The problem with Leuven sculpture around 1500: the creation of anonymous sculpture workshops

Marjan Debaene

In the late Middle Ages, the Brabantine city of Leuven - located at about 30 km from Brussels, the capital of current Belgium – was one of the more important cities in the Duchy of Brabant and a regional production centre of sculpture that appears to have followed artistic trends being set in Brussels. The Leuven sculptors worked for a varied, but mostly religious clientele and received commissions from beyond the city walls, mostly to the east of the city (the so-called 'Hageland' region). The Leuven crafts were organized in a corporate system of guilds. However, the sculptors were not organized in a corporation of their own – they were to join the stonemason's guild – and did not apply a system of trademarks to allow quality control, as was the case in Brussels, Antwerp and Mechelen. The result of this being that in the archives many sculptors are known by name, but they can hardly ever be linked to a body of work. Conversely, many remaining sculptures cannot be attributed to a specific sculptor. Another result being that there are not really reference works with a clear Leuven attribution (just one, by Hendrik Roesen), like in Antwerp or Brussels, where the presence of the Brussels mallet or the Antwerp hands on many remaining pieces, give us an artistic and stylistic frame of reference. The absence of reference works has in the past made the Leuven sculpture research somewhat a Wild West for stylistic attributions.

This paper will discuss the case of some Leuven anonymous masters who have been named rather creatively in the 1970s and who have been assigned a vast and stylistically diverse body of works as their oeuvre: The Master of the Crucified Christ Figures and the Master of Christ on the Cold Stone.[1] Although previous authors wrote about art in Brabant and in Leuven,[2] and already pointed out stylistic similarities, albeit often concisely formulated, these 'masters' are known mostly from the publication *Het Brabants beeldsnijcentrum Leuven* in 1977.[3] This publication

---

[1] Thank you to the organizers of the session 'To be [titled], or not to be [titled]? Art History and its "well-(un)known" masters' at Nordik 2018 Copenhagen for selecting this paper, which will deal with a research case from my PhD research on Late Gothic Sculpture, from Leuven. This paper, which will mostly ask questions and not yet provide much answers, draws further on a presentation given at the Historians of Netherlandish Art conference in Ghent on May 26th, 2018 (Belgium).

[2] See for instance Edward Van Even, *Louvain monumental*, Leuven, 1860; Edward Van Even, *Louvain dans le passé et le présent*, Leuven, 1895; Comte J. De Borchgrave d'Altena, *Notes pour servir à l'Inventaire des Oeuvres d'Art du Brabant (Arrondissement de Louvain)*, Brussel, 1941; Comte J. De Borchgrave d'Altena e.a., *Kunst te Leuven*, Leuven, 1946.

[3] Jan Crab, *Het Brabants beeldsnijcentrum Leuven*, Leuven, 1977. This publication was preceded by an elaborated article a few years before in which Crab first discussed the Louvain style

discussed the status quo in research regarding Leuven Late gothic sculpture. Leuven based art historians Jan Crab, Maurits Smeyers and Jan Karel Steppe laid the groundwork for this research which resulted in an exhibition in 1979.[4] A true merit of this work involved the publication of some archival sources. But the interpretation of the documents focussed mostly on citing sculptors' names and (now lost) objects. The sculptural practice in Leuven around 1500 however did not receive a proper analysis in detail. The most interesting information given in the documents, which are often contract stipulations between commissioners and sculptors, and disputes regarding these commissions, is therefore understudied. These documents actually tell us a lot about how sculptors worked, which materials they used and why and what the wishes from commissioners were.

A large portion of Crab's publication also handles the so-called orphaned objects still conserved but lacking a provenance context and maker. Most works believed to be originating from late gothic Leuven were therefore organized in stylistic and iconographic groups, attributed to an unknown master via a notname. However, two notnames especially are filled with innuendo, the master of the Crucified Christ figures and the master of Christ on the cold stone. In constructing a stylistic narrative around these unknown masters, the researchers made some methodological errors in grouping the sculptures together and attributing them to one hand. Since the 1970s research has barely progressed, and the notnames have often started to live a life of their own, to the surreal point that almost every Brabantine looking Christ on the Cold Stone is now being attributed to Leuven without a second thought. One could even say there is a wild growth of Leuven attribution sculptures as every so often sculptures with this theme surfacing on the art market are catalogued as produced in Leuven, without any reference or argumentation, except that they are of Brabantine origin (and even that is not really sure) and they depict a Christ figure contemplating his fate on a rock.

