Beyond the façade

Town halls, publicity, and urban society in the fifteenth-century Low Countries

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A reflective setting: images and objects

Following the construction of Ghent’s new town hall in 1481, the city’s accounts began to capture many details about how the ‘new chamber’ was decorated. Although most of the relevant entries concern paintings, the new council chamber was also adorned with six metal candlesticks, which were acquired in 1483 or 1484. Marcus van Vaernewyck, one of Ghent’s aldermen and a historian of the city, reflected on the interior of the room in his De Historie van Belgijs of 1568. He revealed several important dimensions of these objects, emphasising how they shaped the overall impression made by the council chamber and impacted upon him as a spectator:

In this chamber, which is in the aldermen’s house of the Keure or the Hooge Bank, I noticed that attached to the walls, there are six metal candlesticks, and under each of them there is an image of a human, with a padlock of the same material in his mouth, which means that all the councillors who take a seat in this place, pensionaries, secretaries and all others, need to keep silent about what is treated in there, and that they have the have to shine in their virtuousness, just like resplendent metal. Like metal that produces a clear sound when struck, their fame should produce a favourable rumour, no matter how often it is touched. Furthermore, just as metal is sustainable, unreformable and not rusty, so too will a judge remain steady, neither inflecting nor adjusting his justice for the sake of someone he loves or hates. Also, he will refuse all corrosion by gifts and corruption, and all that contradicts justice, knowing that there is a highest judge, who sees all and judges all, who does not leave virtue unrewarded, nor the evil unpunished, just like the beautiful scenes of the paintings indicate (te kennen geven), which hang above the magistrates’ heads in the same chamber. 

1 ‘Item betaelt Janne Laerbeke vanden coope van 6 motalin candeleers die ghestelt zyn lancx de voorseyden nieuwe camere’. Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 2:138.
2 ‘In deze kamer (wezende in het Schepenhuys vander Keure, of van de hooge Bank) heb ik aen den muer gezien zes metaele kandelaeren, en onder idere van deze een menschen aenzigt van de zelve stoffe, met een mael-slot aen den mond, beteekenende dat de wethouders en alle andere persoonen die zitting in deze plaets hebben, als pensionariissen, secretariissen enz., schuldig zyn te zwyggen het geen aldaer verhandelte word; datzy door deugden behooren te blinken als een glansryk metael, en gelyk het metael eenen helderen klang van zich geeft, als men daer op slaet, daer’er aldus ook een voordeel gerught van hunne faem moet gaen, zoo menigmael als zy aengeraekt word. Voorders, gelyk het metael eene duerzaeme stoffe is, die niet ligt verandert of roest, aldus mag eenen rechter ook niet veranderen, nog het recht buygen tot voorof agterdeel van de gene die hy lief heeft of haet. Ook moet hy van hem weeren allen roest van
As far as I know, Van Vaernewyck’s text is the only extended reflection from that period on objects and paintings in town halls and their intended impact. His account captures a historical actor reflecting on the imaginary in the chamber in which he must have worked frequently. By 1568 these images were present for decades. He states explicitly what the room’s decoration meant to him, including the six metal candles, each of which was coupled with a depiction of the human head, its mouth padlocked shut. At this juncture, Van Vaernewyck recalls the oath that every alderman had to swear publicly after his election. As I discussed in chapter 2, this oath included the promise to keep the aldermen’s chamber secluded and the information it contained confidential. If an alderman broke their oath, they would be punished by the city’s law court. Against this backdrop, the candlesticks with padlocks served to remind the magistrates of the discretion required by their office.3

For Van Vaernewyck, the candlesticks emphasised the secluded character of the aldermen’s work in the council chamber. In the text, he uses them as material metaphors of the aldermen’s virtues. Referring to the substance of the candlesticks, Van Vaernewyck argued that clear and undamaged metal parallels constant, uncorrupted virtues. It was not only the candlesticks that suggested that virtuous conduct was expected in the room; according to this particular alderman, the message was reinforced by the presence of further decorations in the same chamber, namely paintings. These depicted ‘beautiful scenes’ which ‘indicate’ that corruption will not go unpunished. Van Vaernewyck’s account mentions two paintings. One depicts the cross. The other, by Cornelis vander Goest, presents a Last Judgement. The aldermen ordered the paintings in 1494 and 1496 respectively.4 For Van Vaernewyck, the message communicated by the chamber’s decoration was obvious. He took it as read that the different images collectively informed the setting and related this directly with the activities that took place in the very same space. What is

3 Just as one of the two metal heads and inscriptions placed in the same Ghent town hall, after the breaking of silence during the aldermen election in 1479 (see chapter 2). Van Uytven equally explained the meaning of the heads and padlocks as a reminder of the Ratsgeheimnisses, although he was – based on the work of Frans de Potter – convinced it concerned a chandelier. van Uytven, ‘Flämische Belfriede’, 152; F. de Potter, Gent, van den oudsten tijd tot heden. Geschiedkundige beschrijving der stad., vol. 1 (Handzame, 1969), 199.

4 ‘Een taverneel metten figuere vanden crucifixe […] omme dat te stellene inde camere van scepenen vander kuere’. And ‘Cornelis vander Goux, schildere, commen es voor scepenen vander kuere in Ghend ende kende dat hi anghenomen heeft te makene ende leverne in scepenen camere vornomt een taverneel metten figuere van oordeele ons heeren Jhesu Christi […] alzoet goet weere zwyde oft betere als tweere vanden tempereele vanden crucifixe staende inde selve camere vanden kuere’. Cornelis vander Goes (also written as ‘Gous’, or ‘Goux’) was a painter between 1475 and 1500. He was the brother of the famous Hugo vander Goes. A transcription of the contract is published in: Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 2:387–88.
more, he engaged with the objects, which clearly made a difference and influenced his experience of the council chamber.

This chapter deals with objects and images that decorated the town halls. Like spatial design, as I have established in chapters 2 and 3, visual design participates in social interactions. It influences, for instance, legal and political procedures, as well as the ways in which people relate to them. When looking at or using artworks (by placing them in a room, for example) spectators and users engage with specific images. Paintings and objects were often commissioned by the cities’ aldermen and placed in settings of which they had certain (ideal) expectations. They expected, for example, that these spaces might host public audiences or officials. Decorative elements co-constructed the settings in which they were placed, not only because they often represented these spaces, but also because particular people intentionally used them to emphasise their role in the town hall. Images and objects reflected the use of town hall settings, and constituted reflection themselves, a complexity to which the title of this chapter refers. Beyond new commissions, magistrates needed to relate to artworks already in place, not least when they replaced one item with another. Other spectators might have associated the presence of particular images with specific town hall spaces and legal or political gatherings more generally. People, then, likely attributed agency to paintings and objects because they either inherited their existence and meanings, such as the candlesticks in Ghent’s council chamber, or placed them in specific places and contexts, like the penal objects I discuss below.

In his book *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell develops an anthropological theory of art. In this approach, artworks are grasped not primarily in terms of aesthetics or as bearers of meaning, but rather as actors. Historian of art and architecture Caroline van Eck has taken up Gell’s ideas on art’s agency, explaining how it influences spectators and ‘makes them feel or act in certain ways’. This approach, Van Eck suggests, rests on a theoretical account of the social relationships in which art is made, viewed, and commissioned. Although objects and images represent a ‘prototype’ (an original or influential depiction, which might lead viewers in a certain direction), the responses and interpretations they occasion are also shaped by their materiality in space, the artist, and the spectator or recipient.

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8 Van Eck, 51–52.
Artworks influenced experiences by means of their material presence as well as through what they depicted. Across different town halls, the broad visual program was clear: certain images, such as the Last Judgement, were always present, and many paintings and objects emphasised the legitimacy of justice and governance. Yet there is little evidence as to what exactly these artworks represented and how people experienced them. This makes it relatively hard to unveil how images are made and engaged with. Beyond Van Vaemewycck’s account, the sources that I have used for this research rarely attest to what Van Eck has called ‘living presence response’, that is, contemporaries’ actual experiences.9 Despite this, by tracing the selection and accumulation of objects in town halls, as well as establishing the reasoning behind their acquisition, it is possible to reconstruct (however tentatively) how representations were experienced. Whenever possible, I show examples of people’s apparent interaction with artworks. This is especially the case when documents of practice, such as criminal verdicts, refer to objects and how they related to locations, events, and the people involved.

Many of the artworks featured in this chapter were especially visible, whether they were placed in town halls’ secluded or public spaces. Many were visible to a large public. I argue that although images and objects each had a distinct individual identity, they formed a whole, collectively shaping the iconography of the town hall and courtroom. Accordingly, I make a distinction between the inventory discussed in chapter 1 (such as benches, closets and doors) and objects that bear representations, whether painted or sculpted. The latter category is not reserved exclusively for artworks. Indeed, items for more general use could also emphasise the spaces’ functions and were often laden with meaning or symbolism. They might conjure up notions of authority and legitimacy, for instance. Such pieces may have been decorated, such as the candlesticks described by Van Vearnewyck. In addition to the depictions borne on such objects, their materiality also impacted upon surrounding spaces and subjects. This chapter, then, explicitly engages with research in the field of art history.

The town hall itself was a medium of communication, with a decorative programme that was strongly related to its immediate historical context, namely the specific political situations and challenges faced by the magistrates.10 This goes especially for the images on the buildings’ façades, which indicated tensions between urban autonomy and ducal centralisation. Yet the images that figured inside the town hall did more than this. A range of representations – from stained glass

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9 Living presence response encompasses, among other things, how people reacted to, treated, envisioned objects and how they were affected by them. Van Eck, Art, Agency and Living Presence, 52. About people affected by objects, see also: Gilchrist, Medieval Life, 216–18.

windows to paintings, permanent statues to temporary wax figures – supported and influenced practices that went on in the town halls in both their ideological and pragmatic spaces. The visuality of town halls both reflected and informed their various settings and functions, encompassing the activities, procedures, and regulations that were performed within them. Although representations constructed the town hall as a governmental building, urban society at large was included as an audience. Accordingly, they implicitly acknowledge – and indeed require – the presence of ordinary people in the building.

