

Sacred and serene, or a flamboyant procession of smells and colours?

The Smells of the Cathedral

WENDY WAUTERS

‘The Smells of the Cathedral’ by art historian Wendy Wauters takes us to one of the hotspots of the sixteenth century: the Church of Our Lady, Antwerp’s ‘cathedral’ ever since 1559. This majestic building was the beating heart of the city, where intensely religious parishioners crossed paths with dogcatchers, pilgrims, and livestock dealers. Religious serenity was sometimes hard to find inside.

Anyone who stepped into Antwerp’s cathedral in the sixteenth century was overwhelmed not by a sacred silence, but by a festival of colours, an ocean of sounds, and perfumes intended to help disguise the stench. This sensory reconstruction of the fleeting experiences of everyday life is told through the eyes of an anthropologist, looking at what people did to the church, as well as what the church did to the people. Wauters describes the world of the mediaeval churchgoer, presenting us with a colourful parade of forgotten practices.

That Wendy Wauters is able to bring those transient experiences to life so vividly in this rich book, with its impressive list of sources, is remarkable. In 2022, the thesis on which it is based won her a prestigious academic prize. The success of ‘The Smells of the Cathedral’ demonstrates how important and fascinating it can be when scholars manage to translate their academic results into a book for a broader readership.

‘Perfume’, but in a church

DE STANDAARD



AUTHOR



Wendy Wauters (b. 1983) is a doctor of art history (KU Leuven) who has written an award-winning thesis about the world of the mediaeval churchgoer. After a career as art director in the advertising sector, she started work as head of nonfiction collection development for the Antwerp libraries. She is in great demand as a speaker and likes to turn the spotlight onto small sixteenth-century stories.

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