It is wise to take a step back however, and look at how the artistic style of a sculptor must be defined then? Michael Baxandall already admitted in 1980 it is 'difficult to verbalise about directly'. He also states there is 'a paradoxical relation between imitation of nature and an attractive personal style or maniera'.[5] More recently in 2013, Famke Peters of the Belgium IRPA institute, defined technique as 'the manner of execution' and style as 'the artist's intention begin(ing) to create a certain visual effect'. Technique and style combined make up the sculptor's

---

and mentioned some of these Leuven anonymous masters and their workshop. See: Jan Crab, 'Het beeldsnijcentrum Leuven en zijn stijlkenmerken', *Arca Lovaniensis 2*, Leuven, 1973, 9-42.

[4] *Het laatgotisch beeldsnijcentrum Leuven*, exhib. cat., Leuven, 1979.

[5] In this publication Baxandall states that 'a culture's conception of personal style and of the individual performance is usually deeply involved in its art, but is (...) difficult to verbalize about directly' and for Baxandall there is also a 'paradoxical relation between a general goal of imitation of nature (...) and the attractively distinctive personal style (...) or maniera'. Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980, 123-126.

signature. Or the masterly hand, as the publication on the Master of Elsloo research is suitably titled.[6]

When analyzing the stylistic attribution method applied in sculpture, one can observe that the oeuvre of a sculptor (or any other artist) is often construed by art historians as a compound molecule-like structure, organized around a central object, the 'core', being the key work that defines the 'style' of the master, the work that ideally can be inseparably attached to this master, by means of documentary evidence. This reference object serves as a starting point to compare a group of secondary sculptures to it, and based on these stylistic criteria, are then attributed to this master. These objects are the atoms latching on to this molecular structure. And the further away from the core, the less forceful the stylistic cohesion tends to be; therefore, these objects are called 'periphery' works, or attributed to a so called 'workshop', or even 'circle of' or '*Umkreis*'.

Consequently, this methodical approach does not apply to notname masters, there is no documentary evidence. The only source here is the object itself, and only in some cases is known from which location the object comes from, though it is not always sure if this was the original location the object was made for. Still, this working method of linking so called 'periphery' works to a central 'key object' is often applied to these grouped anonymous oeuvres. The key object being the absolute masterpiece, showing the most talent and quality, according to the subjective eye of the author and using modern criteria. The maker then is assigned a name, often referring to this key object, or a specific characteristic of the body of works. Traditionally, this stylistic comparing and grouping of artworks is a vital part of art historical research of sculpture.

The reason for it is multifaceted. Firstly, many successive conflicts and wars have destroyed archival sources, contexts and objects. Secondly, a great deal of statues has been scattered all over the world via the art market and other channels, which leads to the detachment of their historical context. Lastly, our view on art works has been dominated for the past four centuries by the French-Italian paradigm of the glorification of the antique masters, and this since Giorgio Vasari. This classical approach is partly responsible for the lack of knowledge on how gothic sculptures actually functioned in their original settings. Moreover, only a small niche of the art historical community has looked into medieval sculpture. Research has confirmed that the less is known about an artwork, the less said artwork is appreciated.[7]

This stylistic approach has also been the working method for Leuven sculptures where the only source is often the object itself. Yet, it is nowadays being

[6] 'Style and technique are hard to dissociate. Technique is (..) the way a sculpture has been executed, from the most basic carving to the most sophisticate decorative techniques, the artist's intention begins to create a certain visual effect. The result is what can be called style. Together, technique and style make up the sculptor's signature'. See: Famke Peters (ed.), *A Masterly Hand. Interdisciplinary Research on the Late-Medieval Sculptor(s) Master of Elsloo in an International Perspective*, Scientia Artis 9, Brussels, 2013.
[7] See: Marjan Debaene and Peter Carpreau, 'Kulturräume', *Niederländische Skulpturen von 1130 bis 1600*, Petersberg: Imhof, 2017, 14-19.

criticized as being 'too subjective'. Indeed, interpretation of form and style is a hard thing to master. Opinion A and Opinion B can be head-to-head, yet both be well underpinned and plausible hypotheses.