To do so, I explore the decorative programme that emerged in the town halls of the Low Countries during the course of the fifteenth century, in parallel with the most significant town hall construction works. Although art historians and legal scholars have studied the visual culture of town halls extensively, this historiography is relatively recent. It focuses primarily on paintings, not least the so-called *exampla iustitiae* – paintings depicting judicial scenes (hereafter ‘justice scenes’) of both a biblical and profane character. Scholars have widely acknowledged that these justice scenes were meant to serve as inspiring examples in courtrooms or council chambers (I discuss this further later in this chapter). Yet many of the semiotic objects present in town halls have remained under the scholarly radar, partly because they did not survive and are thus no longer visible. Their presence in the town hall is indicated, however, by cursory mentions in city accounts,


criminal records, and statutes. In this chapter I discuss these objects extensively, for they reflect local economic, political, and legal tensions both within and beyond the normative messages concerning fair justice and good governance.

To analyse these messages, I first elaborate on the way in which town halls were commonly decorated. I pay special attention to justice scenes, arguing that they had effects in legal settings and shaped their meaning. In depicting aspects of trials, they addressed different people in the courtroom, possibly prompting various actors to engage with them. After that, I analyse and discuss how the urban courtroom and its materiality were imagined. I argue that both the painters themselves and members of urban councils – the authorities within town halls, who commissioned their images – purposely integrated contemporary architectural elements into various representational objects. In this way, they engaged with existing themes and images, but sought to determine the meaning and impact of the objects and the spaces they adorned. This is followed by a study of material objects that culprits were required to order as part of their punishment. Given that these objects no longer exist, I reconstruct what they were like on the basis of references to them in criminal court records, including verdicts and case files. Through this approach, I bring into focus the social negotiations preceding the commissioning of objects. Further, I reconstruct the items’ intended impacts, which were determined in interaction with governmental and non-governmental agents, procedures, and spaces. I explore the extent to which their visual messages connected local legal bodies with urban societies. By way of this inclusive semiotic approach, I aim to analyse how the objects were connected with coeval events and the built context, and how they influenced both real and ideal experiences of town halls.

Decoration, justice scenes, and legal settings

Over the course of the fifteenth century, the ways in which paintings and other decorative objects were used in town halls became noticeably standardised. Paintings were directly connected to how buildings were ideally to be used. On the one hand, decorations depicted local affiliations. On the other, they reminded magistrates of their responsibilities. Some of the evidence for town hall decoration contained in city accounts is merely opaque references to ‘an image’ (aensicht, or beelde). Mentions of ‘a scene’ (tavereel) possibly imply justice scenes, but do not specify the scene in question. Other references are more explicit. Except for images such as that of Saint Christopher mentioned in Leiden’s city accounts in 1460, which was placed somewhere at the back of the

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council chamber, these references are generally to paintings depicting common themes and narratives in legal settings. As I argue in this section, such pictures clarified political and above all legal settings in that they indicated how people were meant to experience these spaces. Many of the paintings and objects legitimise forms of governance and justice; many were critical reminders of what was expected of people in both governmental and non-governmental roles.

From the perspective of officialdom, having recognisable, standardised images in council chambers and courtrooms served to visualise, explain, and reinforce the ways in which these settings were supposed to function. These representations remained in place to communicate with future users and visitors, too.

When it came to decoration, town hall exteriors were often more extensively furnished than their interiors. This was especially true of the richly embellished façades of town halls such as those of Bruges, Mechelen, and Brussels, as well as the wing added to Ghent in 1517-18. These richly decorated exteriors stand in contrast to the plainer buildings of fifteenth-century Ghent, Aalst, Leiden, Haarlem, and Gouda. Across these case studies, however, the exterior decoration conforms to a standard iconography. Statues of Mary, to give one example, are omnipresent outside each of these buildings. Sometimes they were placed behind glass or bars, which may have served as protection. In Aalst and Leiden, city accounts include payments made to people to light a candle next to Mary’s statue every night. Scholars relate Mary’s presence to her role as an intercessor. Perhaps the statues communicated a message of hope to culprits, or claims on religious legitimacy by the municipalities. Mary also has this role as intercessor on Last Judgement paintings, which were also ubiquitous in town halls, to be discussed below.

Although such religious iconography was prominent, in the decorative schemes on the outsides of town halls such as those in Bruges and Brussels, the dominant reference is to the ruling dynasty. This is also the case with regard to the few statues that decorated the buildings in fifteenth-century Ghent, Aalst, Gouda, Leiden, and Haarlem. Some images contained inside these town

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14 SAL, inv. no. 525, f.113r.
halls also depict local rulers. Several portraits of the counts of Flanders and scenes relating to their lives, for example, hung on the walls of the Ghent council chamber. Amongst them were paintings of counts Baldwin VII and Charles the Good. These representations were accompanied by justice scenes, now lost, which may have referred to their violent treatment of the rebellious nobility.¹⁸ Other decorations in Ghent’s town hall referred to lords and counts, such as undefined images of counts acquired in 1426 and for the newly built town hall after 1481. A tabernacle with an undefined but noble coat of arms was made in 1480 and the coats of arms of Maximillan and Philip the Good were acquired in 1486.¹⁹ In Leiden, several artists depicted the counts of Holland for the town hall between 1462 and 65. Four statues were positioned above the door to the council chamber and four panels, displaying fourteen depictions of counts in total, hung either in that same chamber or the lobby.²⁰ Paintings of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold were amongst the latter panels.²¹ Another image of Charles the Bold decorated Gouda’s town hall.²²

Although historians have often argued that the buildings’ princely iconography indicated the cities’ consciousness of themselves as distinct sites of power, they disagree on how. Sacha Köhl, for instance, has argued that the iconography focused on royal personages emphasised the county of Flanders’ autonomy and the cities’ roles as centres in a time when they were to be incorporated into Burgundian territory.²³ Peter Stabel, by contrast, has emphasised that town halls’ decorative programmes stressed loyalty to the rightful prince, for he legitimised the power of the aldermen. This was the case, Stabel suggests, even in rebellious cities. Through this, representations in town halls ‘paid homage to the existing social order’.²⁴ Either way, decorative programmes on

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¹⁸ In 1127, rebellion resulted in the assassination of Charles the Good in Bruges. Baldwin personally hanged the rebellious noblemen for violating the peace. He had one of them boiled in oil. The assassins of count Charles were later besieged with the help of Ghent militia. Van Tyghem, *Het stadhuis van Gent*, 1:52; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, 60, 65.


²⁰ SAL, inv. no. 527, f.161v; 528, f.166v; 530, f.155r.

²¹ SAL, inv. no. 532, f.140v.


²³ Köhl, ‘Princely Architecture’, 194. In that line of argument, the choice to depict ‘first counts’ or local lords is more obvious, e.g. Baldwin. In Aalst, was decorated with a copper Child of Aalst in 1465. This Child of Aalst referred to Diederik of Aalst, the last lord of the city (1144-1166). ARA, reg. 31459, f.38v.

town hall façades underscored the magistrates’ claims to legitimate governance. Significantly, these buildings promulgated this message in the centre of the town, visible to both city inhabitants and external visitors. When it came to the interior decoration, however, the urban governors sought to express the ideal social order in more varied ways. Here, too, images and objects bolster claims of political legitimacy. But they also present allegories of good and just governance, such as images and objects indicating ideas about decision making and the administration of justice. Unlike the messages put forward by the ornamental façades, for the most part these decorations served to remind the magistrates and audiences of their roles and responsibilities. Given that these images addressed a varied public and were acquired for specific spaces, the messages that they conveyed were connected more closely with their specific urban, legal, and political contexts. Occasionally they even referred to specific individuals in the urban community. In other words, these messages were direct and comprehensible to various city inhabitants, who entered the town hall frequently. The representations may have been more opaque, however, to visitors from outside the city.

The conformism that was characteristic of interior decorations must have made the connections between space, art, and people more intense. Art historian Juliaan de Ridder has ascertained that at least one justice scene could be found in the council chamber or courtroom of every town hall. Such depictions typically depict an allegory or historical example of a judicial decision, informing the viewer about honest and proper judicial administration, legal duty, and the legitimacy of those dispensing justice in the present court. These images had a ‘pictorial educative mission [that] was aimed not only at the general populace but also at the decision makers’. Furthermore, the inventory of each public courtroom contained at least three objects: a crucifix, a res sacra (an object used for the swearing of oaths), and an image of the Last Judgement. De Ridder has even argued that a public courtroom could function only when a Last Judgement was present. In recording the acquisition of such depictions, city accounts confirm their ubiquity. Still, the sources also suggest they these images were collected only gradually. In Ghent, the aldermen ordered a Last Judgement scene fourteen years after they had commissioned the building. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the only decoration used in Ghent’s town hall in

26 Resnik and Curtis, Representing Justice, 34.
27 De Ridder, Gerechtigheidstaferelen, 154; See as well: Resnik and Curtis, Representing Justice, 34; Edgerton, Pictures and Punishment, 32.
28 De Ridder seems to base his statement on the fact that Dirk Bouts had to paint the Last Judgement, meant for Brussel’s council chamber, before commencing with the Judgement of Emperor Otto, even though both paintings were ordered at the same time. De Ridder, Gerechtigheidstaferelen, 52.
the early fifteenth century was a wooden crucifix, which hung above the public courtroom.29 City accounts mention Last Judgement scenes made for Aalst in 1422, Gouda in 1458, and Leiden in 1462, but there is no evidence for Haarlem. The aldermen often got underway with decorative programmes shortly after renovations to the town hall had commenced or when new buildings were acquired.30 Paintings of the Last Judgement were common, if not pervasive in town halls in the fifteenth century, although they would slowly disappear over the course of the sixteenth.31

Aalst’s city accounts for 1422 suggest that the assignment that the aldermen gave to the painter Claus Poulette was influenced by aesthetic competition between town halls. In asking Poulette to paint a Last Judgement, they included the condition that it should be ‘as good as or better than the Judgement in Brussels’.32 The image was important in bolstering the aldermen’s authority. In studying the relationship between art and law during the Florentine renaissance, art historian Samuel Edgerton noted that from the twelfth century onwards, Last Judgement scenes were likened to law courts. In view of this, the arrangement of figures and other elements depicted in such paintings changed. Whereas previously Last Judgement paintings were apocalyptic, emphasising the end of the world and second coming of Christ, following this shift they tended to foreground Jesus’s role as judge and humankind’s as defendant.33

