

Sarah Joan Moran

Theodoor van Loon and the Politics of Style  
in the Counter-Reformation Spanish Netherlands

My habilitation project analyzes the work of Theodoor van Loon, a Flemish painter active in the Low Countries from the early seventeenth century until his death in 1649. During this time, van Loon was a very active player in the large-scale efforts by both religious and secular authorities to rebuild the material infrastructure of Catholic society, through the repair and rebuilding of churches, the erecting of new monasteries, and the decoration of these institutions with artworks intended to stimulate the orthodox piety of the faithful. In this context, Van Loon executed altarpieces and other large-scale religious paintings for some of the most important institutions, including the archducal chapel at Tervuren, the newly-built pilgrimage chapel at Scherpenheuvel, the new convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Brussels, and various abbey and parish churches in Flanders and Brabant. Theodoor Van Loon was not only highly sought-after by patrons but also acclaimed by his contemporaries; Anthony Van Dyck featured him in his *Iconographia*, and in 1662 the connoisseur Cornelis de Bie stated that “no one in our century could claim to have surpassed [van Loon’s] work.”

Yet despite the praise heaped upon him by his peers, Theodoor van Loon is strikingly underrepresented in modern art historical literature; up until now there has been no book-length study of the artist. My project seeks to rectify this gap in the art historical scholarship, not only bringing this important seventeenth-century painter into the discourse but also enriching our understanding of patronage and politics in this period. I approach the material from the perspective of Baxandalian visual culture, considering the cultural experiences, knowledge and motivations of both patrons and the historical viewing public at large.

I began work on a study of Van Loon in September of 2013 with support from the Swiss National Science Foundation, and I will remain in Antwerp doing research for the next two years. My aim is to produce a monograph on Theodoor van Loon that focuses not just on his personal artistic identity, which is deeply intertwined with contemporaneous artistic developments in Italy, but also asks why that identity was attractive to his patrons. In focusing primarily on Brussels and its surrounding area, the study will furthermore help to expand the field of view within Flemish art history, which has since its inception in the nineteenth century been intensely focused on Antwerp. My work is based on secondary literature on the one hand, through which I situate Van Loon’s artistic style within international trends and patronage patterns, and on the other archival, involving work in the holdings of various churches and institutions related to the archducal court. When completed, the monograph will make significant contributions not only to the history of Flemish art, but also to the religious and cultural history of Europe more broadly.