After all, an artist's formal language may evolve through time. Workshop organization and hierarchy is another factor to take into account here. The contribution of apprentices and journeymen to certain commissions is to be reckoned with. And these sculptors were first and foremost craftsmen and not artists in the modern sense of the word. This all leaves of course too much room for interpretation. This is why this paper argues that the art historical discipline of stylistic analysis of sculptures is in dire need of a more scientific, positive and therefore objective approach. This is why the key object must also be treated with some reserve as this object has been chosen by an art historian, not by the sculptor. By looking at the bigger picture, at the group rather than the individual object, a more objective approach could be achieved. Stylistic analysis and connoisseurship are only some of many tools and methodologies at our disposal to research (anonymous) late gothic sculpture. This requires of course a firm belief that the sculptures speak loudly and clearly for themselves, even if at first it seems they only produce a deafening silence.

How must one then ideally research these medieval sculptures? First and foremost, the art historical ground work must be covered and their archival or bibliographical references (if existing) must be charted, their provenance mapped as far back in time as possible and then a more helicopter perspective must be taken to try and determine socio-economic factors, and a cultural historical context (their function, the era and town in which they were made, the organization of sculptural practice, the possible commissioners).

Once this work has been completed, the researcher must look at the objects and properly assess and analyse them with the tools that modern science is providing us with, and that our predecessors, whose approach may be criticized here, did not have at their disposal yet. Every object should receive a thorough physical and technical examination. Every object should be digitized with technical photography and multispectral imaging (where useful). Every object should receive a wood or stone analysis, a dendrochronological or C14 dating, a RX or CT scan, an analysis of tool marks and an identification of pigments used in the polychromy (by means of non-invasive XRF or sampling/stratigraphic analysis, again where applicable). Of course, as this requires budget, an assessment of the usefulness of these kinds of technical and physical investigations must be undertaken beforehand per sculpture. But for the sake of the argument, let's assume now there is ample budget available and it is deemed useful to undertake this technical research. This way a technical passport can be established for these objects. All these passports can then be gathered together in a database for further analysis to discover their true meaning. Often questions rising from the analysis of archival and historical data will serve as reasons for undertaking this technical analysis.

Next, an objective stylistic and morphologic analysis is paramount. A set of stylistic traits, signature elements, must be defined per statue in order to find possible matches or links between them. One must take caution here. It is not good to apply a set of criteria of a 'key object' blindly to a secondary object, because at

that point wishful thinking sets in and one often sees what one wants to see. If possible, put the objects together in one room and examine them together; to see what is really there, and what isn't. This is of course an advantage when working with a museum's collection and can be an excellent incentive for organizing research exhibitions. This is the ideal and theoretical methodology, a clear and holistic system to examine and research sculpture, starting from technical and archival research, and then including a critical and true stylistic analysis.

The next part of this paper will discuss two concrete cases illustrating the problematic attribution practice regarding Leuven late gothic sculpture. Both anonymous masters have been assigned a body of works to their name, yet it is not sure they are even separate masters or workshops. In both groups there are clear differences and clear similarities of 'masterly hand' features. So, one can even begin to wonder if it is just an artificial divide between two groups?