Legal scholars and historians have put forward other accounts of how depictions of this particular scene were used. Some argue that having once decorated church porches, where judicial sessions were previously held, paintings of the Last Judgement were then moved into dedicated legal spaces in the town hall as they were built.34 Others have underlined the moralising, didactic aspect of representations of the Last Judgement, which they argue expressed the hope that ideal justice could be realised in the here-and-now as well as at the end of days. The contemporary judge, on this view, was positioned as a representative of divine justice. If witnesses, defendants, or other parties committed perjury, then it was understood that true justice would await them in the

29 Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 1:50.
30 This is clearly visible in the city accounts of Gouda and Leiden. In Gouda, cost items first mention the council room and public courtroom in 1455-56, and a Last Judgement in 1458. In Leiden, the 1460-62 adaptations of the town hall were followed by the addition of Last Judgement and princely depictions. See chapter 1, and SAMH, AC1.1148, f.25r; SAL, inv. no. 528, f.166v.
31 Kristin Zapalac argued that the disappearance of the Last Judgment as obvious depiction in the sixteenth-century North-European courtrooms was a result of the Reformation, as Luther rejected the image of Christ as a strict and wrathful judge. K. Zapalac, ‘In His Image and Likeness’: Political Iconography and Religious Change in Regensburg, 1500-1600 (Ithaca, 1990), 55.
32 ‘Item ende dit oordeel es bestaet te werkene an Claus Poulette ende es voorwaerde dat hyt maken sal also goed of beter als toordeel es te Brussel in de camere van scepenen so de voorwaerde inhoud’. ARA, reg. 31427, f.115r.
33 Edgerton, Pictures and Punishment, 23.
34 Martyn, ‘Painted Exampla Iustitiae’, 341.
hereafter. In the same period, literature describing the relationship between earthly judges and divine justice was widespread in the Low Countries. In particular, these writings reflected on the consequences of corruption. Accordingly, Judith Resnik and Dennis Curtis have suggested focusing on how the selection of certain images, such as the Last Judgement, reflected understandings of the judge’s position. Such accounts, however, underestimate the significance of these common scenes. Last Judgements were the centrepieces of courtroom settings. They referred not only to the status of judges, but also to how the roles played by lawyers, parties, defendants, and audiences were understood. Given the images’ placement in actual courtrooms and the ways in which judge and defendants were staged in the representations themselves, it seems that the object addressed many spectators.

As I have noted, paintings were placed in the council chamber and public courtroom. In his *Rechtboek van Den Briel* (c.1405), Jan Matthijsen stressed that the council chamber should be cleaned and furnished with pictures and adages referring to traditional, well-known examples of the proper administration of justice. This would prompt the council to reflect on their practice.

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39 ‘Die raetcamer sal binnen suverlic ghemaect wesen ende besait van poortraturen ende besceven mit goeden ouden wyser leeren, dairmen verder wijsheit ende vroetscip uut verstaen sal moghen; want men pleech te segghen: aensien doet ghedenken; ende dat is sonder twivel wairachtich’. Fruin and Pols, *Het rechtsboek van den Briel*, 80. An English translation of this section is given by Hugo van der Velden: ‘The judge’s chambers should be clean and furnished with pictures, and display good, old, wise adages conveying wisdom and knowledge; for it is said: seeing provokes reflection; and without a doubt this is true’. Van der Velden, ‘Cambyses for Example’, 15.
Fig. 4.1. The miniature *Meeting of the Regensburg Council*, 1536 by Hans Mielich (1516-1573). The miniature can be found on f.2 of the *Regensburg Freiheitsbuch*, Stadtarchiv Regensburg. Image taken from The Web Gallery of Art.
Although Matthijsen does not indicate the exact location of these images and sayings, he implies that they were visible and gives a suggestion of the goals that they were meant to achieve. It seems that the pieces were hung in places where they would have both caught the eye of the aldermen and been visible to other participants in legal procedures. Depending on the location of the public courtroom and position of spectators, it was on view for a larger audience. In Gouda, a Last Judgement scene hung somewhere in the vierschaar, but it is unclear precisely where. The indications are clearer in the case of Aalst. Here, magistrates placed a painting of the Last Judgement above the aldermen’s seats in the council chamber, which also functioned as the public courtroom. In this position, it could potentially be seen by a large audience. The same cannot be said of Leiden, where a new public courtroom was built within the town hall in 1582. By this time at the latest, five new justice scenes – including a Last Judgement – furnished the wall opposite the seats of the sheriff and aldermen, above the partition. As a result, these depictions, which together formed one large painting, were only visible from within the public courtroom, ‘in the eye of sheriff and aldermen’. Decorated law books from Germany in this period show where such paintings were placed in courtroom settings. A 1536 miniature by Hans Mielich, Meeting of the Regensburg Council (fig. 4.1), shows that a Last Judgement hung in the room used by the council of Regensburg, a town in southeastern Germany. Positioned at the end of the circle of aldermen, the painting is visible to anyone walking into the room. Another example is the depiction of a courtroom scene in a Hamburg miniature from 1497, which shows a small Last Judgement scene appears above the seated judges, rather like that indicated in Aalst’s city accounts.

In all cases, Last Judgments were placed in the public courtroom and justice scenes in the chambers used by city councils. They were very common and, as such, shaped to judicial settings. This was especially the case with regard to the vierschaar, for this room was only used during courtroom sittings. Although they would have been most visible in the public courtroom, the presence and influence of these paintings would have reached beyond that legal space. As

40 ‘Item so heift Gillis de scueremaker 1 berd ghelaect boven der siege daer scepenen sitten in hare camere 1 lyste ghesneden. Item so heift de voor. scueremaker 1 berd ghemaect omme toordeel van pourtraituren in ghemaect thebben’. ARA, reg. 31427, f.115r. ‘Dat tavereel vanden oirdel hangende indie vierscaeren’. SAL, inv. 528, f.166v; Abels et al., Duizend jaar Gouda, 244; Helbers, ‘De geschiedenis van het gebouw en zijn voorgangers’, 101.
42 It concerns a miniature in the Freiheitsbuch, the city’s privileges. Another example is the depiction of a courtroom scene in a 1497 Hamburg miniature. Zapalac, In His Image and Likeness, 26–29.
43 Zapalac, 32–33.
Matthijsen’s treatises suggest, justice scenes were meant to prompt members of the courts to reflect on their legal responsibilities. The Ghent alderman Van Vaernewyck, whom I discussed earlier, affirmed that similar images inspired him in this way. Once hung, paintings could influence the ways in which aldermen thought about their tasks and communicated with a larger audience to whom law courts were answerable: God as the highest judge. Zapalac suggests that depictions of the Last Judgement also became embedded in legal procedures in that those swearing oaths pointed to them, reminding those present of that God was supervising the ritual. The images, then, represented forms of legitimacy to a range of governmental and non-governmental actors, and possibly shaped how historical actors participated in legal procedures.

Another common visual element in town halls was green cloth. In Aalst in both 1454 and 1463, artisans covered the council chamber, aldermen’s seats, tables, and the steward’s chamber in green. In Leiden, too, such covering was used for seats in the lobby, council chamber, and writing room. That said, the relevant city accounts indicate that some of the fabric was only used during the winter (and stored in summer), which suggests that the cloth was also used for insulation. The cloth was occasionally cleaned or repainted. In Haarlem, at least several tables were decorated in a similar fashion and some windows of the town hall and public courtroom were painted green. Ghent’s aldermen had seats covered in red after 1426, but by 1482 their new council chamber, the benches, and tables were draped in green. Despite the clear recurrence of green as a decorative element, there is hardly any evidence as to why the interiors of these buildings were often covered in this particular colour. Theologians and prelates have often referred to green as the colour of faith, nature, spring, rebirth, and God’s creation, associating it with hope, health, and balance. These associations were informed by Aristotle’s colour axis. The comprehensive use of green in town halls, therefore, may have referred to natural elements, as did the occasional addition of floral treatments.

44 Zapalac refers to a 1493-49 painted panel by Derick Baegert, Oath-taking in Courtroom. On the painting, a Last Judgement is depicted on the left of the chief magistrate. He makes a gesture similar to Christ, pointing at the Last Judgement, emphasizing the weight attached to an oath. Zapalac, 45–46.

45 ‘Ommie scepene siegen ende tcontoir up tscpepenen huus mede te ecleedene ende te overdeckene’. ARA, reg. 31448, f.34r; ‘Groens lakens daer de siege van scepene, dletryn ende tcontoor in dondfanghers camere mede gheedect ende overeleezyn’. ARA, 31457, f.39v.

46 ‘Wollen groenlaken om de schryne ende bancken opnue voircamer te becleed’en’. SAL, inv. no. 524, f.126v; 527, f.134r; ‘Om des winterdages dat verhemelt dair an te hangen dat somers staet in die schoorstien op die nyeue camer’. SAL, 530, f.135v; 532, f.174r; 559, f.205r; 562, f.223v.

47 SAH, inv. no. 340, f.41r; 354, f.39r; 360, f.71v.

48 Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 2:60, 137.

and more generally botanical ornaments. This suggests that the decoration was intended to represent urban governance as balanced and blooming. Perhaps these decorations also evoked the outdoor locations in which court sessions were once held, often in the proximity of a tree. As I show in the next section, this interpretation is reinforced by the fact that outdoor courtrooms were depicted in the paintings in these spaces.

As a further means of emphasising their judicial and civic character to visitors, some town halls featured inscriptions explaining its functions and recalling the ideas behind governmental and legal practices. Such texts were not added to all town halls and could vary between cities. In Gouda, for example, gilded letters were placed above the front door to the town hall in 1450 and replaced in 1497. ‘Audit et alteram partem’, they declared: listen to the other party. A similar message was placed above the door of the public courtroom in Haarlem. This inscription articulated the building’s function as a courthouse and directly indicates that magistrates were expected to know how to arrive at a proper judgement. In sum, the decorative elements in which town halls were covered served to inform visitors and users that they were walking and practising in legitimate civic and courtroom settings, modelled after a Christian paradigm of justice.

50 The colour red was associated with justice. G. Martyn and V. Paumen, ‘Hemelse rechtspraak op Limburgse grond. Enkele rechticonologische opmerkingen over “Tweevooudige gerechtigheid” (Jan van Brussel)’, Koninklijk Limburgs Geschied- en Oudheidkundig Genootschap 25 (2018): 211. For example, the collatiesolder of Ghent was decorated with flowers and leaves in 1485. Martens, De muurschilderkunst te Gent, 170.

