Representations of Architecture
in Lucas van Leyden's Prints

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Was Lucas van Leyden a Renaissance artist? Situating his depictions of architecture and ornaments either in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance needs to involve an assessment of the meaning of "modern" in the early sixteenth century. Insofar as art is concerned, reference to context is the most important criterion for approximating an exact interpretation of the current visual culture. The trouble with categorizing Lucas van Leyden's works emerges as a matter of periodization at the turn of the century. One of the causes of this problem is his depiction of architecture in his prints, where he included forms of late Gothic and classical architecture in the same prints. The question to be answered here, however, is whether he consciously chose to employ both structures to show an interaction between the Italian Renaissance and Netherlandish traditions, or not. Did Lucas van Leyden's share a similar approach with Gossaert, who "accepted both *modern* and *antiek* as valid artistic modes, languages of form that were chosen according to local circumstance" (Ethan Kavaler, "The Uses of Ornament" 229)?

Reconciliation of opposite structures in architectural representation in prints is a major point in this era of transition. In a different article Kavaler describes this as "the erasure of disparity or divergence as registered in geometric forms. It is worth observing that the elimination of difference, a reconciliation of opposites, is a common goal in late medieval and early modern culture" ("Pictures of Geometry and Narratives of Ornament" 29). Was this what

Lucas van Leyden aimed at as well? There is doubt that he truly did because he did not have a real chance to investigate classical architecture and sculpture in his surroundings since classical forms only existed in the post-Roman territory of Italy, which is always taken as the cradle of Renaissance; architecture in the Netherlands was not yet affected by Renaissance developments. In the light of this it may seem that Lucas van Leyden's only contact with the "Renaissance" may have been through Italian prints circulating in Europe at the time.

Periodization of works of art may become the subject of certain ideologies. This is what Karel van Mander did when he created the image of Lucas van Leyden as a renowned Renaissance artist. Van Mander's biography of Lucas van Leyden (1604) served as propaganda for elevating the status of art in the Netherlands at the time of a Dutch Golden Age in the beginning of the seventeenth century. Lucas van Leyden was made into a figure of a glorious national painter as if he were competing with his Italian contemporaries in artistic technique. In this context, Van Mander's interpretation of the representation of architecture in van Leyden's *Ecce Homo* print gives him perhaps excessive credit for observing and representing "modern" buildings:

Figure 1 Lucas van Leyden, *Ecce Homo*, 1510, Engraving, 285 x 452 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

Figure 2 Lucas van Leyden, *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket*, 1525, Engraving, 242 x 188 mm, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

The following year, 1510, when he was sixteen, he engraved the extraordinary, even unique, Ecce Homo, a work of art which fills one with amazement that such a young boy possessed such abundant spirit and intelligence, both in composition and in the variety of the figures, the details of various ethnic costumes, and the splendid "modern" buildings, all observed so well according to the rules of art and in keeping with the art of perspective and proportion. (Van Mander 212)

But Van Leyden may in fact have been 21. Only Van Mander claims he was born in 1494 rather than the now more generally accepted 1489, in order to make van Leyden a child prodigy just like all other genius artists who reached

Figure 3 Lucas van Leyden, The Return of the Prodigal Son, c. 1510, Engraving, 180 x 245 mm, Leiden University Library.

worldwide success (211). (Van Mander knew that Dürer, for example, was apprenticed at age 15 and wanted to instil Lucas van Leyden's life story with the same gravitas). The "modern" buildings to which Van Mander refers are exemplified by the Italian Renaissance style of classical architecture at the left hand side of the print (Figure 1). More typical of Van Leyden's immediate surroundings, however, is the Late Gothic architecture of the buildings in the middle right. This reveals the scarcity, locally, of up-to-date architectural innovations like those seen in southern Europe. Lucas van Leyden still perceived and evaluated the progress in architecture from a local vantage point with limited opportunity to keep track of novelties. The perspective of the artist and the viewer had changed sharply in a century but this is due to

the intention of van Mander, which was to glorify a Dutch artist to be an equal of his Italian contemporaries.

