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### 'Omnia vincit amor': Het antieke beeld van de aardse liefde in middeleeuws-encyclopedische context (ca. 200 - ca. 1300)

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## Summary

‘Omnia Vincit Amor.’ Vergil was quite right. Love is an immortal and a most indomitable emotion which must be as old as mankind. *Eros*, *Amor* or *Cupido*, the antique deity who embodies this emotion is likewise old, hardly tameable and undying. Up until today the winged boy who shoots arrows and sometimes carries a torch is widely recognized and his meaning is still common knowledge at all levels of Western society.

This study deals with the transmission of this image of love (called *Eros* hereafter, unless dictated otherwise by the literary context) from Antiquity up until ca. 1300. How did the deity live on in the visual sources transmitted from this era of history and why did he do so?

Operating in the field of the survival of the classics in the Middle Ages, this study does not look upon this phase in history as an interval between Antiquity and Renaissance. On the contrary, it regards it as a period in its own right. The focus is hereby on gradual transformation and fusion, not on what was consciously kept unchanged. The transformations and fusions that can be found while studying the medieval *Eros*-source material were rooted in its circumstances and as well potentially in the *Eros* figure itself. Many sources of inspiration lay at the foundation of the visual images of *Eros*. Yet, as will be shown, these images are not sheer copies of their sources. They are in themselves medieval inventions indeed. Therefore emphasis is on the broader cultural context in which medieval images and their meanings have come into being, rather than on their individual inspirations. This cultural context, in turn, consists of several layers. Cultural phenomena are not necessarily designed and directly dictated by the top layers of society. Consequently, visual source material cannot be explained merely by written sources. Instead, the kaleidoscopic quality of the emotion of love and its protagonist caused a most dynamic interaction between the visual and the written source material on the one hand and their contexts and functions on the other. The analysis of this interactive field brings to light the historical dynamics of the survival of the classics in a medieval context in general as well as the backdrop and legitimation of the existence of a visual tradition of *Eros* and its developments

in the Middle Ages.

Images of Eros are found in manuscripts, in image programs of church facades and on artefacts. Images of Eros on artefacts mainly stem from the early Christian era. These images formed part of a traditional pre-Christian visual language. As expected, part of this language slowly Christianized. A substantial part, however, did not. Instead, it became detached from all ideology, a process that had already set in in pagan Antiquity. Depictions of Eros in manuscripts could function in several ways. His depiction could form part of a cycle of images that was highly integrated in the accompanying text and paralleled its contents in order to make its reading easier and more pleasant. In paralleling the text it could also be seen as a 'book' for those who could not (yet) read (well). In a reverse process, in the case of an explanation, a moralisation or an *ekphrasis* of an image, the question rises which one was principal: the image or the text? In a less integrated and parallel form, images could illustrate and elucidate the essence or deeper meaning of (parts of) the text. Accompanying a non narrative text images could confirm or clarify the text. In some cases images and text were complementary.

Depictions of Eros as part of image cycles on church buildings can likewise be understood in various ways. The cycles they are part of can be considered 'books for the illiterate', mnemo art and reflections of the universe. Although in this study all of the aforementioned ways of reading are respected, the last is stressed most.

This study focuses on three main developments in the history of Eros' medieval depictions: the roots of the medieval Eros, the 'encyclopaedic' Eros and the virtuous Eros. This is reflected in the structure of this book, which consists of three corresponding parts, each containing two chronological chapters.

Part I of this study (chapters I.1 and I.2) is concerned with the literary and the historical fundamentals of the visual tradition of Eros respectively. Eros is a deity with many faces. In ancient literature, around 700 BC, he started his career as a great expert. To Hesiod he was both the deep and creative love behind the genesis of life and the driving force behind its continuation. Plato, likewise, assigned Eros an important and constructive place in both the natural and the supernatural world. This original notice, however, was strayed

as time went on and a more earthly view on the deity came into being. As early as in Hellenism Eros was considered to be a young man who had been responsible for many cases of unhappy infatuation. Eros gradually turned into a troublesome toddler, playing silly and childish games. The Roman poets, who were to become an important source of mythological information during the Middle Ages, finally furnished the god with a moral significance. They described love as a painful experience that turned the minds of those struck by it into a state of irresponsibility and infantilism. The Platonic notion of Eros had already given room to believe Eros to have both a divine and an earthly side. The Church fathers reworked this Platonic concept into a theory of Divine Love. Contrary to Plato they dissociated the ancient god Eros from this concept and made him represent an antithesis to Divine Love. This sealed Eros' fate for many centuries to come: he was to live on to embody the various forms of earthly love. This function formed the keynote to Eros' visual tradition for a very long time.

