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Keeping up Appearances: Antwerp Cityscapes as Acts of Resilience and Civic Self-Representation (1550 – 1650)

In the sixteenth century, Antwerp was one of the leading cities in Europe as far as wealth and cultural activity is concerned. However, this 'golden age' of Antwerp came to an end after the political difficulties of the second half of the century. Due to the blockade of the river Scheldt after the Fall of Antwerp in 1585, the city lost its most important economic stimulus and presumably became more introvert, both economically and culturally.

By focusing on the Scheldt and its activity in the Antwerp cityscapes, this paper aims at contradicting this view. It proposes that, although the harbour became less significant in the international trade, the city kept trying to present itself as open to the outside world far into the seventeenth century. A selection of different representations dating from 1550 – 1650 will be examined. Both prints and paintings will be analysed according to viewpoint, the ratio of water, sky and city elements in the picture plane, type of ships and other significant maritime details. The primary aim is to see how the cityscape of Antwerp changed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and how this development relates to 'the story of Antwerp'.

By tracing changes in the representation of the Scheldt in these cityscapes, this paper will argue that the rise of the cityscape as a genre presented the perfect model for the self-representation of the city. It enabled Antwerp to suggest continuity in political and economic turbulent times. The same can be said of the burgher portrait of Nicholaas Rockox, made by Anthony van Dyck (1621). Citizens like Rockox played an essential role in the formation and representation of Antwerp as prosperous, because they were part of Antwerp's identity themselves. Therefore this paper suggests that these 'portraits' of Antwerp and of its burghers should be understood as acts of resilience, strategies employed to change the public's opinion about the city in order to re-initiate economic activity and to consolidate Antwerp's political position.

Some of the material presented in this paper has been dealt with before in a previous article, which approached the topic of the Antwerp cityscapes from a different point of view. See: Dijkstra J.J., "The meaning and significance of 'water' in the Antwerp cityscapes (c. 1550 – 1650 AD)" in: *A Kaleidoscope of Maritime Perspectives: Essays on the archaeology, art history and landscape history of the maritime world view*, Groningen: Groningen Institute of Archaeology (University of Groningen) & Barkhuis, 2013.