Urban Setting

The choice of an urban setting is an important aspect in Lucas van Leyden's prints. He generally uses a natural environment to tell a story. There is either a landscape in the background with a large rock or groups of trees in the foreground. He organizes the figures within multiple scenes depicted to show a sequence of acts as a technique of narration. This is a typically medieval approach to pictorial narrative. And when he chooses a story concerning public spaces, such as *Ecce Homo* (Figure 1), *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket*

(Figure 2) or *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Figure 3), he arranges the setting accordingly.

In these three prints, the aim of the artist is to orientate the viewer to the scene, to what is going on in the story. There is always an audience in the image who is watching, commenting on or being enraged by the events taking place. The real viewer of the print cannot internalize the role of the main event experienced by the religious or historical figures, but he can share the position of the urban spectators to speculate upon the event. This use of setting gives the viewer the possibility to witness and to comment on the occurrences depicted.

According to James Snyder, the architectural representations in Lucas van Leyden's *Ecce Homo* print appeals to the religiosity of the viewers. He provides his audience with feelings of devotion and piety by showing the arresting scene of Christ. He shows his skill in perspective and sets the print within a city panorama of Leiden. Snyder describes the setting as follows:

> The event itself takes place on a raised podium in the center of a vast city square before the praetorium, here appropriately inspired by the old prison in Leiden, the Gravensteen. Other buildings about the open square have been tentatively identified as other prominent buildings in Leiden including Huis Lockhorst, the large Renaissance building to the left, the stepped rotunda in the far distance as the Jerusalemskapel, and the tower of the

Figure 4 Gravensteen

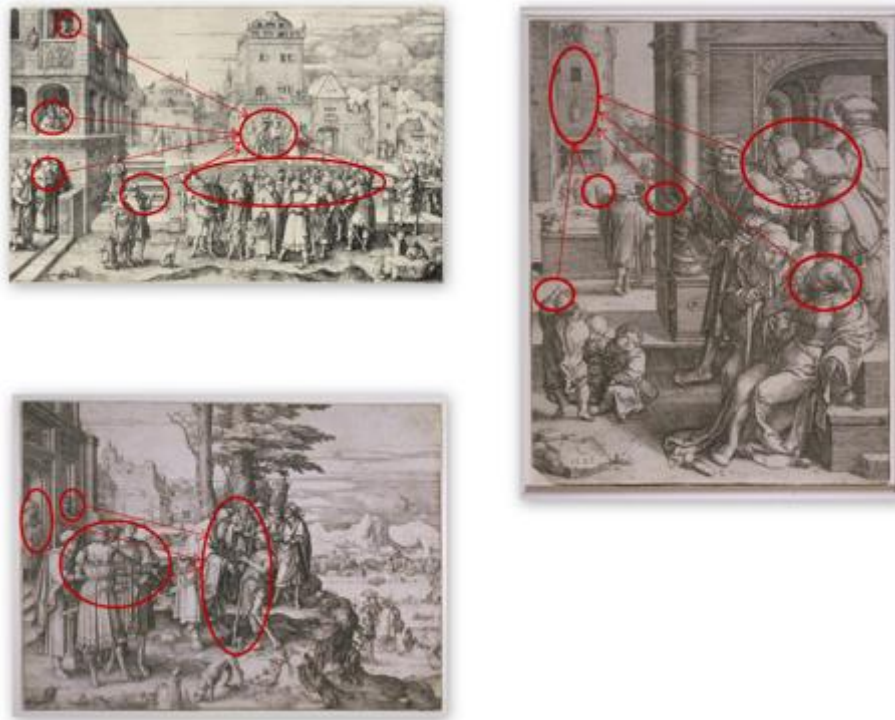**Figure 5** Huis Lockhorst

Figure 6 Leuven Town Hall

Figure 7 Gestures of the audience towards the main event

Begijnhof next to it, although these are not convincing. (458-9)

These vague references to Gravensteen (Figure 4), Huis Lockhorst (Figure 5), Jerusalemskapel, and Leuven Town Hall (Figure 6), though not all of them situated in Leiden, reminded contemporary viewers of their own immediate surroundings. Gravensteen, built in 1463, has a classical façade with pilasters of round arches supported by Greek columns. A similar decoration can be seen in the middle left hand side of the *Ecce Homo* print albeit with a slight disproportion.

The representation of architecture thus works in the creation of such a public space. It convinces the real-life beholder of the print to take the story seriously since it had ostensibly happened in a familiar space of his own, in a city.