51 In Zwolle, a city in the eastern part of the current Dutch territory (then Oversticht) the message was rather extensive. It explained to the (literate) spectator which functions the building had: a place for official proclamations by magistrates, and a place of justice. Both the original Latin text and a translation are given by Phaff. According to him, the Latin text decorated the 1448 tower of the town hall. ‘Adspice substructum qui praeteris arte theatrum unde magistratus publica iussa promulgantur. Lectissima nomina patrum, caput accensis facibus quid? Quod censura severi iudicis exilio notat / Gij, die hier voorbijgaat, ziet naar dit gebouw, dat als een theater voor U oprijst. Van hier hoort ge de publicke bevelen weerklanken. Uitgevaardigd door de Magistraat. Ook worden hier de uitnemende namen bekend gemaakt van hen, die in de vroedschap zijn gekozen. Op deze plaats verneemt het volk de tijdingen van vrede en droevige oorlog. Wat beduidt het ontsteken der fakkels? Dan weerklinkt het vonnis van de strenge rechter over hen die gedoemd zijn verbannen te worden’. H. Phaff, Raadhuis-spreuken (The Hague, 1983), 134. Famously, (fragments of) the political poem ‘How one shall govern a city’ was inscribed in several town halls in the Southern Low Countries and Germany. M. de Boodt, ‘“How One Shall Govern a City”: The Polyphony of Urban Political Thought in the Fourteenth-Century Duchy of Brabant’, Urban History 46, no. 4 (2019): 578–96.

52 According to Phaff, the saying was taken from Seneca’s tragedy Medea. It means that before any verdict is agreed upon, also the other party should be heard. Contrary to Gouda’s example, the phrase was usually placed in the aldermen’s chamber (such as in ‘The Hague). Phaff, Raadhuis-spreuken, 22, 116; Helbers, ‘De geschiedenis van het gebouw en zijn voorgangers’, 146.

53 Probably in 1454-55. Cerutti, Het stadhuis van Haarlem, 84.
Imagining the town hall and the courtroom

Not many of the paintings made for town halls have survived. The few that have depict not only the legal settings in which justice was administered, but also the material staging of legal proceedings. Some represent the ways in which courtrooms were generally set up, others depict architectural elements, while still others incorporate the wider urban landscape of the time. A visual language that is characteristic of interior courtroom settings is clearly present in many of the justice scenes that decorated town halls. I show how these images strongly related to ideologies of openness in courtroom settings that prevailed in this period.

Buildings and the use of judicial spaces inspired the modification of depicted scenes. Magistrates placed paintings referring to decision making and above all the administration of justice in the appropriate spaces in the town hall. These objects attest to the importance that contemporaries attached to reflecting on justice. Accordingly, justice scenes were placed so as to provide examples of ideal judicial conduct in legal spaces. In what follows, I analyse a painting that decorated Haarlem’s town hall, made by an unknown painter between 1465 and 1480 (fig. 4.2).54 It depicts the justice scene known as ‘Christ before Pilate’ or ‘Ecce Homo’, which the artist has staged in the environs of Haarlem’s late medieval urban public courtroom.

In addition to offering a clear representation of a contemporary vierschaar, as I go on to explain, this painting is the oldest known image of Haarlem’s town hall.55 The painting is a rare example in that it depicts such a building; indeed, historian Jelle de Rock has argued that city halls scarcely appear in late medieval iconography.56 Save for a negligible amount of other examples, which appear only sporadically, only justice scenes seem to have depicted town halls. Over the course of the fifteenth century, however, town hall architecture started to appear on paintings, especially Dirk Bouts’ and Gerard David’s diptychs. X-ray research has revealed that Gerard David originally painted more generic buildings before replacing with specific buildings from Bruges’ urban landscape.57 This is a clear example of how an artist altered an original narrative (in this case the story of Cambyses) in the way that they stage the scene. According to De Rock, representations of architecture in Bouts’ and David’s paintings affirmed judicial power.58 On this reading, it would...

54 The painting is currently in possession of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam (but not exhibited). The museum dates it c.1480.
56 This also accounts to painted town views. J. de Rock, *The Image of the City in Early Netherlandish Painting (1400-1550)* (Turnhout, 2019), 160.
58 In the first panel of Bouts, showing the Beheading of the innocent count, an ‘impressive castle’ symbolises princely jurisdiction. The second panel (*The ordeal by fire*) resembles a victory for justice, as the judge finds out that he has made...
seems that Haarlem’s aldermen sought to legitimised their legal authority in a very clear urban context of built environment and in the presence of an audience. In this regard, Haarlem’s ‘Christ before Pilate’ is not unique. More examples of justice scenes, including Last Judgements, realistically depict town halls and courtrooms.

To better understand the possible meaning of Haarlem’s painting, it is worth to focus on some specific aspects of the scene. The subject of ‘Christ before Pilate’ refers to the biblical episode in which Jewish leaders brought Jesus to the Roman governor Pilate so that he could be tried. Not seeing much reason to charge Jesus, Pilate asked the gathered crowd whether he should release the prisoner, as was customary during Passover (this, at least, is what the gospels of Mark and John suggest). The crowd replied they wanted the criminal Barabbas to be released instead. John tells us that having had Jesus flogged, Pilate addressed the crowd again. He told them there was no basis for a charge and declared: ‘Behold, the man!’ (Ecce Homo). The crowd, however, responded with shouts of ‘crucify!’

Matthew writes that before this public trial, ‘while Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.”’ In acquiescing to the crowd’s demand that Jesus be crucified, Pilate washes his hands with water, announcing he is innocent – it is rather the people to choose to shed Jesus’ blood.

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a mistake. It depicts what appears to be the Brussel town hall, exemplifying the urban law court. de Rock, *The Image of the City*, 166. As De Rock points out, there is debate about the legitimizing function of David’s panels. Art historians saw it as political manifesto or a depiction of a struggle between courtly and urban justice. This has been (partly) rejected since Hans van Miergroet opted to see the painting as political allegory, referring to a revolt against Maximilian and aldermen convicted of corruption. Maryan Ainsworth has argued against this interpretation, especially since the ducal identification seemed incorrect. She also stated that the painting was made ten years after the revolt. Earlier, Hugo van der Velden also questioned the paintings political character and argued to interpret David’s panels as justice scenes. H. van Miergroet, ‘Gerard David’s “Justice of Cambyses” Exemplum Justitiae or Political Allegory?’, *Simiolus* 18, no. 3 (1988): 116–33; Ainsworth, *Gerard David*, 62; Van der Velden, ‘Cambyses reconsidered’.

59 Matthew 19; 1-16. 60 Matthew 27: 19. 61 Matthew 27: 11-26. Scholars have studied Jesus’ trial from a Roman-legal perspective. They argued that Jesus received a fair trial according to contemporary law, being accused of crimes against majesty or sedition when brought to Pilate. Jesus’ refusal to make a clear statement was sufficient for conviction. See e.g. (also for further references): D. Chapman and J. Schnabel, *The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus: Texts and Commentary* (Tübingen, 2015), 421–23. Jonathan Burnside avers that ‘as far as the Gospels are concerned’ the trials were not the trials of Jesus at all, but the trial of the religious authorities, Herod, Pilate, and the people. J. Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (Oxford, 2011), 463.
Fig. 4.2. Anonymous, *Christ before Pilate*, Haarlem ca. 1465-1480, oil on panel. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, accession number 3387.
This scene is clearly recognisable on the Haarlem painting. Two guards, one of whom has a grotesquely large nose, bring Christ before Pilate, who is wearing an ermine cloak. The Jewish high priest Caiaphas stands beside Pilate. He is depicted with a stick – an object associated with judges. Behind Christ and his guards, a man looks down at a dog that has entered the space. According to several art historians, his man is likely a member of the crowd outside who has walked into the courtroom. Pilate is holding a paper with text written on it – the message from his wife. Standing behind him are a cleric and other Jewish elders. A partition separates the courtroom from the market square, mirroring the public courtroom. The courtroom is depicted in the background as one of the two buildings attached to the town hall. The demarcation consists of a wooden panel with bars; a door is open. A crowd outside the courtroom is visible through the bars and door. A female character and a guard stand amongst the wider throng of people.

_Ecce Homo_ is a well-known and widely depicted scene, represented by Netherlandish painters from Hans Memling to Hieronymous Bosch. That said, paintings with this theme are not known to have appeared often in council rooms or courtrooms. What is more, painters have rarely situated the scene in the context of a town hall or its surroundings. In the Haarlem case, however, the architectural background to the biblical scene is very recognisable. Some few details aside, the large building in the middle distance resembles Haarlem’s town hall. At the time that this picture was painted, this was how the town hall must have looked. It had a main hall and two adjacent public courtroom spaces. The church behind the town hall, which was discovered during excavations in 1956, was part of the Dominican cloister.
just above the building, was likely destroyed during a storm in 1465.\(^69\) It is unclear whether the building represented on the right of the panel, which rather resembles a castle keep, corresponded to a building that existed historically. Historians have conjectured that it depicts a family stronghold or ducal prison tower.\(^70\) Except for a slight exaggeration of the size of the ‘small public courtroom’, the extensions on the painted town hall correspond with the expansion of Haarlem’s vier scharen around 1460 (they were originally built in 1440-41).\(^71\) If this painting was made sometime between 1465 and 1480, the artist accurately depicted Haarlem’s town centre. The town hall features prominently in the painting. Not only is the building clearly visible in the background, but it indicates where the judgment scene is staged, namely in the urban public courtroom of Haarlem.

The meaning behind the painting is ambiguous. On the one hand, the chosen theme has to do with a judge making a dubious decision. Although he saw Jesus as an innocent man, he nonetheless sentenced him as if he were a convicted criminal. On the other hand, the represented story describes how the Jewish leaders whipped up the crowd to demand that Christ be prosecuted. The judge was powerless, but the religious leaders and spectators were not.\(^72\) The painting could have been meant to show a miscarriage of justice. On this reading, it would have served to warn Haarlem’s judges to be wary of making such mistakes themselves.\(^73\) However, the events in the painting would eventually lead to Christian salvation. Following his resurrection, Christ (his wounds visible) would assume the role of judge, as depicted in the Last Judgement scenes. Both Pilate as judge and the crowd played a vital role in the biblical scene. It is possible, though, the painting approaches the scene from the same perspective as contemporary law courts, for whom Christ oversaw judicial practice as the ultimate judge. The image also addressed audiences and witnesses in that a crowd is presented prominently in the painting. They are visible through the demarcation; what is more, one member of the public seems to have walked into the courtroom through the open door. In this way, the painter made it clear that the trial was open and meant to be witnessed. Taking into account the interventions that the audience was allowed to make, in the


\(^{72}\) Liesbeth Helmus, who wrote the contribution on Haarlem’s ‘Christ before Pilate’ in the following catalogue, noted the caricatural depiction of characters, implying stereotyping. Lammertse and Giltaij, *Schilderkunst van de late Middeleeuwen*, 129.

