From First Sight to Insight

The Emblem in the Low Countries

The emblem literature of the Low Countries has become a paradigm in the discourse on European cultural history. But what actually are emblems? Why are they now so widely studied? What is so special about Dutch and Flemish emblem books? Emblem books have literally and metaphorically re-emerged from second-hand booksellers and bibliophile collections to land on students' desks, and that within the last thirty years or less.

Yet emblems are not part of Literature with a capital letter. Not one emblem book has a place in the canon of accepted classics. Emblem art was a temporary phenomenon which eventually burned itself out. The revival which this genre has enjoyed here and there in the post-modern period has little to do with the emblem in its historical context.

1. A fascinating genre

The emblem as a genre has a complex history, and its origins are by no means Dutch. For its development we should go back to the standard model that appeared in France between 1534 and 1560: the emblem consisting of a heading (*motto*), a plate (*pictura*) and a poem, with or without a commentary. The intention is primarily rhetorical; emblems are to make authoritative statements. Referring both to nature (particularly flora and fauna) and to tradition (mythology, the Bible, history, literature) as well as to the everyday human environment, they provide norms and arguments for proper behaviour in an attractive combination of words and pictures. You look, you recognise and you are then persuaded and adopt new insights. So emblem art is a typically humanist activity; it aims at furthering the creation of a new man, specifically by using illustration and word, eye and ear. This dual method of persuasion consists in distilling deeper truths from illustrated data: representation and explanation, display and demonstration, in a pleasing manner. But the artistry of the emblem was not just a question of the quality of the plate and the poetry. The subtler the emblematic edification, the greater was its artistic and persuasive effect. This could for instance be achieved by endowing the combination of motto and plate with an enigmatic

quality. The poem then often functions as a convincing solution. Another favoured method was to allow the plate in various ways to contribute to the explanation, for instance by introducing pictorial metaphors or indicative elements in the background. The subtler the reference, the greater its conviction, though this was obviously never arbitrary. Images gain meaning through recognisable analogies. A weathercock can never be a lesson in constancy, though it can ingeniously represent the positive aspects of the politician's vacillation; it is useful 'for indicating the wind directions to those who must use them'.

This enormously successful genre – there were some thousands of editions within a period of about 250 years, the total copies of which must have run into seven figures – seems at first sight to have arisen by pure chance. This occurred in 1531 when a collection of Latin epigrams by Andrea Alciato, a Milan lawyer working in France, which was originally intended for an inner circle of humanists, was provided by an Augsburg printer with a series of woodcuts and published in this form with or without the author's knowledge. To these *poems,* in which the author had derived deeper meanings from the more or less visual descriptions of the subjects in the Greek models he was following, he gave the title *emblemata.* This word, derived from the Greek, refers, after all, to artistic inlays and mosaics of all kinds; the meaningful epigrams also contributed a sort of added value. The addition of plates was an immediate success, and Alciato himself now expanded his collection following this formula. The first authorised edition appeared in Paris in 1534. It became a phenomenal best-seller. Up until 1565 some sixty editions flowed from the French presses in Latin, French, German, Spanish and Italian. Only when epigons began publishing 'similar' little books, was Alciato's title taken over as a somewhat loosely applied name for a particular genre. It was of course only relatively speaking a coincidence. The formula later promoted by Alciato and his Paris printer had its roots in any case in the increasingly popular illustrated literature being adopted in book publishing and elsewhere. It was the significance of the picture that was highly esteemed, as with the vogue for Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were read as ideograms revealing ancient wisdom directly – without explanation: the language of objects. Then there was the infectious fashion among the elite of displaying personal ideals and intentions, often very artfully, in images accompanied by mottos (the *impresa* or device). There was also the prestige of the highly esteemed *poetria* already in vogue among the late medieval *rhétoriqueurs,* the art of fictionalising mythology and fable in order to expose deeper truths. And were *poesia* and *pictura* not, after all, close relatives?

Through their twofold means of communication – pictorial and verbal – the emblem books were immediately (and expressly) aimed at a double market. On the one hand there was the large group of artists and craftsmen, from architects to milliners, whose use of emblems enabled them to offer more meaningful products. On the other hand, there were the readers. For them the genre blossomed out into all kinds of forms – from moralising guides to amorous gift-books, from mystical books of meditation to natural history encyclopedias, from schoolbooks to cookery books, from theological exposition to vulgar classroom levity, from unbridled panegyric to pamphlet and social criticism, from childrens' books to obituaries. It was ultimately

an artistic and didactic method (a *genus scribendi)* applicable to all areas of life.