The methodological problems for both groups are mostly the following. Firstly, attributions are being made based on a supposedly stylistic, morphologic and iconographic unity, starting from one prototype image (often without provenance). But as the cases will show, these criteria are actually compositional features one can find in almost any given Crucified Christ in Brabant in the late gothic period. There is no mention of typical 'masterly hand' features, such as the way hair, faces and hands are sculpted. Furthermore, there are stylistic overlaps between several groups. Thirdly, there is a constant confusion of the terms 'master' and 'workshop' and criteria are applied loosely, which results in some very strange additions to the group. Another problem is that Crab et al. did not include secondary figures (e.g. Mary or St John the Evangelist in Calvary groups) in their analysis; so, a large portion of the stylistic story is neglected, especially for the Master of the Crucified Christ figures.[8] Sculptor names, known from the archives, are being casually linked to objects without any archival or stylistic backup (e.g. Hendrik Roesen, Bartel van Kessel). That is a very slippery slope, which at a certain point is being admitted to in reference to Van Kessel in Crab's publication.[9] And lastly, the socio-economic and art historical context is hardly touched upon.

The Master of the Crucified Christ figures

The prototype image defined by Jan Crab is a large crucified Christ (now missing his cross) in the collection of M Leuven (fig. 1).[10] It used to hang outside on a cross under a canopy on the cemetery next to the Saint John the Baptist Church of the Great Beguinage in Leuven. There is no knowledge that this Christ figure was part of a larger triumphal group, with a Saint John and Virgin Mary accompanying him. It is also not known if the cross used to be placed somewhere inside the church

[8] In fact some of the Saint John figures are being attributed to another anonymous master, namely the Master of Saint Matthew of Meensel. See Crab, 'Het beeldsnijcentrum Leuven', 37 and Crab, *Brabants beeldsnijcentrum*, 281-285.

[9] Crab, *Brabants beeldsnijcentrum*, 233.

[10] Inv. C/52, 178 x 168 cm; see: Marjan Debaene ed., *M Collecties Beeldhouwkunst*, Leuven, 2014: 54-55.

Figure 1 Master of the Crucified Christ figures, *Crucified Christ*, c. 1500. Oak, traces of polychromy, 178 x 168 cm. Leuven: M, inv. C/52. Copyright: Meemoo – Photography: Dominique Provost.

and later moved outside. The sculpture is made of oak wood and shows only traces of a now mostly lost polychromy, due to an age long exposure to the elements. There are no archival documents mentioning this object, but it is being dated in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Some old photographs and mentions in early 20th century literature do exist.

This image is regarded as the key sculpture, the nucleus of the oeuvre because it excels in quality of sculpting and monumentality – according to the author. It is also the largest statue in the oeuvre. The criteria or features as they were defined in the 1970s are the following[11]: a heavy and 'broad' crown of thorns; the head of Christ slightly falling down on right shoulder; a lock of hair falling on the upper right chest; the anatomic features of the corpus, with a high held and very distinctive chest and ribcage; the 'special' drapery of the loin cloth (without further explanation); the knees held up slightly.

The sculptor was familiar with anatomy as Christ's body is well proportioned and modelled, though extremely skinny, the heaving chest being a consequence of hanging on the cross. The long legs are of course a perspectival elongation, as pious spectators were to look at this image from a lower standing point. Around this object a group of ca. twenty sculpted Crucified Christ figures in

---

[11] As formulated in: Crab, 'Het beeldsnijcentrum Leuven', 23-25, 30-31; Crab, *Brabants beeldsnijcentrum*, 255 and in Leuven, *Het laatgotisch beeldsnijcentrum*, 24.

the Leuven area have been assembled, based on the aforementioned set of criteria, to make up the oeuvre of the Master of the Crucified Christ figures[12]. The choice of the notname was, of course, very obvious.

But what is also obvious is that here a capital error is being made, as these features are not really typical for the style of a master, they do not define a hand. Instead they are typical for a certain compositional type often executed in sculpture and painting around 1500 all around Western Europe. These features are not establishing the artist's signature. True artist signature features would be of a more technical nature and involve the treatment of facial traits (nose, lips, eyes and eyelids, the way of cutting hairs, beards, fingers, nails, hands and feet).