The positions of the commenting viewers are arranged in such a way that they take the real viewer within themselves; they share the experience and sensation of what they are talking about with their gestures. Their hands, their arms and visages all point towards the main event in the middle- or background (Figure 7).

It can be argued that the emphasis of the artist is not to show the main event but to signify public opinion since this is the mainstream early modern method of grabbing the attention of viewers. The people represented are always multiple in number; Lucas van Leyden put groups of people in his engravings to make the viewer comprehend that the main event concerns public interest even though it is experienced by a single historical person: Virgil, the Prodigal Son and Jesus Christ are the
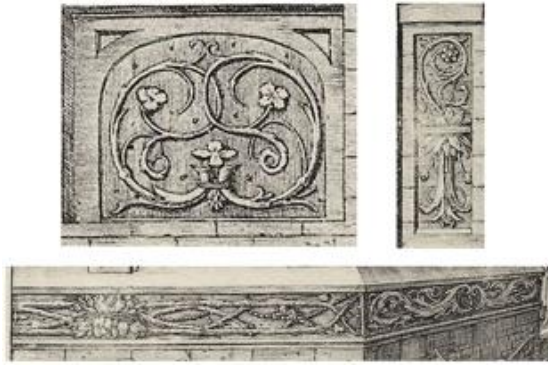
Figure 8 Detailed tracery in *Ecce Homo*

Figure 9 Detailed tracery in *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket* and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (right corner)

protagonists in the stories. However, at first sight, they cannot be discerned easily. Only the Prodigal Son (Figure 3) can be observed straight away because he is situated right in the middle of the composition. Yet he is still situated among multiple groups of figures representing the expression of public opinion.

The importance of context is again a determining factor in making the choice of setting in a print. J. B. Deregowski evaluates the constructed space in pictures as follows:

> The representation of space, when seen in cross-cultural perspective, is far more complex ... a problem of "text" and "context" rather than one of 2D or 3D responses to pictures and illusions designed for literate, Western subjects. The cultural context of image making, image content, and image meaning are all important. (91)

We cannot be sure that all the viewers of Lucas van Leyden's prints were "literate Western subjects" since it was only the beginning of the
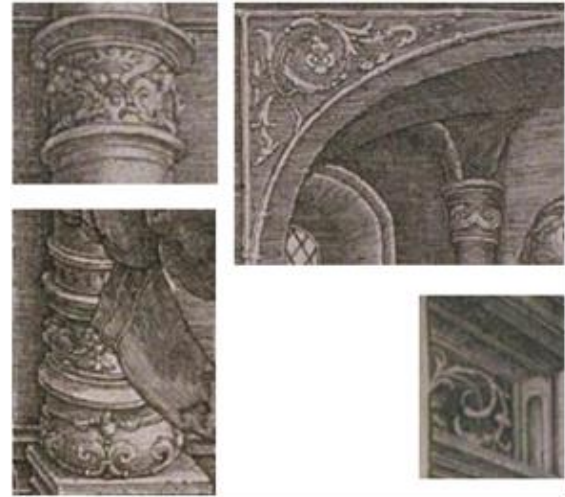
sixteenth century and at this time, a "richly diversified literary life was flourishing at every social level in the South, while in the North a literary culture was sorely lacking" (Herman Pleij 132). However, since Lucas van Leyden resided in a city in which international trade, education and religious institutions were present, his clients either commissioned him to make religious engravings or they purchased religious themed works pre-made by the artist himself. It means that his clients knew what they were paying for. But what about those who lacked the required knowledge to decipher the prints? If they looked at the prints without any information at hand, what they probably did see was only some people gathered to witness something and it must be important because the people represented are usually shown curious and interested in the event whatever that might be.

It is highly probable that Lucas van Leyden's prints and paintings were in popular circulation concurrently with religious stories produced for a growing urban readership, and may have been used as illustrations for religious printed books.

People themselves wanted to learn the stories of Christian virtues; the clergy were no longer the sole educators of the ignorant masses. Citizens were becoming more independent on choosing what to learn and practice through literacy because they were then at least enlightened by the *chambers of rhetoric*, societies that produced drama plays in the Low Countries, spreading Erasmian "freedom of opinion" (Pleij 116). Lucas van Leyden had followed the same approach when practicing his art since he is original and innovative within the medieval tradition of printing. But despite his innovations, he still used medieval techniques, as previously outlined.