It goes without saying, then, that as an artistic expression of thought this genre provides a remarkably rich source for cultural history. It is in the history of thought and attitudes that it is particularly meaningful: in its formulation of behavioural norms, of upbringing, of giving meaning to things. In current studies there is little apparent evidence of this. Bibliography, editions, genre theory and its application in art and literature are still their main concern. Yet it is very important to understand how the emblem acquires its meanings, how the genre works and how its features distinguish it from other less successful forms of binary communication. But there is more. The way in which the emblem contributed to the development of European civilisation is a boundless and fascinating subject.

2. Emblem art in the Low Countries, or the crown on the genre

It is the graphic quality of the Dutch emblem books that generally accounts for this literature becoming a household word. They are visually extremely pleasing, executed as they were by an impressive line of famous artists and engravers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: from Marcus Gheeraerts to Romeyn de Hooghe via the De Passes, the Galles, the Wierixes, Adriaen van de Venne, Jan Luyken and many others. But most of this artistic fame was probably acquired later, in the circles of bibliophiles and collectors of graphic art. Its 'historical' success was due rather to other factors: the commercial ingenuity and know-how of the printing houses, its social, middle-class character and the fact that ideological movements like the Counter-Reformation in the southern provinces and pietism in the North made ample strategic use of the genre. Finally there is evidence that the emblem in the Low Countries, as indeed in Germany, enjoyed a serious literary prestige. Nearly all the important Dutch writers of the 'emblematic age' – the term is Herder's! – used the genre in some form or other: Jan van der Noot, Daniel Heinsius, Hugo de Groot, Roemer Visscher and his daughter Anna, Hendrik Laurensz. Spiegel, Bredero, P.C. Hooft, Joost van den Vondel, Justus de Harduwijn, Jan Starter, Johan de Brune sr, Adriaen Poirters. Some, such as Jacob Cats and the doubly talented Jan Luyken, even became personified synonyms of emblem art.

2.1. Antwerp: the humanist emblem

Cosmopolitan Antwerp with its distinguished cultural life, its fashionable *rederijkers,* its numerous printers, its scholarly humanists and artists and above all its wealth, is the innovator. Though others showed remarkable enterprise in emblem publishing, it was Plantin, with his workshop at the hub of the Antwerp humanist circle, who set the tradition of Dutch emblem book production in motion. Taking advantage of the crisis in the French book trade around 1560, Plantin's house produced more than a dozen Alciatos for the foreign market in 1565 and the following years. Meanwhile, in 1563, the Hungarian humanist Joannes Sambucus had approached Plantin

Fig. 1 – J. Sambucus, *Emblemata* (Antwerp, 1564). Print of an emblem dedicated to the Roman humanist Fulvius Ursinus. In an English version it reads:
'First reade, then marke, then practise that is good, / For without use, we drinke but Lethe flood ...'
(G. Whitney, *Emblemes*, Leiden 1586, p. 171).

with his fine literary imitations of Alciato (editions 1564, 1566). These were followed, in 1565, by Junius' *Emblemata*. Both these new collections were almost at once spoken of everywhere in the same breath as Alciato's. Thus the Antwerp printing house published at the same time the three most influential works in Latin humanist emblem art, learned, subtle and concerned with moral philosophical edification and its typical topics: the role of Fortuna, human weaknesses (greed, deceit, *voluptas*, folly) and the 'humanist' virtues: integrity, friendship, moderation and conscious loyalty to the community. There is a striking synthesis of all this in Sambucus' emblem on the use of books, in which the humanists' practice becomes itself a cautionary symbol: not the reading of books, but the application of what we read makes us wise (fig. 1). Partly to defray the costs of the relatively expensive woodcuts, Plantin also published Sambucus' and Junius' collections in the Dutch language, with the encouragement of the famous geographer Ortelius and with an eye to the *rederijker* readership and Antwerp's artistic circles. This was the beginning of the noble lineage of the emblem in the vernacular. Later, in 1607 and 1612, the most influential humanist emblem book of the seventeenth century in Europe was to appear in Antwerp: the polyglot *Emblemata Horatiana* by the learned artist Otto Vaenius, the onetime teacher of Pieter Paul Rubens. This book, which systematically rendered Horace's ethical dicta into emblems abounding in neo-stoical wisdom, was to become one of the most popular vade-mecums of European royalty and nobility.