\(^{73}\) Lammertse and Giltaij, 129.
biblical narrative as well as in the here-and-now, the painting emphasises the possibility of dialogue between Pilate (or the medieval judge) and the witnesses.74

The painting simultaneously communicates an inspiring message to the different participants in legal procedures and visualises the courtroom’s openness to the public. As such, it contains a multiplicity of potential messages. In fact, it combines them: properly conducted justice, the painting suggests, is conducted in an open courtroom. Despite its relatively small size (26,5 centimetres wide and 38,8 centimetres tall75), when placed in the council chamber, the painting could have been seen not only by those administering justice, but also by culprits and witnesses during hearings, as well as legal parties in some civil disputes.76

There are many differences among depictions made for town halls and courtrooms. Nevertheless, the elements that I have identified above recur in different examples. At first glance, this is less obvious with regard to Last Judgement scenes, which tend to be quite generic. As art historian Kristin Zapalac has argued, however, these images did not offer ‘a simple analogy to the trial held in late-medieval municipal court, nor did it serve only as a subtle iconic legitimation of the power of the temporal judge. Instead, the Last Judgement itself was present in the courtroom, evidence for that final trial was there being collected and weighed’.77 Some examples of these scenes contain recognisable depictions of a courtroom, with references to architecture or seated aldermen. Last Judgements that include aspects of secular staging are often referred to as ‘Dual Justice’ scenes. In the following sections, I analyse a few of these images, showing how they communicated a properly organised courtroom as part of magistrates’ broader legitimising strategy.

Four Dual Justice scenes have been preserved. Magistrates of the German city of Würzburg ordered one around 1400. It depicts Christ as a judge, positioned in between Mary, John, and the twelve apostles.78 A trial takes place in the lower half of the image, within a circular wooden demarcation representing a courtroom setup that recalls circular outdoor courtrooms. Outside the partition, a few people are watching the legal procedure. The image shares its visual language with the 1478 Last Judgement made for the German town hall of Graz (fig. 4.3). Here, too, the lower portion of the picture depicts an earthly courtroom. The judge – a portrayal of the

76 Cerutti, Schretlen, Lammertse and Giltaij have confirmed this place, but Hoogewerff doubts this (but could not find proof for an alternative location).
77 Zapalac, In His Image and Likeness, 37; Van der Velden, ‘De broer van de koning’, 162–63.
lawyer Nicolas Strobel – is positioned in the centre, just below Christ, and is flanked by associates. A demarcation separates the courtroom from the world outside, although one man on either side of the image is able to peer over the wall. Their gaze, however, is focused on Christ. That said, they seem to be watching the trial critically: one of the men is counting on his hand (the same gesture being made by a member of the court) and the other holds a piece paper that has been written upon.

Fig. 4.3. Anonymous, Judge Nicolas Strobel and the Last Judgement, 1478, oil on panel, Stadtmuseum Graz.

79 Zapalac, *In His Image and Likeness*, 48–49. Paintings depicting urban magistrates occurred more often, but it was not a commonality. Usually, these were more prestigious examples, such as those made for Leuven and Bruges. It is believed that five figures on the *Justice of emperor Otto III* by Dirk Bouts were members of the Leuven council. Also, the *Judgement of Cambyses* by Gerard David contains twenty portraits, amongst them many magistrates. S. Mareel, ‘Spiegels van rechtvaardigheid. Gerechtigheidstaferelen in de Nederlanden.’, in *Roep om rechtvaardigheid. Recht en onrecht in de kunst uit de Nederlanden, 1450-1650*, ed. S. Mareel (Veurne, 2018), 59.
Fig. 4.4. Jan van Brussel, *Dual justice*, 1477 (or 1499), oil on panel, Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht, inv. no. 6353
Sometime between 1475 and 1477, the magistrates of Maastricht commissioned a painting of Dual Justice (fig. 4.4). The cityscape of Maastricht forms the background of what is in some ways is a traditional image of the Last Judgment. In contrast to many such scenes, though, it depicted a courtroom in the lower left-hand corner. Unlike the examples referred to above, this is clearly an interior space. Christ himself is accompanied by Mary and John, and seven women and seven men. These richly dressed people are possibly saints. In the courtroom, two parties stand before the law court. One carries a red cloak (perhaps a magistrate) and money pouch. The other party is represented by a man with worn-out clothes. This is probably an image of civil justice. The painting seems to warn the judges against outside influences, especially corruption through bribes or bias. Behind the judges, a devilish figure – his hands full of golden coins – encourages the judges to accept goods and money. By means of written words, he argues they are in a position to profit and would be foolish to reject such rewards. Outside the courtroom, on the right, an angel asks them to stay vigilant. He tells the magistrates they should not let themselves be influenced by gifts or hate. Instead, they should administer justice, for hell awaits them otherwise.

It is unclear which of Maastricht’s magistrates ordered the painting and for which space. Georges Martyn and Vanessa Paumen suggest that it was bought by the urban law court or the Council of Maastricht (a judicial body, supported by Charles the Bold, that functioned between 1473 and 1477). In either case, it would have decorated a public courtroom, occupying the traditional location for Last Judgement scenes. Moreover, the image’s depiction of a civil hearing would have been the most appropriate for a vierschaar, for this is where such trials were held. The city’s coat of arms (a silver star on a red shield) appears at one of the windows of the depicted courtroom, as well as in its upper right-hand corner. The cityscape in the background also clearly refers to the urban context of Maastricht. When this painting was acquired, the city had no town hall but used separate houses. Amongst them, however, one was designated as a courthouse. The Council of Maastricht or an urban law court used the painting’s imagination of the urban setting to affirm its position in the city. The image was intended to stage a stereotypical scene of an indoor secular courtroom.

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80 De Ridder dated the painting around 1475, but Hugo van der Velden refers to 1499. In the most recent publications, there is no consensus, and estimations vary from 1475 to 1499. De Ridder, Gerechtigheidstafelen, 62–65; Van der Velden, ‘De broer van de koning’, 162; Paumen, ‘Rechtspraak naar het voorbeeld van de hemelse rechter’, 34; Martyn and Paumen, ‘Hemelse rechtspraak’, 205.


82 ‘Gij die sijt heren, leert recht verkeren, nempt goet ende gelt, die gij hebdt leyt, te doen gewelt, nempt altijt baet, dat is myn raet, ist recht oft kom des nyet en laet, anders gij gaat voer gheck ende dom’.

83 ‘Gy die sijt raedt, u ougen op slaet, aen dese figure die sake verstaet, mit goeder maet, doet recht al pure, des nyet ende laet, om gunst off haet, noch om gheyn hure, anders ghij gaat die rechte si aet te helsscher vure’.

84 Another urban high court was located nearby. Martyn and Paumen, ‘Hemelse rechtspraak’, 210–12.
The anti-corruption message put forward in the painting is therefore infused with notions of heavenly justice and contextualised in an urban courtroom with a recognisable social and physical setting. More than just an inspiring image for the judges themselves, it seems to address all of the courtroom’s users, for whom it held up an image of ideal justice. Indeed, the images that I have discussed above communicate to a range of participants in legal procedures – parties, lawyers, witnesses, audiences – who might have had either validating and contesting influences on proceedings. As I have shown in chapters 2 and 3, municipalities tried to regulate behaviour so as to administer justice and come to decisions in what they saw as the proper way. Disturbances of political and legal procedures were undesirable and punishable. The authorities were especially concerned to establish order in the council chamber and public courtroom, mirroring the moral legal spaces depicted in town hall paintings.

These paintings provided visual cues to the magistrates, reflecting their will to monitor interior legal practices. Securing properly functioning courtroom settings and smooth judicial procedures was meant to ensure clarity and avoid corruption. The staging of legal iconography in an urban courtroom not only served to explain the judicial performance, but also accentuated the importance of the space. This courtroom, the paintings emphasised, facilitated the legitimate administration of justice. Panels such as those from Maastricht and Haarlem are especially pronounced examples of courtroom spaces, for they include separate court constructions in the image. That said, they also fit into a larger trend, in which town hall architecture was increasingly appearing in paintings. This tendency may have been initiated by the construction of town halls or painters seeing the buildings being used. In their efforts to legitimise their governance of urban populations and administration of justice, the legal bodies that used these spaces and acquired paintings also influenced the pictures. Such interventions in town hall iconography and its messages, then, became part of the courtroom setting.

In contrast with most other known justice scenes and Dual Justice paintings, the panel from Maastricht does not depict spectators outside or around the court structure. Onlookers were often portrayed in representations of urban law courts, which attests to the openness of legal activities and the importance of spectators as witnesses. Zapalac notes that justice scenes and miniatures of court settings offer viewers glimpses of bustling urban life, often showing citizens watching through the windows.85 In addition to depicting audiences, famous paintings made by Dirck Bouts and especially Gerard David present other analogies of openness. Justice scenes made by both painters feature lodges on town hall exteriors, allowing viewers to see the wider urban

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85 Zapalac, *In His Image and Likeness*, 32.
context, as opposed to enclosed indoor chambers. David painted a particularly lively representation of Bruges, which clearly includes the town hall (fig. 4.4). A wider view of the urban landscape can be seen in the reflective surface of a soldier’s helmet. Although any trial in this period would have taken place in a purpose-built space, this was not as how they were imagined. Instead, paintings placed legal proceedings in open, publicly visible settings.

Fig. 4.4. Gerard David, *The Justice of Cambyses*, 1498, oil on panel, dyptich. This is a fragment of the left panel, showing the arrest of Sisamnes. Groeningenmuseum Bruges. © Collection Musea Brugge, www.lukasweb.be – Art in Flanders.