The assumption that a workshop specialized in one iconographic type is wrong as well. This type of specialization would not have been viable for a sculpture workshop in the small town of Leuven, even with a market and clientele in the wider surroundings east of Leuven, which is the nowadays Hageland area. No documentary evidence supports this claim of iconographic specialization.[13] Sculptors took assignments for all sorts of sculptures. Some artists were undoubtedly known for their execution of certain types but there is no evidence that a workshop only made Crucified Christ figures.

A strong local influence for this group of Leuven crucified Christs must have been the Calvary group on the rood screen of Leuven's Saint-Peters Church (figs 2 and 3), dated around 1490 and attributed to Jan II Borman, supposedly the best sculptor from Brussels as a later document from 1513 states.[14] The attribution remains without any documentary evidence for now. The exquisite cutting technique and realistic treatment of scenes and figures is of another level but upon closer inspection many features of this Christ are available in the Christ of the Beguinage: the lock of hair, the skinny body with pronounced ribcage, the loin cloth (more delicately carved but with the recognizable form and scheme of folds), long and straight legs and arms. It seems almost evident to name this Christ figure as the

---

[12] Most of the Christ figures in this group probably hung in the transept of a church as a triumphal cross or outside, and certainly at a higher level.

[13] The author does not know of any sculptor in any other region working in this manner. There is of course the case of Adam Dircksz. (1509-15), whose workshop specialized in miniature sculpture in boxwood, but this is a technical specialization, not an iconographic one. See: Frits Scholten, Reindert Falkenburg et al., eds, *Small Wonders*, exhib.cat., Amsterdam, 2016.

[14] See Debaene, *M Collecties,* 50-51; Borman is mentioned as the 'beste beeldesnyder' in a contract between Nicolas van Arcle and Jan Borman for carving wooden models for the Brussels Baliënhof, 28 April 1513. See Brussels, Archives Générales du Royaume de Belgique, Chamber des Comptes, acquits 27.397, 1er compte, fol. VII v°- VIII v°. For an analysis of this document see: Emily Pegues, 'Jan Borreman's Wooden Models for Bronze Sculpture: A Documentary Reconstruction', *Artes et Historibus 17*, 2017: 181-204 and Marjan Debaene ed., *Borman. A family of Northern Renaissance sculptors*, London / Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2019.

prototype from Brussels influencing local Leuven sculptors, as it was there in Saint Peters Church, available for all to be seen and be inspired by.[15]

Figure 2 Jan II Borman (and workshop), *Calvary*, c. 1490. Oak, polychromy, 205 x 201 cm (Christ figure). Leuven: Saint Peter's Church, inv. C/664. Copyright: Meemoo – Photography: Dominique Provost.

Figure 3 Jan II Borman (and workshop), *Calvary (detail: Christ)*, c. 1490. Oak, polychromy, 205 x 201 cm (Christ figure). Leuven: Saint Peter's Church,inv. C/664. Copyright: Meemoo – Photography: Dominique Provost.

There is certainly one mention in an archival document from august 1526, stating that the Leuven based painter Jan Vander Coutheren was to polychrome the Calvary group for the Celestinian Cloister in Heverlee, near Leuven 'as richly and as good and beautiful of gold' after the model of 'the one in Saint-Peter's Church'.[16] This statement applied of course mostly to the polychromy, but it can be assumed that the sculpture itself must have been an example too, although the contract made with Leuven sculptor Hendrik Mouwe in February of that same year does not specifically mention this.[17] The Celestinian cloister was one of the last great building projects in Leuven, but it is now almost completely destroyed. Just a few of its artworks have survived, but no Calvary statue is among them. It does show the impact the Borman Calvary group still had almost thirty years after its creation. In several other archival notes in the Leuven archives it is stated that the sculptors had to make their statue based on a 'patroen' or design by another craftsmen. This somewhat nuances the idea of the (Leuven) sculptor creating his own 'inventio' or

---

[15] A possible earlier inspiration could be the miraculous roman sculpture of the so called Crooked or Brown Christ (ca. 1200), which was venerated in Saint Peter's Church. This is hard to verify as nowadays only the head of the sculpture has survived. See: Debaene, *M Collecties*, 24-25.