Effect of Ornaments on Narrative

The ornaments in Lucas van Leyden's prints play the role of communication on a meta-level. Art historians such as Erwin Panofsky understand ornaments as signs of a metalanguage producing a subtle message related to the story depicted. Panofsky explains the ability of architectural components to communicate as a matter of evolution:

> Ultimately, the flying buttress learned to talk, the rib learned to work, and both learned to proclaim what they were doing in language more circumstantial, explicit, and ornate than was necessary for mere efficiency; and this applies also to the conformation of the piers and the tracery which had been talking as well as working all the time. (57-8)

Here Panofsky refers to the elements of Gothic architecture that served the illiterate public to recognize the magnificent forms of religion and its institutions and due to this magnificence they should be admired and believed in deeply. The comprehension level of the viewers is commonly low, so that the architectural design of the buildings gives away the intended message. The ornaments work as reference points for the viewers to catch the meaning of the narrative to its aimed level.

Since "narrative is dependent on cultural context," (Deregowski 91) the artist needs to choose the most appropriate ornaments in order to provide the viewer with the best communicative means. In Lucas van Leyden's case of being a prominent artist in the Netherlands, where the Renaissance tradition has not yet reached its full strength, he chose Gothic style ornaments which imitate vegetal forms. Kavaler interprets the meaning of these vegetal forms of ornament as follows: "The juxtaposition of geometric figures, intact and flawless, with renderings presented as incomplete or transformed into plant-like effigies again suggests degeneration or adulteration" ("Pictures of Geometry and Narratives of Ornament" 32). In this light it is possible to claim that the ornaments in Lucas van Leyden's prints of *Ecce Homo*, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket* hint at the theme of degeneration. (Figures 8 and 9).

The plant-like circular ornament with flowers, the plaster tracery with branches and another reflection of plant-like ornament at the left hand side of the *Ecce Homo* print reveal the injustice done to Christ in the middle-right of the composition. On the other hand, these Gothic style ornaments have a place in the Renaissance era as an extension of tradition. It would not be wrong to put forward that Lucas van Leyden implemented plant-like ornaments as metalingual elements to convey a particular

Figure 10 Lucas van Leyden, *Emperor Maximilian I*, 1520, Engraving and etching, 260 x 193 mm, Leiden University Library, and details of tracery.

meaning by being loyal to the medieval tradition of art when it is not possible to innovate. This is because a symbol can only regenerate properly within an iconographical tradition; without giving reference to an old occurrence, the symbol loses its meaning. If he wanted to narrate a particular scene, creating new symbols was out of the question in Lucas van Leyden's circumstances, because his aim was to give recognizable meaning to the image, not making up new scenes with different meanings. It was important for him that these elements were recognizable by his audience. Ornaments that were too innovative would have obscured the meaning of the print.

The tracery in the upper left corner of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* print is the single reference to prodigy as degeneration. In *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket* print, Lucas van Leyden again attaches the Gothic ornaments right behind the public commenting on the suspension of the magician who had attempted

Figure 11 Albrecht Dürer, *The Emperor Maximilian,* 1518-19, Woodcut, 537 x 433 mm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

to commit adultery with the daughter of the Emperor Augustus. She had deceived him by hanging him in the basket halfway down her window and caused a mockery of his intention.

However, in the print of *Emperor Maximilian*, the ornaments do not specifically tell a story of degeneration (Figure 10). Lucas van Leyden had copied Albrecht Dürer's print of the emperor to a certain extent since there are a lot of similarities as in a mirror image (Figure 11). It is worth stating that Dürer's original does not have any background; there is only the emperor. The reason why Lucas van Leyden chose to fill in the blankness of background with architecture and ornaments is doubtless that he wanted to add something of his own to the portrait. The emperor is situated in a semi-closed area with an opening to a backyard. The coat of arms of the Holy Roman Empire with the double-headed eagle as a symbol of authority is positioned in front of the emperor. It is a question why he chose the racket-like non-identical ornaments in the coat of arms though. The tracery in the right hand side column does not refer to anything special about the reign of Maximilian. The children dancing around the column may be a

Figure 12 Piero della Francesca, *Ideal City,* c. 1470, Panel, 60 x 200 cm, National Gallery, Urbino, Italy

reference to the pre-Christian folkloric symbol of the Maypole, celebrating abundance. Van Leyden must have thought this reference was relevant to the theme of a powerful emperor. This partial lack of communication is rare in the use of ornaments as metalanguage. Concerning this, Kavaler suggests that

> The ornament itself rarely communicates specific information. It can signal, rather, a way of perceiving the structure it inhabits, a mode of understanding. It inflects the idiom of its carriers – church façades, tombs, choir screens, and so on – and might be considered in this sense a metalanguage, concerned with the primary language of architectural iconography ("The Uses of Ornament" 227).