2.2. Cupid at work. The erotic emblem

In the dynamic environment of the young, internationally oriented Leiden University, the erotic emblem makes its appearance around 1600, and this again becomes a brilliant success with far-reaching implications in cultural history. As connoisseurs of classical love poetry, scholars started, as in the Italian renaissance salons, to provide illustrations of Cupid with mottos and epigrams in the vernacular, in a bantering Ovidian or plaintive Petrarchistic manner. This scholarly pastime soon became a profitable trade. Amsterdam

printers of popular reading matter (song-books!) soon sensed the market and started vying with one another in the production of collections of *emblemata amatoria. Quaeris quid sit amor* (If you are looking for what love is ..., Amsterdam, 1601), written in Dutch by Daniel Heinsius under a pseudonym, is the first in a long series. Though a certain fascination with erotic love was not far removed from this genre in emblem art – we have only to think of the crudely obscene treatment of the theme in German collections written for students – the innovative Dutch amorous emblem books are remarkable for their erudition, their sensitive humour and their refining aims: Heinsius appears as Cupid's Dutch tutor, P.C. Hooft as his secretary. Collections of amorous emblems – printed like music in oblong format for shared use – provided gift books for wealthier youngsters. They served to captivate the hearts of young girls. Their hardy attraction lies in the way in which they give visual form to Ovid's literary conceits and introduce Petrarch's amatory language into the universal language of lovers. Through Cupid's capricious dealings we are given an instructive yet pleasant introduction to the perilous but indispensible Venus: 'purveyor and destroyer of all things'. *Couleur locale* is often of the essence. Where, for instance Alciato depicts love's omnipotence with the classic emblems of fish and flowers – for it rules over land and sea (fig. 2), in Heinsius' amusing *The Trades of Cupid* (Het ambacht van Cupido) this omnipotence is the subject of a nice transposition. The ancient, philosophical idea that love makes the world go round and maintains the harmony of the spheres (Lucretius) is wittily compared here with the trade of the cooper (Dutch: *kuiper*), without whose agency the big barrel of the world is constantly in danger of literally and figuratively falling to pieces. Moreover, the representation of Cupid as a cooper is based on a pun: *kuuper / Cupido* (cooper / Cupid):

Kuypt kleine kuyper kuypt, die alle man doet buygen ...
Want waer het sonder u, de weerelt viel in duigen. (fig. 3).

Coop little cooper, coop, bending all to your caprices,
For were it not for you, the world would fall to pieces.

Fig. 2 – A. Alciato, *Emblematum libellus* (Paris, 1542), p. 170: 'Do you see how naked Eros smiles, how gentle he looks? / He has neither torches, nor bows that he could bend. / But one hand holds flowers, the other a fish. / That is to say that he lays down the law on land and sea.'

Fig. 3 – D. Heinsius, *The Trades of Cupid* (Het ambacht van Cupido): Cupid as a cooper, (emblem 2). *Afbeelding van Minne – Emblemata Amatoria – Emblemez d'Amour,* (Leiden, 1619, 2 Pl. 3r)

Fig. 4 – O. Vaenius, *Amorum emblemata* (Antwerp 1608), p. 115. Cupid provides a donkey with wings, thus turning him into a Pegasus. Love refines. R. Verstegen's English legend reads: 'Thear's not so dul an asse but Cupid hath the power, / Through love to whet his wittes, and mend his doltish mynd. / The slow hee maketh quick, hee often altreth kynd, / Hee giveth manie gifts, but mixeth sweet with soure.'

Fig. 5 – P.C. Hooft, *Emblemata amatoria* (Amsterdam, 1611), p. 53: love as hopeless drudgery. The Latin motto goes back to Erasmus' *Adagia*. The plate explains itself. The spinning squirrel symbolizes the lover following the girl. The swans are an attribute of Venus.

Gradually the genre turned its attention more and more to marriage: middle-class morality took over from the gallantry of courtship. The first signs of this occur in the *Amorum emblemata* (Antwerp, 1608) by the above-mentioned Otto Vaenius, the most famous specimen of the genre, which appeared, thanks to exemplary team-work, in three different editions in Latin-Dutch-French, Latin-Italian-French and Latin-English-Italian. This lucrative multilingual product was immediately adopted in Amsterdam (fig. 4 and 5). The ever-increasing moralising tone reached its zenith in Jacob Cats. *The Maiden's Duties* (Maechden-plicht, 1618) is in reality a discourse on love and marriage set out as an emblem book. In *Silenus Alcibiadis* of the same year (the later *Emblems of Love and Morality* – Minne- en Zinnebeelden), Cats, as he himself says, finished Cupid off. Each plate is given an erotic, but also a moral social and religious explanation. 'A triplicate Alciato', Heinsius cheered. Later, adults and the elderly were addressed in the same way as the young had been. Whereas in the Republic it was the erotic emblem that informed the realistic and bourgeois emblem