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The Dual Justice from Maastricht also seems to emphasise accessibility and openness of justice, for the courtroom that it depicts has many visible openings. On the right-hand side there is a large opening, through which both parties seem to have entered the room. One of the four windows is ajar and through it a bit more of the cityscape can be seen. There is even an open door in ‘Christ before Pilate’ in Haarlem, which implies that the public courtroom was partially enclosed. The demarcation includes a railing, through which much of the market square and town hall is visible, as are the onlookers. Together, the examples that I have explored show that justice scenes (and some Last Judgment scenes) frequently refer to an open courtroom setup, often in the local urban setting in which the picture was hung. The open view on the city, the presence of spectators, and the possibility that they might influence proceedings served as a visual reminder of how a public, professional, and legitimate law court should function, as well as the threat of corruption.

In a study of the Italian city-states, architectural historian Alick Mclean has argued that public spaces remained sites of display. Magistrates framed them as such in the images, words, and actions that made up their institutional communications (the city, Mclean suggests, was their broadcasting system). Magistrates’ claims to openness in their practice are certainly apparent in the paintings that they commissioned and acquired. As I have shown in earlier chapters, however, many other agents tried to gain access to spaces reserved for decision making and the administration of justice. In so doing, they contributed to the shape of publicity. In tandem with other decorative elements, such as green cloth, these paintings emphasised the idea that open law court sessions were open, even though they were hung in indoor, purpose-built spaces. (This message did not extend to encompass council meetings, which were not depicted in the paintings). Accordingly, paintings, much like other elements in town hall spaces, influenced and contributed to a delicate message about the meaning of town hall courtrooms. This message was constructed and communicated over a long period, which endured beyond the terms of magistrates who acquired the paintings – much like the town hall itself.

87 A. Mclean, ‘Don’t Screw with the Law: Visual and Spatial Defences against Judicial and Political Corruption in Communal Italy’, in Genealogies of Legal Vision, ed. P. Goodrich and V. Hayaert (London, 2015), 179, 185–86. Art historian Ann-Kathrin Hubrich also made the connection between legal procedure, location, architecture, and decoration for the late medieval Luneburg town hall (Germany). She initiates the argument that a visual programme – showing court procedures – replaced visible dispensation of justice. According to Hubrich visibility of trial declined due to the implementation of Roman Law. As I have shown, the transition of open to interior courtrooms did not negatively impact access and visibility per se, but facilitated tools to monitor these aspects. The visualisation of openness, then, was not a replacement, but a confirmation. A. Hubrich, ‘Multi-Layered Functions of Early Modern Courtroom Equipment: Lüneburg for Example’, in The Art of Law. Representations and Iconography of Law and Justice in Context, from the Middle Ages to the First World War, ed. S. Huygebaert et al. (Cham, 2018), 157.
Objects in penal processes and socio-legal messaging

Urban law courts ordered culprits to give temporary or permanent objects to town halls as part of the penal process. Scholars have frequently studied metal fists and inscribed placards donated as a punishment. Few (art) historians, however, have focused on the many other pieces of art that convicted people acquired as part of their punishment, let alone the implications of these additions to town hall and courtroom spaces. The following paragraphs trace such objects in criminal records related to the town halls under study. I argue that these items also function as visual messages promoting the legitimacy of magistrates and urban law courts. As additions to existing court and town hall settings, these objects affected socio-legal messaging more generally.

Legal historian Paul de Win has analysed the place and significance of works of art and craft in criminal punishment. These objects, he suggests, can be divided into two categories: those intended as decorations and those serving didactic functions, which mention a crime that has been committed or a name of the condemned. According to De Win, items in the latter group are best referred to as ‘shaming penalty pieces’ in that they brought down ignominy on offenders for their crimes. Art historians agree that metal fists, heads, and placards were acquired as part of penal practice and served to shame the culprit and his family over the medium term. However, they also suggest that these objects served as *exempla*, which stood as a warning to other members of society. Edgerton has argued that the effectiveness of such penal objects relied strongly on their social and political context. They functioned when exhibited before a large audience that would recognise the victim ‘and be aware of his shame both from the likeness and the setting in which the likeness was displayed’. It was, in fact, ‘didactic art’ in the service of ‘earthly Justice’. I tend to agree that aspects of shaming and didactic messaging for a larger audience came together in

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89 P. de Win, ‘Works of Art as a Form of Criminal Punishment in the Low Countries (14th-17th C.)’, in *The Art of Law. Representations and Iconography of Law and Justice in Context, from the Middle Ages to the First World War*, ed. S. Huygebaert et al. (Cham, 2018), 299–318.
90 De Win, 299–300.
91 Huygebaert and van Audenaeren, ‘Een vuistregel uit het vroegmoderne strafrecht’. Samuel Edgerton discusses examples of *executio in effigie*, punishment by image. These examples served as public shaming in case people escaped or were out of reach of legal authorities, or in case of disputes between several citizens or groups. They could be painted (temporarily) on town halls, city gates, guild halls, law courts and even whorehouses. Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment*, 68–76, 91–125.
93 Edgerton, 222.
sentencing culprits to acquire penal objects. In their own way, every object – whether these referred to individual cases or more general political or legal challenges – served both functions. The place in which they were displayed influenced how these objects were defined. Conversely, items also give meaning to their location, communicating within and about their surroundings.

Objects, then, could refer to both specific crimes and larger economic, judicial, or political trends. In the penal process, objects were used to repair damaged or challenged social relations in urban society, especially those between magistrates and culprits. But as I have already indicated, other punishments – such as public rituals or stone fines – could serve similar ends. The use of objects, however, had a particular place in the town hall, where they performed specific communicative functions. They were visible for a long period – perhaps some were even permanent. Such objects emphasised the purposes and socio-cultural meanings of either a town hall as a whole or a particular space within it.

Forgiveness rituals staged in public courtrooms occasionally included the carrying of an object (which was often made of wax). In chapter 3, I put forward an interpretation for the incorporation of such objects, referring to the example of Symon Heynricx in 1482 Leiden. The aldermen had accused and convicted Heynricx of perjury, ordering him to present a wax fist at the public courtroom, where the object would remain for three days of public hearings.94 On the same day, the court similarly sentenced another person to bring in a wax fist, and place it in front of the crucifix. The culprit was a man named IJsbrant Buytewech, who had violated an oath. For three days, then, the courtroom was decorated with two fists. The verdicts clearly state they served as ‘an example for all others’.95 Even though these objects did not directly mention the crime or culprit’s name, the accompanying records clearly state they were meant to deter others inclined to deviate from orderly legal procedure. Besides being part of a ‘penance’, the object – combined with the public ritual – repaired the damage done to the law court and society. What is more, during the civic hearings it communicated the message that participating dishonestly in legal procedures was a prosecutable offence.96

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94 SAL, Correctieboek C, f.77r. For the transcription, see footnote no. 100 in chapter 3.
95 ‘Als die scout den tijt van een uere heeft sitten dingen, comende nder vierschairs bloets hoefs ende ongegoeget, hebbende een wassen vuyste gemaict van een pont was in zijn hant, ende offeren die goede ter eeren ende tot wairdichheyte des heyligen cruys, ende hidden den scout ende gerechte dat soe willen om goidsiswille, welke wassen vuyste die drie poordindage hangen sel voir theylige cruys staende nder vierschairs iexembe van alle anderen’. SAL, inv. no. 0508, Correctieboek 4C, f.77v.
96 Wax objects were more often used during public penance, and the offer occasionally referred to the crime itself, for example by depicting the stolen object, or the merchandise for which the infringed law accounted. For instance, a wax cow in 1474 Gouda and three wax cows in 1476 Leiden were used after the violation of meat prescriptions. SAMH, AC2.176, 81; SAL, inv. no. 0508, Correctieboek 4B, f.265v. See for a discussion on public penance and its relation with religious penance in: Camphuijsen, ‘Scripting Justice’, 82–83.
The wax fists’ placement next to the crucifix in the public courtroom had the potential to impact the meaning of both the object and the setting. Although these objects were part of specific penal processes, they also participated in legal rituals on later days of hearings. Litigants swore their oaths on the crucifix. The presence of the crucifix thus indicated a salient location for a visual message, for people were expected to engage the object. Placing the object elsewhere would have changed the character of the interaction. One interpretation of the fists’ presence next to the crucifix might suggest that the law court used them to communicate the importance of oaths, reminding those who took them of the repercussions that they would face should they break their commitments. The verdicts describe the magistrates’ motivations, but other people might have been involved in the sentencing too. If they went undetected by courts, perjury and the violation of oaths had the potential to harm others. It may be, then, that the objects addressed not culprits or magistrates, but the other parties involved in such infringements, as well as urban society at large. On this reading, the objects’ socio-legal message was that the law court was vigilant and protected the legal rights of all.

Clearly, these objects were exhibited temporarily during a specific period of legal activity. Other objects seem to have been included in town halls’ decoration for longer periods. It appears that these were chosen carefully and communicated claims of political and judicial authority in the strategic spaces and at strategic times. For example, by 1492 a remarkable object adorned the lobby on the main floor of Gouda’s town hall: a used cauldron. Attached to the rafters, it was a large copper specimen that had once been used by the hop trader Barent Pietersz, who had secretly brewed beer in his own house to evade excise duties. The cauldron bore a message: ‘He who brewed in this cauldron has repented this all his life.’

The aldermen seemed to have formulated this message to emphasise their vigilance and the consequences of neglecting brewing regulations. In all likelihood, it was not based on Pietersz’s case alone. No less than twenty-four cases regarding violations of brewing statutes came before the criminal court in that year. In response, the town council announced that all servants transporting for breweries within the city walls must come to the sheriff and renew their oath. At the same time, they established a fine for unauthorised transporters. Control over the taxation of Gouda’s breweries – a major part of the city’s economy (and thus political power) – was clearly being contested. The town hall’s relationship with the brewers’ guild was also under strain.