The effect of ornaments, then, may not always reach the goal of making meaning possible for the audience due to the relative obscurity of the iconography.

Spatial perspective and the paintings of Italian contemporaries

The Renaissance artist needs to be faithful to the reality in nature as well as he aims to elevate the real to the ideal by using correct proportions and perspective. Spatial perspective is an instrument to be employed in this respect. Murray Roston declares that the ultimate aim "of painter, architect, and sculptor was to present in his work the attainment of a harmonious ideal by means of fidelity to the actual, and thereby conversely to endow the terrestrial with divine proportion" (114-5). This is what Lucas van Leyden lacks in his prints. He does not only depict human figures that are disproportionate, but he also organizes the buildings in his prints with defects yet these are minor. His aim is to fill the space in the most harmonious way in order to serve the viewer better, to keep him focused on the main event.

The concept of white space important at this point. In graphic design, the artist leaves an empty area for aesthetic composition. In his prints, Lucas van Leyden's application of white space comes into being mostly as the sky in the background. However, in representing architecture, for example in his *Ecce Homo* print, some buildings are darker and some are lighter

Figure 13 Perugino, *Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter,* 1481-82, Fresco, 335 x 550 cm, Sistine Chapel, Vatican

in gray tones. This is due to the effect of lighting. On the other hand it is still doubtful if he practiced single source of light technique like his Italian contemporaries who mastered the Renaissance style of painting. Many of his human figures are composed of lighter tones of gray due to his fine workmanship. Every single detail of clothes of these figures can be discerned easily and this proves his proficiency in his daily life observation of clothes. His portrayal of bodily proportions may not be, but his clothing designs are very close to reality. His truthful representations of clothes constitute a strong characteristic to be ranked equal to the Renaissance artists because ideal depiction of reality is very important in this artistic tradition. Another point is that, Lucas van Leyden's strict application of composition elements of fore-, middle- and background in his prints is praiseworthy. He employs the new method of Renaissance perspective in order to give the

feeling of depth to the image; to construct three dimensionality. There is always something in his backgrounds to divert the viewer.

Roston describes the application of the classical architecture of antiquity in the Renaissance: "Only the Renaissance blended those two aspects of ideal and real as intrinsically unified elements of its philosophy, incorporating that duality into its art and literature to create its remarkable breadth and range of vision" (116). The aim of Italian artists is to convey this duality of ideal and real to the trained eye. Piero della Francesca's *Ideal City* (Figure 12) is a typical example of Renaissance work of art depicting the architecture of the era.

The rotunda is positioned in the middle of the composition surrounded by several three-story buildings. The painting shows the obsession of Renaissance artists with linear perspective. None of Lucas van Leyden's prints indicate such an obsession with perspective, or

Figure 14 Raphael, *School of Athens,* 1509-11, Fresco 500 × 770 cm, Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura, Rome

the glorification of the classical architecture of antiquity. His aim is to tell the story rather than focus on architectural design. For him, architecture does not constitute the primary issue to concentrate upon, it is a side element to be carefully planned in order to support the meaning of the story in its most captivating form. It may even not exist if not necessary. He takes architecture as a background image, as a supplementary element. On the other hand, the building on the left hand side of his *Ecce Homo* print is parallel to Piero della Francesca's buildings. They are different in the forms of ornaments and proportions to serve the viewer in the Netherlands, to make him/her feel a bit more familiar with the setting. The audience in Italy, however, is more connected to the architectural culture of antiquity. If their eyes were already trained in their daily environment, then it can be concluded that they demanded to

see the harmony of real buildings added the artists' idealization of these structures. This may be the consequence of the equation of "man's spiritual well-being [being] intimately related to his physical surroundings and to the harmony or lack of it implicit in that environment" (Roston 111). This may be why Renaissance artists were so anxious to apply the technique of perfect proportions in their paintings. Roston's description of the "window of the soul" in Renaissance visual culture is related to Leonardo da Vinci. He states that,

> For Leonardo, however, all medieval warnings against the deceptiveness of sight fall away. The eye, no longer the seducer of the Christian spirit, has become in his luminous phrase the "window of the soul," establishing a healthy communion between the inner

self and the outer surroundings of its habitation (1987: 113).