As early as the fourth century, in Prudentius' very influential *Psychomachia*, Eros was represented as the personification of the vice of earthly love. In his poem Prudentius reworked the antique notion of a perpetual battle in the mind within a Christian setting. He presented the virtues and the vices as warriors in an arena, fighting a bloody battle. Eros appeared on the scene as one of the followers of the vice *Luxuria*, which had taken on the form of the goddess Venus. As was to be expected *Luxuria*, just as all the other vices, lost the battle. She was killed by the virtue *Sobrietas*. *Luxuria*'s host was terrified and forced to flee. Nineteen (fragments of) illustrated copies of the *Psychomachia*, dating from the ninth century until 1298, survive up until today. Eros is depicted as a frightened idol, running or flying away, while he looks back and drops his bow, his arrow and his quiver. The antique battle in the mind might still be a perpetual one, the outcome seemed settled for once and for all. Over and over again Christian virtue was triumphant and Eros was sentenced to perpetual fright and flight.

The broader contextual and functional backdrop of the visual Eros-source material is found in the material culture of the late antique and early Christian era. In this phase of Western history distinct phenomena such as meaningfulness and meaninglessness, Romanization and Christianization, duality and reconciliation, evolved into harmonious pairs. A mere literary and

intellectual interpretation of the source material would do insufficient credit to this particular harmony.

Not any different from pagan or Jewish artefacts early Christian artefacts functioned aesthetically, representationally or symbolically. Moreover, magical authority held by certain objects would surely not have been denied to them all of a sudden. Why would one dispose of the tools one could act upon reality with? A fusion of the old powers with the new one would have been more desirable and would have been easy to make. On many occasions several of these functions could be officiated by one single object. For example, winemaking erotes depicted on a sarcophagus, either Christian or pagan, can be decorative, confirming and articulating the status of the deceased, represent something, or form a symbolic part of a certain ideological world picture. What exactly they represented or within what ideological constellation they were understood or meant to be understood, however, cannot be established with exclusive certainty. Transformations will have taken place and syncretism did exist, on both a conscious and an unconscious level. However, both diversity in both the Christian community and in late Roman society, and duality and ideological fusions within individuals, the absence of guidelines for Christianizing pagan symbols did not urge to endow these symbols with new meaning or to change judgment of their value. Moreover, Christian sarcophaguses, catacombs and wedding caskets were often decorated with pagan symbols. Death and love are universal. Occasions such as funerals and weddings therefore, are natural channels for handing down traditional symbols and metaphors without altering their meanings according to a contemporary ideology. In other words: latest 'fashions' in interpreting certain symbols should not too readily be assumed. Tradition is at least as important. Literary evidence of this phenomenon is given by Pseudo-Oppianus' *Cynegetica*.

The fact that Eros could have been seen or was meant to be seen in the light of Christian faith in this phase in history is by no means denied. The aforementioned harmony of apparent contradictions and natural continuity however, adds more to the understanding of the visual Eros tradition of the ages ahead, than a speculative search for lost meanings of individual objects of art. Closely related to this natural continuity namely, is the universal human inclination to experience the universe as a logical and balanced whole. This

phenomenon would find fertile soil in Christian thought in the centuries to come. In order to do justice to the historical dynamics of the survival of the classics the focus should not particularly be on seeking and finding changing meanings of Eros in each and every individual object of art; it should rather be on clarifying Eros' position in a world picture in which the harmonious communion between present, past and future would become crucial.

Part II of this study (chapters II.1 and II.2) discusses the visual Eros tradition in the encyclopaedic context. 'Encyclopaedic' is here defined as the body of all works that aim to reflect the harmony of the universe in all its details and to honour its Creator. In this encyclopaedic world Eros no longer lived on eclectically and no longer on various cultural levels. Instead, he was exclusively received in high cultural and intellectual circles and explicitly in a context with one single God and one revealed truth that could not be questioned. Sole question was how to understand creation -including love and its antique protagonist- within this irrefutable truth. The world of Divinity itself was no longer any point of debate.

In the early Middle Ages encyclopaedists such as Isidore of Seville and Hrabanus Maurus admitted Eros into their works. In these, pagan Antiquity reached a very interested audience. Medieval learned minds had, by definition, a kaleidoscopic interest in each and every thing creation had brought forth. In praise of the Creator this interest resulted in an excessive urge to record every single piece of knowledge that could be found. This collected body of science quickly grew into a magnificent intellectual edifice in which the harmony and logic of God's creation were revealed. Although described as a lewd demon, Eros naturally lived on in this encyclopaedic framework. More than just a didactical vehicle, he was, after all, part of creation just as any other part of the physical reality. The fact that Eros was described and depicted in encyclopaedic works, mirrors of creation, is therefore right by definition. Eliminating him or any other part of creation would have been a denial of the perfection of God's universe.