98 SAMH, AC2.176, 128-130.
99 SAMH, AC2.176, 135.
100 Abels et al., Duizend jaar Gouda, 81.
Indeed, the aldermen’s authority seems to have been at stake; in 1492 the law court sentenced four men for abusive and threatening behaviour towards members of the council.\(^\text{101}\) It is unclear why Gouda’s aldermen had picked out Barent Pietersz to set a visual example. Perhaps his case stood out because he was the only culprit to evade excise that year who actually worked in the brewers’ industry. The rationale behind the magistrates’ decision to put another cauldron on view in 1519 was somewhat clear. This followed the sentencing of the fuller Herper Jacobsz, who had also repeatedly evaded excise duties for beer by blending it with another unspecified liquid in the very same cauldron that would subsequently hang in front of the town hall. This allowed him to sell the beer to his servants and labourers at low prices. For this, Jacobsz was fined a large sum of money and sentenced to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome.\(^\text{102}\) Around the time of this incident, the law court also prosecuted several other persons for violating statutes or insulting aldermen. The town council had begun losing its struggle to maintain the prosperity of Gouda’s brewery economy around 1518. Grain prices had increased and consequently the brewers’ guild asked for the opportunity to use less malt. This resulted in complaints that the beer’s quality had declined. The magistrates sought help from Charles V and the Council of Holland, replacing the guild’s board and the brewery statutes.\(^\text{103}\) As a semiotic device, then, the cauldron hanging before the town hall had a significance that went beyond Herper Jacobsz’s individual misbehaviour. The magistrates were trying to affirm their jurisdiction over beer production and excise through a highly public visual display.

But this particular case seems to have been singled out for a specific reason. In the verdict concerning Jacobsz, the judges referred to an earlier trial concerning his wife, Maritgen. She had been prosecuted in 1497 for transporting three barrels of beer without paying excises and was fined accordingly. The court, however, stated that this was a ‘remarkable verdict’, which was especially lenient in view of her pregnancy. The records note that Maritgen might otherwise have expected to undertake a pilgrimage to Einsiedeln (in Switzerland, around 730 kilometres away).\(^\text{104}\) The conclusion of the verdict in the case of Herper Jacobsz indicates that his misbehaviour led

\(^{101}\) SAMH, AC2.176, 131-133.
\(^{102}\) ‘Alsoe Herper Jacobsz de volder hem vervoerdert heeft naebier te halen, ende dat te snyden in een ketel althans tegenwoirdich hangende voer dat stedehuys, ende alsoe hij dit seker langen tijt gedaen heeft’. SAMH, AC2.176, 167. It is unclear whether Jacobsz was sentenced to a pilgrimage to Rome as conditional punishment.
\(^{103}\) Abels et al., Duizend jaar Gouda, 82.
\(^{104}\) ‘Daeromme de voors. Maritgen Jacobsz den heer ende der stadt te beteringe doen sal ende gheven thien rijns gulden, ende also zij nu ten saken mit vruchten es ende zwaer mit handel gaet, so wort haer verdragen de correctie vanden stadt, mer wordt sij hier inne eenichsins bevonden in gelike sake so soude zij tot vermanen vanden seepenen een bedevaert doen tot Onser Vrouwen tot Nynsele […] ende verdragen hemlyden eenige merkelice correctie te doene om sonderlinge redenen bij hemluden voort ghestelt’. SAMH, AC2.176, 106.
the judges to revise Maritgen conviction, twenty-two years later after her trial.105 The same family had violated beer excise statutes twice. The law court clearly communicated these violations at a time their relationship with the brewers’ guild was unstable.

The location of the cauldrons was closely connected to Pietersz’ and Jacobszs’ evasion, the aldermen’s authority, and accordingly the possible semiotic meaning. They did not adorn the ‘excise house’ (t Excijshuus) but the town hall.106 The placement of the 1492 cauldron – in the most public area of the town hall’s main floor – is especially significant. It determined who received the object’s message, namely that ‘he who brewed in this cauldron has repented this all his life’. Although some taxes may have been paid in the building, that exact space was primarily used as the public courtroom and a passageway to the rest of the building. Clearly related to governance and the administration of justice, the message referred to beer excises and the prosecution of those who violated brewer statutes. The object likely stood out in the court setting; in the context of visitors’ expectations of these spaces, it doubtlessly attracted attention. As a message, the cauldron visualised, repaired, and thus strengthened the aldermen’s political and judicial authority over beer excises. The cauldrons may have served as trophies, monuments to the aldermen’s dominance. The writing on the 1492 cauldron, though, suggests that the objects’ communicative power was enhanced, especially in the context of the town hall. This cauldron at least was a warning to future offenders. As such, it stands as a clear example of a visual object in the town hall that reached out to a large public.

Another example concerning beer excise evasion in 1505 was even more directly connected to an individual. In that year the law court convicted the fire bucket warden Jan Adriaensz of forgery. It appears he had written himself an excise payment certificate before picking up a keg of beer containing around thirty-nine litres. For this offence, the criminal court dismissed Adriaensz from his position and ordered that he pay for ‘new window with glass that shall stand in the council chamber as an example for all others’.107 Although the window’s size and the

105 ‘Ende alsoe de selve Herper de volders wijff genaempt Marritgen gecorrigeert is geweest in t jaer van 1497 den 18en in novembry, van drie vaten biers die zij ingedaen hadde sonder dat te verexcijssen, soe is waer dat deselfde correcie inhoudt dat indien Marritgen voirsz. nae dier tijt bevonden worde’. SAMH, AC2.176, 67.
106 A place that clearly existed around that time, as it is referred to in the verdict concerning Maritgen: ‘ghecomen is in t excijshuus’, SAMH, AC2.176, 106.
107 ‘Alzo Jan Adriaensz, bewaerder vanden brantemmers, him vervordert heft gehadt up donredagenavont lestleden te scrijven een excijsbrieffkyn, daer hij en kendekyns biers up gehaelt heft, aldus hij selver geconfesseert heeft, dat een saecke is van quaeden exempele. Soe is t daeromme dat men den voornoemd Jan Adriensz. gecomplempneert hebben dat hij voer zijn voorsz. delict geven sal die somme van thien ponden die gaen sullen naer wijzen dat vierschabrbock […] Ende daerenboven sal de selve betaelen eenen nywem nae met een glas die staen sal inden raedcamer tot exempele van allen anderen, ende voerts zoe verlaet men den zelven Jan van zijne officie ende verclaeren den zelven inquabel te zijne’. SAMH, AC2.176, 158. See for kinnekijn in the MNW.
representation it was to bear are not specified, presumably it was a stained-glass window that a
clearly recalled the case against Adriaensz, whether through image or text. It was installed alongside
two other stained-glass windows from 1501, which were paid for by Dirck Hoeck (who might
possibly have been an alderman himself for several years between 1470 and 1500). The glass of
these windows contained the following sentence: ‘Dirck Hoeck did not want to live according to
the law; for which he gave these two windows’.

In all probability, the aldermen’s use of windows to set examples in 1501 was connected to the fact that the magistrates had ordered that a new set of windows should be installed that year. In addition to the three that I have described, these consists of four other stained glass windows. They were designed and made by a lay brother named Cornelis Volprechts, who would be hired again in 1518 to repair eight glass windows in the town hall. Accordingly, Gouda’s council chamber was decorated with permanent references to specific offenders. By means of these windows, the magistrates surrounded themselves with successful judicial interventions. Moreover, as in the case of the stone fines that I analysed in chapter 3, the culprits repaired the damage that they had done to the government by paying for an addition to the town hall, strengthening its physical appearance in particular ways.

The production of glass windows as part of penal processes was not restricted to Gouda. A man called Mouwerijn van Tol was sentenced to order a stained glass window in Leiden in 1461. In contrast to above examples, the verdict elaborated by the city’s aldermen specifies the depiction that the window was to contain. Understanding the scene, however, first requires exploring the case itself, as well as the parties and tribunal that it involved. According to the criminal record concerning the trial against Van Tol, one-and-a-half months before the criminal court came to the verdict, he came to the sheriff and aldermen to communicate his suspicion regarding another man, who was named Roelof van Hamert. According to Van Tol, Van Hamert had stolen a chest containing a large sum of money from a ship. Van Tol told the court he was certain that this was true, swearing on his life. Van Hamert, however, denied the allegation. Swearing on his life he was innocent, he claimed that Van Tol had falsely accused him of the deed. This appears to have been a problematic situation, as the record implies. Both men had put their lives at stake and were imprisoned for the time being. After the hearings, Leiden’s aldermen

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108 Helbers, ‘De geschiedenis van het gebouw en zijn voorgangers’, 102. ‘Dirck Hoeck woude naer de Weth niet leven, Tot Correctie heeft hij dees twee glasen gegeven […] Daerinne gescreven sal staen syne misdaet, tot exempel van een ander’. The criminal verdicts of Gouda name a Dirck Hoeck Jacobsz as alderman in 1474. SAMH, AC2.176, 83. Unfortunately, the criminal verdicts have a gap between 1495 and 1503. Further insight regarding this case is thus limited.


110 SAL, Correctieboeken 4B, f.141r-142r.
declared that Roelof van Hamert was not guilty. The sheriff however was unconvinced and participated in Van Tol’s appeal of the decision. The appeal had already received the support from a few of Van Tol’s friends. On the basis of the appeal, another trial was initiated, in which the defendants were each supported by three noblemen. The four burgomasters and eight aldermen served as arbitrators. After the meeting, they concluded that they could not come to a collective decision. According to the record, the law court then studied the case with ‘great determination and maturity’. They decided that Mouwerijn van Tol had indeed falsely accused Roelof van Hamert. Reinstating their initial verdict, they sentenced him to a significant punishment. First, Van Tol had to come ‘bareheaded’ to the sheriff and ask for his forgiveness ‘in a loud voice, so one can hear him’ in the presence of Roelof van Hamert and his friends. Immediately afterwards, Van Tol would have to make a similar plea to the burgomasters and aldermen. Then, in front of the town hall, he was to confess that he had made a false accusation to the ‘common people, with a loud voice’. These were just the first elements of Van Tol’s punishment. On the following Sunday, the culprit had to travel to Leiden’s St. Peter’s church, again bareheaded, and walk around the church with a cross and burning candle, before offering the latter at the main altar. He would repeat this ritual the following Sunday in the parish church of The Hague, eventually offering another burning candle in the chapel of the Council of Holland. He avoided having to go on a pilgrimage to Einsiedeln because this punishment was remitted by Van Hamert.

In addition to having to compensate Van Hamert’s legal costs, Leiden’s criminal court sentenced Van Tol to one last penalty: he was to provide a stained-glass window. This window, which was to serve ‘for eternal memory and as an example to protect others from the same mistake’, would replace another already in place down in the town hall. The composition of the new window was structured around two men, one ‘standing straight and the other kneeling, dressed in hides’. Roelof van Hamert’s was written above the upright figure. Mouwerijn van Tol’s

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111 On Van Hamert’s side, his party consisted of Jacob van den Woude (lord of Warmonde), William ‘the bastard’ of Wassenaar and Geryt of Rijswijk. The three men on the other side were William of Alkemade, knight Jan van Poelgeest and Henric vander Heede. SAL, Correctieboeken 4B, f.141r.