Perugino fills the blankness of the ideal city with a narrative of *Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter* in his painting (Figure 13).

The background consists of three major buildings: a rotunda in the middle again and two decorative arches on both sides of the rotunda placed with perfect symmetry. The middle- and foregrounds are balanced with static and dynamic human figures. In comparison with Lucas van Leyden's *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket*, the narrative is composed with reversed approaches: whereas Lucas van Leyden pushes the main event in the background in order to give the real viewer the chance to get in the shoes of the audience present in the print, Perugino directly situates the major theme in the foreground. The figures in the middle ground can be taken as the audience but they are not strategically put there for the real viewer to get in touch with the event. They seem to be enjoying the event rather than speculating about what is happening in the foreground.

Lucas van Leyden's *The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket* and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* prints have similar pilasters on façades of buildings with the inner walls of Raphael's *School of Athens* fresco (Figure 14). The point of divergence lays in the ornamentation of both walls (see Figure 15). Lucas van Leyden applies tracery to these pilasters whereas Raphael positions sculptures in the niches difficult to decipher along the corridor. The slightly visible hands and faces of the sculptures reveal the three-dimensionality within the painting not only towards the linear depth but also in the direction of sideways. Lucas van Leyden's

Figure 15 Ornaments on *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and *School of Athens*

ornamentations of these pilasters remain only two-dimensional and decorative. There is not a single reference to "window of the soul" concept of the Renaissance tradition at all, meaning that the world view is changing towards appreciating knowledge found in the world rather than religious doctrine. Roston praises Raphael's *School of Athens* for its

> Aristotelian interest in actuality find[ing] its expression in the spatial rationalization of the architectural setting, so accurately rendered with its broad stairway, decorative pilasters, and noble arches that it is believed by historians to represent the interior of St. Peter's as Bramante was actually planning it at the time. (120)

It is obvious that Lucas van Leyden does not glorify the architecture in the sense that his Italian contemporaries did after all. There is certainly interconnectedness with the philosophy of nature at the time of Renaissance.

However Lucas van Leyden's concern is still the narrative itself.

Comparison with Albrecht Dürer's Prints

On the other hand, a better comparison of Lucas van Leyden's prints in the issue of representation of architecture is possible through analyzing his German contemporary Albrecht Dürer's prints. In Dürer's three prints of *Glorification of the Virgin, Christ Among the Doctors* and *The Rejection of Joachim's Offering*, which he made in between 1502 and 1504, the subsequent stories of *The Life of the Virgin* take place indoors.

There is always an arch in the image and it is in the ancient Roman style. Only in *The Rejection of Joachim's Offering* print (Figure 16), one can distinguish the groin vault made up of pointed arches, which is an element of Gothic architecture. Like Lucas van Leyden, Albrecht Dürer also seems to go in between two styles of architecture but with the difference of concise application of the technique in order to enrich the decoration. The viewer really senses that it is a closed room with accurately managed spatial perspective. The proportions of the arches and pillars are well organized for the full effect. It seems like Dürer better kept pace with the Renaissance art flourishing in Italy than Lucas van Leyden did. It is feasible that Dürer was the most inspirational artist in Lucas van Leyden's life concerning art to follow the developments in the global sphere since their meeting in 1521 in Antwerp is evidenced by both artists drawing each other's portraits.