[16] See: Stads Archief Leuven (SAL) 7811 fol. 86-86v°

[17] See: SAL 7810 fol. 438-438v°

composition.[18] This information is vital in understanding Leuven sculptural practice in the late gothic period.

Figure 4 Rogier van der Weyden (and workshop), *Crucifixion*, c. 1457-1464. Oil on panel, 323,5 x 192 cm. Madrid: El Escorial, San Lorenzo de El Escorial , inv. 10014602. Copyright: Wikimedia Commons.

And of course, there is an undeniable link with the same compositional motif painted by Rogier van der Weyden and his workshop many times, to name just one painter (fig. 4).[19] What is odd though is the almost complete omission of analysis on the secondary figures in the calvaries. In the core group of Christs showing the most stylistic similarities quite a large number of Mary's and St Johns have survived. They all show the same overall traits and some have very distinctive likenesses to one another in terms of treatment of eyes, mouths, curls, double chins etc.[20] Yet the analysis of these statues, which actually enriches our idea of the style of this Master

---

[18] For Baxandall this ability to design or invent is even a condition for true mastership. See: Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 123-126.

[19] See for instance the Seven Sacraments Triptych (1445-1450) in the collection of the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Antwerp (inv. 393-395) or the Crucifixion at the Escorial in Madrid (inv. 10014602).

[20] For instance the figures of Saint John and Mary of Pellenberg, Sint-Joris-Weert, Tielt-Winge and the Maricolen cloister in Leuven are all stylistically alike. See also footnote 8.

of the Crucified Christ's group is simply limited to the fact that they are, quote
'typical Leuven saints' and the male Saint John figures are linked to the Master of
Saint Matthew of Meensel. It is difficult to understand why this was bluntly omitted
from the style analysis. Especially since many of these stylistic features show clear
links to works attributed to Hendrik Roesen (more so than to the Saint Matthew of
Meensel sculpture),[21] whose known oeuvre consists mostly of male standing saints,
and one seated Saint Leonard from Zoutleeuw, the statue that has the doubtful
honour of being the only surviving documented sculpture from Leuven.

The Master of Christ on the cold stone

Figure 5 Master of Christ on the Cold Stone, *Christ on the cold stone*, c. 1500. Oak, polychromy, 104 x 51 cm. Leuven:
M, inv. C/45. Copyright: Meemoo – Photography: Dominique Provost.

The same problematic methodology is applied to the Master of Christ on the Cold
Stone. This body of works was assembled around one key object being a Christ on

[21] The likeness of these Saint John figures is most evident in the facial features and the
drapery folds of Roesen's Homobonus of Zoutleeuw, Saint Cornelius of Leuven and Saint
Rochus of Rillaar.

the Cold Stone also from the collection of M Leuven (fig. 5).[22] It is made of oak, with a thick overpaint, originates from Leuven's Saint Peters hospital and dates from around 1500. Again, no archival sources have survived.

The so-called stylistic criteria for this group are the following: a heavy and 'broad' crown of thorns; two locks of hair falling on the both sides of the chest; the anatomy of the corpus: high held and very distinctive chest and ribcage; the way the arms are held, wrists and feet are tied – the 'special' knot of the rope; the treatment of the loin cloth (again no specification on what this means); the cloak draped over the rock; the 'spike block' to the left[23] and Adam's skull to the right.[24] These criteria result then in an assembled group of circa twelve sculptures in the Leuven area. Strikingly, the very typical way of draping Christ's cloak around the stone in parallel, horizontally organized and rather thick, rounded folds is not mentioned anywhere. This feature seems rather typical for many sculptures in this group though and stands apart from the drapery schemes in Brussels sculptures treating the same theme, such as the Christ on the Cold Stone from Leuven's Saint James Church, currently in the collection of M Leuven or the one at the Hôtel Dieu in Beaune, where the drapery is less stereotypical, more edgy and shows more variation. Nor does the former research mention typical masterly hand features, such as the way hair, faces and hands are sculpted, yet these show again clear links to other groups, notably the Master of the Madonna of Piétrebais and Hendrik Roesen[25]. So yet again the same methodological errors occur when assembling this group. There is the subjectively chosen prototype, the applied stylistic criteria are actually generic, compositional elements one can find in almost any given Christ on the cold stone in Brabant in the late gothic period. The core group is far from homogenous and different masterly hand features are seen. The socio-economical and historical context is hardly touched upon. Also, the extreme popularity of this cold stone imagery in the late gothic Brabantine region linked to a certain devotional context in the many hospital facilities in the city of Leuven and the popularity of passion plays in this region is barely mentioned or investigated.

