mercy* embody these Renaissance approaches to imitation and innovation. Aertsen deliberately repeats some of the original designs, while also combining different elements from Serlio in new (painted) structures in order to demonstrate that he has not only mastered the content of the treatise, but also the underlying rules of architecture. The large tripartite arch to the right has no direct model in Serlio's treatise, but rather reinterprets and combines the elements of three elevations described and illustrated in Chapters VI and VII of Book IV.[42] The tension between copying (a simple form of *imitatio*) and emulating is also

[37]   Cited after: Christopher P. Heuer, *The City Rehearsed: Object, Architecture, and Print in the Worlds of Hans Vredeman de Vries* (London, 2009), p. 99. The Classical Tradition in Architecture.

[38]   Jean Vredeman Frison, *Architectura, ou Bâtiment, pris de Vitruve et des anciens écrivains, Traitant sur les cinq ordres des colonnes…* (Anwerp, 1577), [n.p.], [text between table 5 and 6]: "Combien que le très-renommée Vitruvius, Sebastiaen Serlio, & l'expert Jacobus Androuetus Cerceau, ont mis enavant [en avant] beaucoup d'autres diverses sortes de Frontons, Frontispices, Edifices, Frontes ou Faistes, à la manière Antique, Italienne, & la pratique de leur Architecture & Bâtissage, selon qu'on le treuve [trouve] en leurs livres et patrons des aultres Maîtres, a la mode, coustume & façon de ce pays là, sans fenestres croistes, & singulierement sans requent beaucoup de lumière, ne haulte profondeur, mais larges, & bien peu haultes. Mais en ce Pays Bas, on a une aultre condition [...]." [Transl. by the author].

[39]   Heuer, op. cit., p. 104.

[40]   Ibid., p. 47.

[41]   Alberto Pérez-Gómex, Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge, MA–London, 1997), p. 22.

[42]   Serlio, *Generale Reglen…*, op. cit., fol. xxvii, xxix, xlii.

present in the letters above the arch, *MAT XXV*, that follow the font included by Coecke van Aelst in the 1539 edition of Serlio. The letters do not come from the Venetian original of the treatise. Rather, they were added by Coecke van Aelst in the first edition of *Generale Reglen…* in place of Serlio's designs of shields. While making this change, Coecke van Aelst did not insist that his readers should follow them precisely either.[43] Overall, the Warsaw panel is a visual equivalent of the praise Karel van Mander would later write in honour of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, who innovated architecture through the written word and in printed illustrations rather than through actual designs. The *Seven Works of Mercy* even includes a subtle allusion to the transition from "modern" (i.e., Gothic) architecture to the "correct" (Classical) one: the Gothic style of the monochromatically painted church in the background is abandoned in favour of a variety of Italianate structures elsewhere in the painting.

Another testimony to Aertsen's ambition as an "architect" is his attention to *decorum* in combining specific deeds of mercy with their backdrops. For instance, in ancient and Renaissance architectural theory the Ionic order used in the tripartite arch was deemed appropriate for interior chambers and hallways.[44] The symbolic association with a transitional space of hallways strengthens the reading of the scene of sheltering the pilgrims as a passage from the earthly reality to the eternal house of God. Similarly, while we would search in vain in Serlio for a drawing of a façade such as the one behind the ransomed captives, its Tuscan design follows the advice of Vitruvius, Alberti, and Serlio, who all thought of the Tuscan order as a decorous choice for military architecture, fortresses, and prisons. Finally, the Doric arches behind the scene of giving drink to the thirsty, described in Chapter V Book IV, were characterized in the treatise as very strong, ingenious, and pleasing to look at, and as particularly well suited to be used as bridges over rivers and for the transportation of water.

This type of sophisticated reception of architecture required, of course, a knowledgeable audience, those "liefhebbers der Architecturen," to whom Coecke van Aelst dedicated *Generale Reglen…* The possibility of finding those architectural allusions is an important aspect of the Warsaw panel in the context of its creation less than ten years after the 1566 Iconoclasm. Aertsen's emphatic interest in architectural design functions as a virtuosic display of his mimetic skills in his imitation of diverse building materials, colours, and textures; his architectural ambitions were indeed acknowledged by Karel van Mander, who stated that "in large work, in which lies art's power, he was a supreme, competent master, understanding and painting his architecture and perspective very well."[45] More importantly, however, Aertsen's manipulation of architectural models and their metaphorical connotations allowed him to create a composition which tells two stories: the story of the seven works of mercy and the story of the architectural tradition in the Low Countries. Thus, while I have proposed that the architecture helps to communicate the theological content of the panel, it can also be argued that its prominence deflects the religious message, as the originality of Serlian buildings steals viewers' attention. Aertsen's recognition of the possibility of using the setting to redirect viewers' attention towards his skills as an "architect" can be explained in the context of what Heuer calls "a post-Reformation turn to less-narrative motifs."[46] In the trou-

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[43] Heuer, op. cit., p. 109.

[44] See, e.g., Hans Vredeman de Vries' comments in his 1565 book on the Doric and Ionic order: *Den eersten boeck ghemaect opde twee colomnen Dorica en Ionica* (Antwerp, 1565).

[45] Van Mander, op. cit., p. 234, fol. 244r.

[46] Ibid., p. 106.

bling post-Iconoclastic reality of artistic production, we are confronted with a painting that absorbs us visually and intellectually as much in regard to charity and its meritorious value as it does in regard to the contemporary transformation of architecture. As the history of the poor relief in Amsterdam and the panel's migration to a private collection suggest, the connoisseur and pictorial discourse on architecture eventually outgrew the panel's original functions of public exhortation to charity and testimony of religious and civic importance of *Huiszittenmeesters*.