



**BRAIN-be**

**Belgian Research Action  
through Interdisciplinary  
Networks**

**2012-2017**

OrnaSacra

***Ornamenta Sacra.* Iconological Study of the Liturgical  
Heritage from the Southern Netherlands (1400-1700)**

RALPH DEKONINCK (UCLouvain) – BARBARA BAERT (KU Leuven) – MARIE-CHRISTINE  
CLAES (KIK-IRPA)

Axis 3: Cultural, historical and scientific heritage

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Context**

This collective project, gathering scholars from three institutions (IRPA/KIK, UCLouvain, KU Leuven), has conducted an iconological and anthropological research devoted to the late medieval and early modern liturgical heritage from the Southern Netherlands (1400-1700). It is concerned with different kinds of objects, made of a wide variety of materials and techniques and fundamental to the ceremonial, that occupied a central place in the religious art of the past. We have investigated the provenance, the nature (material, technical, stylistic, iconographical...) and the evolution of this production in order to better understand its religious, social and artistic importance for a timeframe characterized by profound transformations of the liturgy and by religious conflicts and reforms.

The historical anthropology of the visual and of the sensible has offered us a methodological framework within which we have considered the material and symbolic nature as well as the spatial and ritual context of these objects, so as to provide a renewed analysis of their forms and functions. We have also built up an original methodology in order to trace the links (in terms of provenance, of typology, of chronology) between the objects which are part of liturgical sets often today dismantled and spread through different places (museums, private collections, church treasures...).

### **Objectives**

The general purpose of the project was to study and valorise this rich cultural heritage through interdisciplinary research that contextualizes the liturgical objects in their historical, liturgical and cultural environment. More precisely, this project has opened new perspectives on both interrelated methodological and thematic levels.

Through the development of a thesaurus, the project has contributed to refine the typology and vocabulary. The development of new search tools and web resources took in particular the form of a database with new imaging techniques (3D images for example).

The project has explored the complex status, functions and uses of liturgical objects through an emphasis on their ornamental dimension. It sought to show the interaction between the aesthetic and the functional dimension of these objects and how their materiality was closely linked to the sacredness of the ceremony.

It sought also to explore the performativity of these objects through the links between them, the ritual and the individual actors taking part in the liturgy. More precisely, it has explored their role in the experience of the sensorium.

## **Principal results**

### **Web resources (WP 1)**

The KIK-IRPA team built the structure of the website (wordpress) ([ornamentasacra.kikirpa.be](http://ornamentasacra.kikirpa.be)). This site is the showcase of the project and offers the general public a summary of the main themes and analysis grids developed within the OrnaSacra project, while allowing numerous access points to a wiki and to BALaT (Belgian Art Links and Tools), the KIK-IRPA portal. The homepage provides access to a presentation of the project, to 3D photographs, to the wiki and to the synthesis of the research, which includes three sections: objects - rites - senses. The first section is dedicated to the objects themselves. It is divided into two main sections: textiles and goldsmith's work (typologies, materials and techniques, ornamentation, iconography present on the object). A second section allows the object to be highlighted in its liturgical context, on the basis of the iconography of the time and normative and prescriptive texts, to shed light on the functions and uses of objects. It also analyses how the objects construct the identity (sacred/secular) of the men who use them. Finally, the third section focuses on the effects of the objects on the viewer's senses, in other words on their synaesthetic aspect.

The wordpress site is linked to a wiki (collaborative web application). Such a structure has been set up to avoid permanent IT assistance and future fees. This wiki presents a webpage with the thesaurus tree (hierarchical list of terms). Each term is followed by its equivalent (FR-NL) and is clickable, opening a detailed page on each object: definition, etymology, origins, evolution, prescriptive texts, and typology of the object. Images and links to videos and other sites were added during the research. Equivalences in the official languages of the International Committee of Art History (in addition to French: English, German, Italian and Spanish) as well as in Latin or another ancient language, where applicable, are also provided. Links are made to KIK-IRPA objects and to representations of the objects in works of art (iconography of objects in the photo library), and to bibliographic references (link to the KIK-IRPA library).