[22] Inv. C/45, 104 x 51 cm; see: Debaene, *M Collecties*, 130-131.

[23] Regarding the typical yet apocryfical iconographic element of the spike block see: Phillip Jeffry Guilbeau, 'IUXTA ITER SCANDALUM: The "wayside stumbling-block' in late medieval passion imagery", *Studies in Iconography*, vol. 27 (2006): 77-102.

[24] As formulated in: Crab, 'Het beeldsnijcentrum Leuven', 33; Crab *Brabants beeldsnijcentrum*, 266 and in Leuven 1979: 24.

25 Recent archival and stylistic research by the author and by Prof. Dr. Michel Lefftz (UNamur), followed by the well-argumented re-attribution to Jan Borman I of key objects from the alleged oeuvres of the Master of 'Christ on the Cold Stone' such as this prototype sculpture from M's collection, and other Leuven notname masters, seriously threatens the survival of the Leuven Late Gothic sculpture centre . But rather than bury the concept, the rediscovery of Jan I, and hence the addition of a truly talented master to its ranks, provides a new beginning, a rebirth one might call it, and in so doing creates an excellent opportunity to study Leuven sculpture in this new and utterly fascinating light. See: Marjan Debaene, ' The Death and Rise of the Leuven Late Gothic Sculpture Centre', in: Debaene, *Borman,* 62-63.

Afterthoughts

Our fragmentary knowledge and data regarding Leuven sculpture ensures that researchers are often solely designated to the images themselves for study. In the past this mostly resulted in a stylistic approach, occasionally supplemented by technical or scientific research. It often remained the aim of many researchers, following the 'star system' in place for painting, to realize a monographic attribution. Although attributing sculptures to geographical locations, urban production centres and pseudo-workshops seems to be most feasible and safe option, it often remains an unsatisfactory approach for true identification and explanation of a sculptural object or ensemble.

Can the anatomy of a production centre like late gothic Leuven be therefore better determined? It is clear that this anatomy does not only consist of workshop organization as a characteristic. Patrons and their structures, connecting roads to other cities, political and religious ties, access to information, different needs of different social classes are also part of this system.[26] By subsequently linking the object to its specific cultural space it is possible to describe a more complete and far richer historical context and meaning for a sculpture as opposed to choosing the safer and rather limited road of attributing to geographical production centres or notnames based on stylistic characteristics and opinions.

Connoisseurship is and will always remain important in assessing these artworks but too often the method lacks objectivism and contextualization. Instead and equally important as a hunch by a connoisseur's trained eye, is what the sculptures tell us: materials, sculpting techniques, tool marks. But a clear focus must kept on re-interpreting documentary evidence to shed light on sculptural practice and devotional context in Leuven and its relationship to other, nearby Brabantine sculptural centres such as Brussels, Mechelen, and Antwerp, but also Diest or the Liège region. Furthermore, the iconographic notname creates a stylistic tunnel vision. By defining an artist by his apparent production, one tends to only look at 'crucified Christs' or 'Christs on the cold stone', when investigating them further. No sculptor in Leuven (or any smaller artistic centre) would only use one type of iconography and be able to make a living of this.

Additionally, the prototypes or 'key objects' are rather randomly and subjectively chosen. Might the combination of the fact that the analysis was made by the then curator of the Leuven city museum and the fact that both 'prototype' images are pieces from that museum's collection be more than a coincidence? Leuven sculpture is in need of a true analysis, not an analysis based on iconographic, compositional or chauvinistic elements.

