

Verschuylen and the Antwerp school

In many ways in the nineteenth century the silversmith and chiseller Jan Pieter Antoon Verschuylen, the son of the lace merchant Joseph Théodore Verschuylen and Anna Cornelia de Locht, was a key figure in Antwerp's silversmith trade. In 1820, at the tender age of nineteen, he is already mentioned as being a silversmith. His talent, combined with his exceptionally long career, meant that he had a major influence on Antwerp's silversmiths in the nineteenth century.

In 1860 he was the very first craftsman to receive a knighthood of the Order of Leopold. Joseph Willems, who had trained at the academy, reserved a prominent place for this knighthood on the portrait bust of Verschuylen, which he crafted in 1866, one year after Verschuylen's death. King Leopold I owned a holy-water font by Verschuylen featuring Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well. This monumental work, which was inspired by eighteenth-century pulpits and a late seventeenth-century engraving by Jan van Orley, was already mentioned in 1833 in the *Gazette van Gend* soon after its creation. The jaw prosthesis which he made that same year for the French soldier Alphonse Joseph Louis, who was gravely injured during the siege of Antwerp and who is better known as *the gunner with the silver mask*, is still the subject of much international attention to this day in medical literature, more specifically in the context of military and plastic surgery. At the same time the Roman Catholic Churches in the Netherlands were also an important market for Jan Pieter Antoon Verschuylen's church silver. Inspired by lace exports he was not afraid of even smuggling his wares abroad. New works met with positive acclaim in *De Rotterdamsche Courant* and even *De Surinaamsche Courant* newspapers.

His technical skills, his eye for detail and his ability to create depth and movement – even when he had to take into account the client's budget and only finished the visible parts of the sculptures instead of the whole sculpture – are all contributing factors to the fine quality of his silver. His preference for the neo-Baroque also allowed him to elaborately decorate his work. At the same time Verschuylen also paved the way for the Antwerp neo-Gothic, in which his apprentice Lambert I Van Ryswyck and Albrecht Jacobs would go on to play a prominent role.

Often seventeenth- and eighteenth-century silver and gold needed restoring, repairing or reworking allowing him to closely study these works, along with his commitment for example to the Shoemaker's Chapel in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp. In 1852 and 1853 he reworked the monstrances of St. Andrew's Church in Antwerp and St. Martin's Church in Kontich. The former was manufactured in 1712 by Wierick IV Somers after a design by Michiel van der Voort. The latter was made in 1709 by Jan Anthoni Lepies. He also owned silver by Jan Baptist I Verberckt, which he loaned in 1854 for the celebration of the anniversary of Antwerp's Guild of St. Luke. Besides this he also had an extensive collection of drawings by the sculptor Hendrik Frans Verbrugghen and terracotta models by Walter Pompe and Jan Frans Van Geel, which he supplemented with a collection of engravings of models and ornaments by such artists as de la Fosse, Normand and Forty. Thanks to a recently discovered lot of more than two hundred drawings from Verschuylen's workshop we also know that he copied sculptures and silver and gold from Antwerp's churches, such as a group of statues by Artus II Quellinus in St. James's Church.

Verschuylen also amassed a collection of technical textbooks, which among others included the following publications: *Vade Mecum de l'orfèvre et du bijoutier, par Fessart* (1837), *Manuels de Galvanoplastique et de Daguerrotypie* (1843), *Manipulations électrotypiques, ou traité de Galvanoplastique* (1843), *L'art de l'essayeur, par Chaudet* (1835) and *Manuel complet de l'essayeur*. He used these to further supplement his technical skills which he acquired in the workshops of the silversmiths Charles Aulit and Joseph Lecocqmartin. The meticulously finished details and complex shapes of Verschuylen's work clearly bear the mark of his almost fanatical teacher Lecocqmartin.

Not much is known about the education of Jan Pieter Antoon Verschuylen at the Academy as part of the rolls are missing for the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1825 he took drawing from life classes and by 1834 at the latest became a member of the *Société royale pour l'encouragement des*

Beaux-Arts. In 1833 and 1834 he presented some of his own work at the *Exposition nationale des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels. On the back of one of the designs from Verschuylen's workshop is an ornamental design which may have been created during his time at the Academy.

Like his illustrious predecessor Jan Anthoni Lepies he usually signed his works in full and proudly stated his place of residence – Antwerp – which was important because the Netherlands was an important market for his work. His numbered drawings, often double designs, underscore his artistic qualities and his preference for sculptural elements, such as reliefs and statues. Jan Pieter Antoon Verschuylen often also collaborated with sculptors or used their models: Joseph Gillis in 1844, Lodewijk Corrijn in 1845, the de Cuyper brothers in 1845-1846, Willem Geefs in 1857 and Pierre Alfons Bogaerts in 1861-1862.

In 1829 Verschuylen's successful workshop employed six workers. One of his main collaborators was Joannes Franciscus Ghislenuus Dutienne, the son of the cabinetmaker and architect Carolus Augustinus Jacobus Dutienne. After his training at the Academy Verschuylen's son Charles was destined to succeed him but like his sister, Jeanne Marie Norbertine, he died during the cholera epidemic of 1866. The contents of the workshop and Jan Pieter Antoon Verschuylen's collection were auctioned off for the most part on 15 April 1867 in his house in Lombardenvest. Some objects, such as his portrait bust and the prosthesis for the French gunner Alphonse Joseph Louis, were conserved for the benefit of the public through his daughter Reine Louis Cornelia Verschuylen and the Stalins family.

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