Fig. 6 – J. Cats, *Proteus, or Amorous Scenes rendered as Moral Emblems* (Proteus, ofte minnebeelden verandert in Sinnebeelden, Ed. Amsterdam, J.J. Schipper, 1658), emblem 28. Peasant couple with onions. Peeling onions, which causes weeping, as symbol of keenness in love, friendship in hard times and tribulation.

books, in the Spanish Netherlands it was a religious counterpart that set the tone. At Archduchess Isabella's suggestion Vaenius now published emblems on 'devotional' love (*Amoris divini emblemata,* 1615): Cupid in a little mantle with a halo. This became a very fertile formula both in Catholic and (later) Protestant circles in the furtherance of a spiritual life.

2.3. Mark, learn and inwardly digest: the realistic bourgeois emblem book

Where familiar realism is dominant in the plates, and where they represent middle-class values, they are often referred to as typically Dutch emblem art. Though the description is somewhat vague and questionable, depending as it does on the 'realism' of the plates, the phenomenon itself is no less interesting for all that. Aesthetically, these volumes are among the finest in Europe in the genre. For the history of life and thought they are often unexplored gold mines. This group includes the tens of thousands of copies of Cats' collections, whose subject matter is still close to humanist emblem books (the fauna and the proverb). Through its tripartite application the genre in his hands becomes a kind of book of life dealing with erotic love, family and upbringing, society, Christian life and death (fig. 6).

A small masterpiece to which recent emblem studies are paying increasing attention is the high-handed *Symbolic Pictures* (Sinnepoppen) by the Amsterdam grain merchant and poet Roemer Visscher, whose home was the centre of a thriving cultural interchange. Visscher had plates made with mottos and provided them with commentaries for his friends, publishing them in 1614. They are all highly original. The prints use an eloquent close-up technique, preferring utensils and instruments whose attributes, application and effectiveness introduce the 'moral'. As has been rightly said: in bourgeois Amsterdam life, norms of behaviour increasingly relied on personal experience rather than classical tradition and the allegorical interpretation of nature. The commentaries were in prose, following the French device books: concise, but very vivid and direct and full of surprising turns of

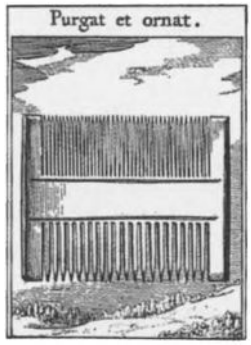

Fig. 7 – Four of Roemer Visscher's *Symbolic Pictures* (Sinnepoppen. Amsterdam. 1614), I, 35 and 9; II, 46 and 6.

phrase and covert erudition. The tone is often humorous, *ad rem* and satirical – Visscher was not afraid of invective – in the spirit of Erasmus. The mockery in this collection does not, however, muffle its pleasure in being Dutch. The references show a striking interest in the economic sector: earnings and the acquisition of property, and the morality of this. But civil government is also represented in the so-called prince emblems where the deliberate banality of the pictorial material is often inelegantly commonplace. A high official is like a de-lousing comb: he cleanses the land of rogues and adorns it with fine laws. Brooms are extremely useful, but they are made of the hair from the backs of pigs: there's no knowing the origin of magistrates. Visscher also shows a sober piety and middle-class neo-stoicism: the gateway to a Dutch field teaches us the happiness of *kleine vrijheid* (modest freedom): remain lowly and be satisfied (fig. 7).

A solid and even pietistically directed godliness is evident in the splendidly-produced *Emblemata* (1624) by the Zeeland magistrate Johan de Brune sr with realistic plates by Adriaen van de Venne, who was also Cats' illustrator. The originality of this collection consists primarily in its choice of emblematic material: the recreational activities and the lifestyle of the young well-to-do citizen, in which (often erotic) party games figure prominently. There seem to be obvious links with painting (a delicate issue!). Moreover, the explanatory poems are accompanied by erudite, supple, evasive and stylish prose commentaries that herald the advent of the Dutch essay. The ideological tendency reminds one of Cats: the behaviour of the young, the *res publica* and one's relationship to God. Hence, once again, *chacun son goût* (fig. 8).