Conclusion

The challenge of periodization of Lucas van Leyden's works is dealt with in this article by looking at the representation of architecture and ornaments in his prints. It is still difficult to situate him either in the medieval tradition of art or in the Renaissance era. Although it is possible to put him in a third space in which both architectural styles exist together, it would still be very doubtful to think of Lucas van Leyden to aim at such a transcultural claim since his opportunity to get in touch with the real Renaissance artists of Italy and exchange of knowledge was limited to his account with Albrecht Dürer only. This incident may direct future research on analyzing in depth how and why Lucas van Leyden chose to employ different architectural forms in his prints as if making collages.
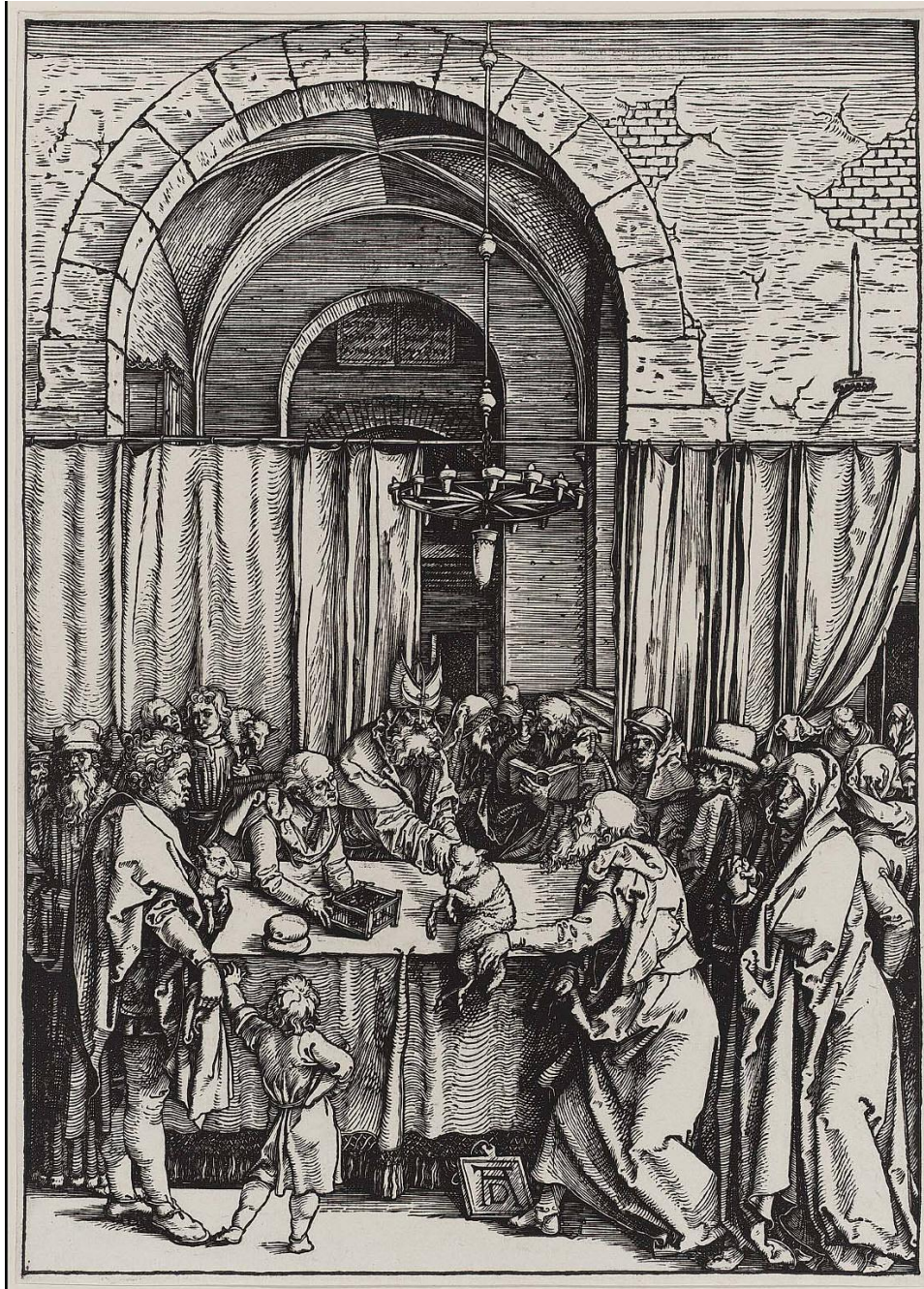
Figure 16 Albrecht Dürer, *The Rejection of Joachim's Offering (The Life of the Virgin)*, c. 1504, Woodcut, 295 x 212 mm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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