Even more exuberant and inexhaustible striving to comprehend the unwavering system and logic of the universe and to work the body of knowledge into a highly elaborate intellectual construction characterize the learned world of the twelfth century. The fruits of this diligence were

encyclopaedic works such as *speculae*, *summae* and cycles of images on church facades. Herrad of Landsberg incorporated Prudentius' complete *Psychomachia*, including Eros, in her highly systemized *Hortus deliciarum*. She assigned the story a clear position in creation and made it into an actual episode in history. In image programs on church buildings Eros took his place in series of virtues and vices. These images were didactical in character and, consequently, the negative keynote clearly resounds. In regard to church buildings and the encyclopaedia's as mirrors of God's universe however, it must be stressed that Eros was part of creation firstly and a useful means to communicate a didactical message secondly. As much as every creature Eros formed an essential building block of God's supreme edifice and could not be omitted.

The virtuous Eros is the subject of part III of this study (chapters III.1 and III.2). From the encyclopaedic milieu Eros was handed down into broader social circles, those of the courts. The intellectual dimensions of courtly civilisation could not have existed without the tremendous amount of knowledge that, in the praise of God and his creation, had been accumulated and assimilated in the monastic world. The fact that Herrad of Landsberg employed the social rituals from the world of lords and vassals while working the *Psychomachia* into her *Hortus*, shows that the monasteries, in their turn, were not at all socially isolated or stagnant. The clerical and the secular worlds were by no means separated. Instead, they fostered and highly influenced each other. Herrad's *Psychomachia* forms a conservative prelude to the doctrine of courtly virtue for that matter. Courtly virtuousness, in its turn, carries many aspects of the traditional encyclopaedic systemisations of the virtues and the vices.

In the early thirteenth century Thomasin von Zerclaere wrote a didactical poem for young nobles: *Der Welsche Gast*. In this poem Thomasin managed to render the original duality to Eros. Eros still represented earthly love and did not actually regain his divine side. Earthly love however, no longer was considered evil, to be despised in all cases, nor was its tormented personification. Instead, love could make a true wise man wiser. Indeed virtue could turn love into a driving force that brought nobles to even greater virtuousness.

In the *Roman de la Rose*, finally, Eros succeeded in regaining his ultimate power and esteem. He was no longer scornful. He was no longer a device to gain virtuousness; he himself had become a purpose. He had become a lord who demanded the oath of allegiance from all. One should not be devoted *in* love to someone; one should surrender *to* love itself. All this is reflected in the ways Eros is depicted. He not only gained a servant, a crown, a throne and a cloak, he could even be portrayed carrying Saint Peter's key. His depiction in the form of an angel in a tree, his arms spread eagled and flanked by worshippers, shows how strongly nature -earthly love in this case-, the antique heritage, secular life and the world of Christian religiosity were bound together in one harmonious whole.

Vergil was very right indeed. As long as living creatures exist in this world there will be love and as long as there is love there will be life. What exactly this love may be, is, and always has been, to the discretion of all. Hence, the meaning of the antique god that embodies and causes the emotion is unstable by definition. He was never really fostered for any 'original meaning', nor was this 'original meaning' ever lost and rediscovered at any given time. Instead, he always has been, and still is, interpreted over and over again.

Eros' problematic character, combined with the rather persistent notion that the medieval Christian mind naturally assimilated the antique heritage didactically, readily legitimizes the survival of Eros and the existence of a visual Eros tradition during the Middle Ages. From this angle Eros can be looked upon as very useful. He functioned as symbol of the vice of earthly, and therefore despicable, love. True as this may be, this reading of history alone does not do justice to the effort the medieval learned men took in honour of God and his universe.

A myth or a mythological figure forms the image of an abstract universal concept. This, however, cannot be said of Eros. What exactly is the abstraction he embodies? It seems that the mythological 'image' of love is more real than the realities it refers to. Eros is consistently depicted - either in words or in a tangible image- winged, carrying his bow and arrow and possibly his torch. His apparent meaning as the cause of love is equally unchanging. The love he causes and personifies however, is subject to change to such a degree that one might say that he is rather a symbol than a representation. He

is more image than content. In the medieval Christian world picture creation is build up from images of a supernatural and absolute truth. In praise of their Creator and for the purposes of education the medieval authors were expected to record creation and to unveil its underlying harmony. Eros' thematic variety gave great freedom to explore the possibilities to incorporate him into medieval thought. Actually, he has everything a 'genuine medieval symbol' should have.

This 'genuine medieval symbol' evolved within elitist secular circles into a symbolic image of the path to virtuousness. Yet, although we might call these circles secular, clerics had not only designed the encyclopaedic world but had designed this Eros as well. In doing so they had not denounced their integrity or their loyalty to their predecessors. It was quite the opposite: by ridding a number of apparent antitheses of creation they conscientiously crowned the edifice their predecessors had constructed.