Also, when conducting this analysis there must be attention for terminology as well. How must these 'signature' morphological features be described so that

---

[26] This has led to the idea of restructuring the medieval sculpture research paradigm by trying to provide a customized attribution system based on the concept of a cultural space. See: Debaene and Carpreau, 'Kulturräume'.

their meaning does not get 'lost in translation' or is too viable for interpretation that it can apply to most anything? Describing a feature as 'the special way of draping the loin cloth' leaves us wondering what Crab thought was so special about it. Surely, he had something specific in mind, yet he failed to specify. A proper description and clear definition of these signature features is not superfluous at all.

Lastly researchers must not be afraid to let go of the idea of separate masters as such and look at Leuven sculpture production as a cooperative system, where several sculptors ran separate workshops, but often worked together as well, and even drew in masters from other cities such as Brussels to collaborate with as the documentary evidence points to distinctively. Moreover, the Leuven sculpture scène was a small one – and there were many family ties. This has been well worked out in Jan Crab's publication, in which he publishes several genealogies of Leuven sculpture families.[27] The profession was undoubtedly passed on from father to son. In some families a 'beldesnider' was present, and a 'schrijnwerkere' married into it or vice versa, for instance the Hessels family, where sculptor Willem Hessels' sister married joiner Jan Petercels. In the archives many records of collaborations between these different craftsmen can be found. In one case, Jan Petercels works together with Jan Borman, sculptor from Brussels and Mathys Keldermans on the altarpiece for the Brewer's guild in Saint Peter's church in 1507.[28] Petercels also worked together with sculptor Jan van Kessele in 1504-05 for an altarpiece for the Saint Anne's brotherhood in Saint Peters Church.[29] And Hendrik Mouwe finished an altarpiece started by Jan van Kessele; he was asked to do so by van Kessele's brothers in 1510.[30] So, these Leuven sculptors ran into each other, knew each other's work and were colleagues as well as rivals when it came to getting assignments, especially the more popular (and therefore probably most talented) of the bunch, at least according to the archives, such as Joes Beyaert, Hendrik Mouwe, Hendrik Roesen, Jan van Kessele, etc. If this all is taken into account, it is almost impossible to determine who is who and who made what in that period.

The so-called Leuven late gothic sculpture centre, consisting of separate masters, might just be a fiction, created by a wishful thinking and maybe slightly chauvinistic mind, in order to 'compete' with other Brabantine cities such as Mechelen, Antwerp or mostly the close-by city of Brussels. Must one conclude that former researchers were wrong in their assessment? No, far from it, there is definitely 'something going on', and there are groups of sculptures that are very much alike from a stylistic point of view, but as this paper tried to argue, the methodology used lacks objectivism and shows clear errors. The problematic division between these so-called anonymous masters, based on iconographic and compositional criteria, might just be a very thin line in need of erasure.

[27] For the first thirty years of the sixteenth century, Jan Crab noted thirty new names in the archives, "beldsnidere" as well as "steenhouwer" and "cleynstekere'. See Crab, *Brabants beeldsnijcentrum*, 79-80.
[28] SAL 7400 fol. 267v°-268v° and SAL 8168 fol. 346 v°
[29] SAL 7397 fol.172-173 and SAL 7398 fol. 345v°-348
[30] SAL 8169 fol. 342v°

Dra. Marjan Debaene is Head of Collections at museum M in Leuven. She specializes in late gothic sculpture from Brabant. Marjan has curated various exhibitions for M f.i. 'Signed, Jan R. The re-discovery of a Renaissance Master' (2012), 'Sculptures from Bruges' (2015), 'Masters of Sculpture' and 'Crossing Borders. Medieval Sculpture from the Low Countries' (2017). She has curated the exhibition on the Borman sculptor's dynasty 'Borman and Sons' (2019) and is the coordinator of Ards, the network association for medieval sculpture (www.ards.be). Her doctoral research, which is entitled '*What's in a name? Leuven anonymous sculpture re-examined*' focuses on the sculpture that has been produced around 1500 and the first quarter of the sixteenth century in and around the city of Leuven.

marjan.debaene@student.kuleuven.be