112 ‘Ende wairt die voirs segshuyden opten 30en dach van decembri dair omme versament zijn geweest, die welk tsamen niet en hebben comen over een comen, ende hebben mits dien die sake geset in handen vanden vier burgermeesteren ende acht scepenen als overmannen soe zij in hoir uutsprake twijdrichtig zijn, wairomme tgerecht die sake mit groter delibracien ende riipheyt van rade doigjesien ende overgeleyt hebben ende doen dair of hoir uutsprake als hiernae bescreeven staet’. SAL, Correctieboeken 4B, f.141r.

113 ‘Bloetschoefs ende ongegoet in jegewnoirdicheyt van Roelof voirs. ende zyne vrienden mit luyder stemmen, soe datmen hem horen mach, den scout van Leyden inden name van mijnen genadigen heer bidden sal dat hij hem van mijns genaden heeren wegen vergeven wil, om godswillen, sulck ongerechtich aenseggen ede aantichte als hij den scout voirs. over Roelof voimoemde aen gebrocht ende an geseyt heeft’. SAL, Correctieboeken 4B, f.141r.-141v.

114 ‘Oic ter stont voir der stedehuys bloets hoefts ende ongegoet voirden gemeenen volke mit luyder stemmen, soe dat ment bescheiyledelie horen mach’. SAL, Correctieboeken 4B, f.141v.
name accompanied the kneeling figure, ‘praying to pardon his crime’. The record states that the window was made to stand as an example to others. Accordingly, it was placed downstairs in the town hall, where it is very likely that it could be seen from the passageway (the lobby or corridor). This was next to the public courtroom, the place with which this example had the most resonance. Given the culprit’s reverent posture and his simple clothing, onlookers would see that he was penitent. They also would know whom the window depicted, for the two men were clearly named. This would have been to the benefit of Van Hamert, for the window cleared his name in an eminently visual manner. By means of the forgiveness ritual, Van Tol had already acknowledged the criminal court’s authority as a judicial body; by providing the stained glass window, he incorporated this message into the town hall’s iconography and the court setting.

False accusations were punished on other occasions in Leiden, resulting in similar forgiveness rituals being performed in the courtroom and in front of the town hall, combined with pilgrimages. The reason that the sentence passed on this specific incident included a glass window is likely indicated by the statement that the aldermen and burgomasters made during the trial. The composition of the record shows a confident urban criminal court, deliberately highlighting its capacity to come to a verdict by means of determined and mature insight, to use the court’s own words. The glass image that decorated the town hall functioned not only as a warning; it also served to remind viewers of the urban criminal court’s competence and authority. It seems that the aldermen anticipated that the image might possibly have this impact.

Another trial resulting in a culprit acquiring an image for a town hall (in this case a painting) took place in Aalst in 1537. In this instance, the magistrates’ reputation was at stake. The record notes that a woman named Katherijn vanden Auderenhove had insulted many municipal officials, including the sheriff, bailiff, and their servants, contesting their governmental duties. Vanden Auderenhove had spoken in an offensive and threatening way when goods belonging to her and her husband had been confiscated due to debts that they had accrued. She called the sheriff and

115 ‘Voirtmeer soo sel Mouwerijn voirs. tot een ewige memorie ende tot enen exempel om andre hem dair voir te hoeden beneden nder stede huys in een veynster, dairmen een glas uut nemen sal, op sijnen coste tusschen dit ende Sinte Jansmissemasetcomende een nu glas doen maken, ende dair in setten twie mannen, te verstaen een man boven gescreven mit die name van Roelof van Hamert, recht op staende, ende dander man beneden knyelende in een pair huden cleder boven gescreven mit die name van Mouwerijn van Tol, biddende gracie vander voirs. misdaet’. SAL, Correctieboeken 4B, f.142r.
116 Such forgiveness rituals were particularly popular in Utrecht. According to Camphuijsen, these rituals were included in a broader constellation of spiritual and legal practices. The apparel – bareheaded and in simple clothing – was thereby common penal practice. Camphuijsen, ‘Scripting Justice’, 81–87.
117 SAL, Correctieboeken 4A, 1437, f.75r; 4B, 1470, f.117v-118r.
118 The clerk of Leiden wrote rather extensive texts for the verdicts around that time, but compared to all other cases in the same year, the three pages concerning this trial do stand out.
aldermen thieves in front of the town hall, amongst many other insults. She would later insult their wives too. She had also threatened a town servant, refusing to allow them to clean her alley. The bailiff proposed that Vanden Auderenhove be sentenced to do public penance. She was to let stand on a scaffold with written explanations of her crimes, after which her tongue would be pierced through by a hot iron stake and her cheek branded. She would then be banished from the county for fifty years – effectively a life sentence. In her defence, Vanden Auderenhove stressed the fragility of her sex and her temperament. In the event, Vanden Auderenhove received a lighter punishment. This was either due to her defence or her and her husband’s strong connection to Aalst’s political and economic elite, as Peter Stabel has suggested. As the ultimate verdict states, she was sentenced to perform a public forgiveness ritual in the vierschaar, where she had to kneel, holding a candle decorated with the coat of arms of Charles V, and confess her crimes aloud. She would then leave the candle behind in front of the Last Judgement that was ‘present in the public courtroom’. Next, she had to commission a painting depicting a woman, kneeling and holding a burning candle in her hand. She was to place the image in the chambers of the aldermen, close to the Last Judgement. On the image, a ‘large and legible’ text would explain why this painting had been made and who had ordered it. Perhaps Vanden Auderenhove received a lighter punishment, but the painting ensured that her case was remembered and set an example for a longer period.

Just as in Leiden, a depiction served to recall a penance ritual. The painting clearly referred to the particular case and the individual involved. Vanden Auderenhove’s misbehaviour had clearly challenged public order in Aalst and the authority of the aldermen, sheriff, and bailiff. The depiction repaired the damage that had been done to their reputation and defamed Vanden Auderenhove’s instead. There was more was at stake in the image, however. The record mentions Charles V’s coat of arms, which indicating the legitimising function performed by such iconography. Perhaps this aspect of the verdict had something to do with the fact that Charles V’s

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119 SAA, inv. no. 926, Dictums, no pagination. The verdict consists of four folia (recto and verso), hereafter referred to as page 1-8. Peter Stabel has used this verdict in his contribution on market places and civic identity, using it as an example of how the market square and its built environment functioned as a centre of urban activity, used for showing political ambitions, as well as discontent and contest. Vanden Auderenhove was the wife of a wealthy butcher called Jan van Branteghem. Stabel, ‘The Market-Place and Civic Identity in Late Medieval Flanders’, 46–50.

120 SAA, inv. no. 926, the case of Katharijn vanden Auderenhove, 1-6.

121 Stabel, ‘The Market-Place and Civic Identity in Late Medieval Flanders’, 49.

122 ‘Latende de zelve keerisse ten dienste voor doordeel ons heeren ahier ter vierschaeren [...] te stelene inde cameren vanden voirs. scepene an d’oordeel ons heeren, eene ymage of figueren van eene vrouw persoon in portraatueren van die vrawe op huerten knieden knielende, met eene keerisse in huerten handen, daironder stellende met groote leselike screven de cause ende redene waeromme ende wie so aldair heeft moeten stellen ende setten’. SAA, inv. no. 926, the case of Katharijn vanden Auderenhove, 8.
authority was coming under strain in the context of yet another Ghent revolt (1537-39).

The Last Judgement is referred to twice in indicating where Vanden Auderenhove would leave the candle behind and place the painting. She herself had to address heavenly justice, acknowledging her behaviour. The new painting would accompany the Last Judgement, a more customary image. In this case, then, both magistrates and culprit, then, were actively engaged with this existing visual fixture of the town hall.

In 1531, carpenters had repaired or replaced the benches and wooden enclosures of the public courtroom. A few years later, the objects that Vanden Auderenhove acquired were added to the court setting, where they joined the exiting painting of the Last Judgement. The candles would also have been present, but this was temporary, probably lasting for duration of the forgiveness ritual. However, the authorities required a more permanent reminder for this legal setting, sentencing Vanden Auderenhove to commission a depiction of her penance ritual. It is unclear how long this image stayed in the town hall. It is conceivable that the urgency of cases depicted decreased after a few years or when the terms of the aldermen involved came to an end. To a certain extent, then, contemporaries changed town hall iconography, signalling how they acknowledged the magistrates’ legitimacy. When deploying such strategies, however, actors negotiated existing spaces and visual programmes: court constructions, objects, and paintings that were already in place.

Conclusions

The decoration and material settings of town halls endowed council chambers and public courtrooms with meaning. Through representations and other forms of visual embellishment, these spaces were presented as sites of legitimate and effective justice and dispute resolution. Buildings and spaces also variously influenced, inspired, and compelled users of town halls to commission and place images and objects. They also determined how these objects were experienced in that material circumstances partially defined viewers’ lines of sight. Conversely, images and objects co-constructed the spaces in which they were positioned. As such, they contributed to courtrooms’ spatial and semiotic setup.

Town halls often featured quite generic decorative elements, such as Last Judgment paintings and justice scenes. These affirmed judicial spaces, communicating with those present in the courtroom in a direct and comprehensible way. What is more, some people may have been

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124 ARA, reg. 31515, f.27r.
able to see the images from outside. Such works served legitimising and didactic functions, addressing law courts, other legal parties, and audiences. Together, these visual elements informed different users of the town hall that they walked and practised in a building that facilitated legitimate civic and legal practice. Images increasingly incorporated spatial and architectural elements, which referred to the legal settings that they ornamented. At the same time, the buildings, spaces, and the ways in which these were used influenced and inspired town halls’ visual culture, shaping depictions and where images and objects were placed.

Images and objects were therefore an important addition to the considered and complex semiotics of public space and legitimacy in town halls. As such, they played into the dynamic relations amongst material environments, procedures, and regulations that I have discussed in the preceding chapters. Recalling contests in local urban society or well-known allegories, these visual elements affect both the ideal of the town hall and how it was really experienced, sometimes temporarily, sometimes over a prolonged period. Accordingly, they created a uniquely instructive narrative in which contemporary historians can recognise not only the meanings that urban councils wished to associate with their chambers and town halls, but also the resistance that they provoked.