Fig. 8 – J. de Brune, *Emblemata or Symbolic Pieces* (Emblemata of Zinne-werck, Amsterdam / Middelburg, 1624), emblem 35: amorous fun on the swing. The author appends a witty essay on the fickleness of the female mind.

In their impressive attempts to revitalise and underpin Catholicism, the Jesuits, and in their train the other monastic orders, made ample use of the emblem. Here it was the Southern Netherlands that set the trend. In contrast to France, for example, where Jesuit emblem art latterly promoted the specific interests of state ideology, the genre became the favoured medium of religious polemic, of education and of personal spiritual growth (of monastics and women in particular). Finalists at the Jesuit colleges even had to devise emblems as edification for their colleagues and to further their competence in Latin and poetry. The Royal Library in Brussels has a unique collection of these often superb manuscripts (which will form part of an exhibition in 1996).

The Jesuits' discussion of the emblem developed into a doctrine that embraced the whole of visual Catholic pastoral theology: pictures are the books of the illiterate and ignorant, they can be easily memorised, they touch the emotions, they have a ritual power, they sugar the pedagogical pill, they enhance concentration and are an important accompaniment to meditation. It was through the Jesuits that the Council of Trent's doctrine on imagery impinged on the theory and practice of emblem art, in the vernacular as well as in Latin. Its effects, therefore, are many and varied.

It was, however, the ardent books on meditation, in the manner of the erotic emblem tradition, that had the greatest impact. Their concentration on personal spiritual growth and individual sanctity and their emphasis on the practical aspects of the religious life apparently fulfilled a need at a time of confessional disputes and dogmatic arguments. Thus the Jesuit Herman Hugo's *Pia desideria* (Pious Desires, Antwerp, 1624) became a European devotional best-seller, to be followed by pietists of various Protestant hue. This had an almost incalculable influence on baroque literature and art. Central European ecclesiastical architecture is but one illustration of this. What now seems to us sentimental, then possessed a powerful eloquence and conviction in its conceits (fig. 9).

3. The Anglo-Dutch connection

One of the largest collections of emblem books is housed, since 1958, in Glasgow University Library. It is named after its founder, the nineteenth-century Scottish aristocrat and scholar Sir William Stirling Maxwell. It has subsequently been considerably enlarged. The Dutch-language section is impressive – a unique set including 84 sketches for the *Symbolic Pictures* – and was by no means fortuitous. Sir William was not just a connoisseur. British emblem art was after all very much under the influence of Dutch examples, and there is little evidence of a reverse trend. It must suffice here to note that this influence pervades the whole history of the genre in Britain from the very outset to its resurgence in Victorian times.

English literary historians are inclined to take the English translation of Jan van der Noot's *Theatre* (1569) as the starting point. The first truly English emblem book was in any case printed in Leiden: Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* (1586) can be placed in the context of the

ethical and political discussions prompted by Leicester's campaign in the Netherlands. Cats' works were much translated in, for instance, the *Pleasant Dialogues and Dramas* (1637) by the dramatist Thomas Heywood, and this continued right into the nineteenth century when with the collaboration of Stirling Maxwell and others, a selection of *Moral Emblems with Aphorisms, etc.* was published in 1860 in London. Dutch cultural historians, confusing cause and effect, associate Cats' success with the 'typically Dutch-Calvinist' mentality. The poet's reception in England (and to a far greater extent in Germany) throws considerable doubt on this interpretation. History repeated itself – translations and editions continuing into the nineteenth century – with Vaenius, particularly his *Horatiana*, selections of love emblems and especially of their religious counterparts: numerous English emblematic devotional books in the style of Herman Hugo – e.g. Quarles' *Emblemes* (1635) – derive from examples in the Southern Netherlands.

For the English commentaries to his *Amorum emblemata* (1608), Otto Vaenius turned to Richard Verstegen, the Antwerp agent for the English Catholic emigrants. He thereupon dedicated the collection to the then most influencial patrons of English literature, William Earl of Pembroke and Philip Earl of Montgomery. This opportunist gesture from the Antwerp poet is symbolic of the Dutch emblem's place in English emblem literature. It is certainly fairly central to it, and though much has been charted, the whole map is still far from complete.

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Translated by Peter King.

Fig. 9 - Woodcut by C. van Sichem from the second impression (1645) of the Dutch version of Herman Hugo's *Pia Desideria* (Pious Desires): the soul imprisoned in the body.

Useful access to current emblem research is available since 1986 in the journal *Emblematica* (AMS Press, New York).

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