In addition to the general thesaurus of the KIK-IRPA photo library, the thesaurus "Christian Iconography" and the thesaurus "People and Institutions" were also corrected. A great deal of work was done to correct and update the data on objects in order to guarantee optimal search results. These corrections were used to identify masterpieces. For the period covered by the project (1400-1700), the 108 types of terms include 6301 objects. We also ensured efficiency by making the best use of BALaT's potential: we encoded all possible data in ADLIB (BALaT's source software), and we have inserted additional data into the wiki, so as not to duplicate efforts. Details of KIK-IRPA photos inserted in the wiki, linked to the object files in BALaT, are an invitation for the user to enter the image and discover its full potential.

### ***Ornamenta and decorum* (WP 2)**

This WP has explored the relationship between the aesthetic and liturgical dimensions of these sacred objects, two dimensions that have long been considered as watertight categories, or belonging to very specific fields of study. Among the research fields that have been investigated in this perspective, different but interconnected research axes have been developed by UCLouvain researchers.

A first line of research consisted in studying the representations of liturgical ornaments (the iconography of objects). The study of engravings and paintings from the 16th and 17th

centuries has shown that these representations are sometimes oriented towards the crisis of the system of liturgical objects and their destruction by the Protestants, and sometimes towards their exaltation by the Catholics. In particular, the research provided a new understanding of what is traditionally referred to as “iconoclasm”. It was shown that the crisis of images could just as well be understood as a crisis of the system of liturgical objects (or “cosmoclasm”).

A second line of research has set itself the objective of studying the images and motifs of which the objects are the medium (iconography on objects). The research focused mainly on liturgical textiles from the 17th century, a time when the images of the saints or of the holy story embroidered on medieval textiles tended to give more and more space to the ornament, which evolved more freely and literally absorbed the meaning of these textiles. By studying the relationship between the image, the ornament and the object, the OrnaSacra researchers have become interested in this phenomenon of “ornamentation” of the *ornamenta sacra*.

A third line of research consisted of a study of the materiality of these liturgical textiles. The research carried out in BALaT and in the sacristies of Belgium has made it possible to establish a completely new corpus (which is rare in the field of religious embroidery, where anonymity reigns) of the works of a workshop of embroiderers from the town of Ath at the beginning of the 18th century, the Dormal-Ponce. The productions of this workshop, which stand out for the richness of their materials, the inventiveness of their designs and their exceptional technical mastery, constitute the ultimate outcome of the phenomenon of the “ornamentation” of liturgical objects that we have studied.

### ***Senses and experience (WP 3)***

The study of the role of ornaments in their relation to the aesthetic value and liturgical functions of the objects under scrutiny has been completed by a reflection on the experience of the senses. We have taken advantage of recent studies on the history of senses and the sensible to shed new light on the synesthetic experience triggered by these objects. This part of the study has thus been focused on their different functions in the experience of the sensorium. We have shown how through these senses, the different media are efficiently interwoven with the audience and the ritual. The major outcome of this WP is the thesis of Wendy Wauters, under the supervision of Barbara Baert: *The Stirring of the Religious Space. Late medieval perception and experience in the Antwerp Church of Our Lady (c. 1450-1566)*. It deals with the lost pre-Tridentine décor of the Antwerp's Church of Our Lady. This church provides the dynamic backdrop for the sensory perceptions of clergy and townspeople. By mirroring the observations against the widely disseminated knowledge of the sensorium, an attempt is made to bring the perceived impact of the experiences into a larger, understandable frame. This research does not aim to provide an exhaustive and objective inventory of the social interactions and ritual acts in the late medieval parish church. It does, however, use quasi-anecdotal data and subjective testimonies to find out more about the physical and spiritual experience of the so-called religious middle groups. This paradigm is then dissected in view of its translations to the user context, typology and iconography of the liturgical objects that circulated in the building. In this way, *ornamenta sacra* function as unexplored trails to the documentary value of late medieval imagery and the complex of religious beliefs among churchgoers.

**Keywords**

Iconology, liturgy, rite, object, art, image, ornament, senses