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CALL FOR PAPERS:

MAGNIFICENCE IN THE 17th CENTURY Performing Splendour in Republican and Princely Contexts¹

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Introduction

The 2,500th year celebration of the Persian Empire under the last Shah, the heavy weight championship with Foreman versus Ali in Mobutu's Zaire, the Paris constructions from Centre Pompidou to Mitterrand's Pyramid, and more recently Putin's Winter Olympics in Sochi all met with an enormous public interest for great expenditure and great effects which are for an important part linked to specific rulers. However, time and again, the questions regarding the taste or tastelessness of the expenditure sounded loudly. Could money have not been spent in a

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better way and for better purposes? This is a dangerous question as it can help paving the way to revolt, as among other rulers the Shah would learn very soon after the festivities.

The economy of spending enormous sums on public festivities and buildings is a hot issue nowadays, but was debated for centuries and centuries already, involving among others, ethics, rhetoric, theology, politics, and even literary and art theory. However, each time and each culture made its own claims, set its own preconditions, and expressed its own concerns regarding great expenditure.

We find an early and very important contribution to the debate in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle famously defines the concept of magnificence (*μεγαλοπρέπεια*) as a virtue concerned with wealth, more particularly “a fitting expenditure involving largeness of scale (...) in relation to the agent, and to the circumstances and the object” (trans. W.D. Ross, 4.2). Aristotle explains this further by stating that “the magnificent man is like an artist; for he can see what is fitting and spend large sums tastefully”. So the virtue of magnificence is not only about great expenditure as such, the enormous amounts of money have to be spent by a person with particular characteristics for particular activities in order to attain particular objectives: “Therefore the result should be worthy of the expense, and the expense should be worthy of the result, or should even exceed it. And the magnificent man will spend such sums for honour’s sake; for this is common to the virtues. And further he will do so gladly and lavishly; for nice calculation is a niggardly thing”.

Throughout the ages, these preconditions were time and again taken into consideration to define and redefine the correct spending of large sums of money with the intentions, the taste, the descent and the richness of the spender as central parameters, as well as the social relevance of the expenditure. Every later period in Western history appropriated magnificence in such a way that Aristotle’s concept figured as, in the words of Guido Guerzoni, “the intellectual bases of twenty-five centuries of consumption patterns that were not conspicuous nor flaunted, but burdened by the weight of inevitable social obligation” (345).

The Age of Magnificence

The conference focusses on the appropriation of the concept of magnificence in seventeenth-century republican and princely contexts in Europe. Although the seventeenth century is previously described as the ‘Age of Magnificence’, thus far no attempts have been made to look how the term and the concept of magnificence functioned in this period. This is all the more surprising as the seventeenth century is strongly defined by the consolidation of religious difference, by a confrontation between growing absolutism versus the success of republics, by an increasing importance of *nouveaux riches* in public display, as well as by the rise of theories on the impact of art.

This Intersections volume will look in which ways these crucial ethical, religious, political, aesthetic and cultural features interacted with thought on magnificence. Therefore, it studies performances of splendour in the broad sense of *magnum facere* (the etymological origin of magnificence), from spectacular civic and courtly festivities over impressive displays of painting and sculpture in rich architectural settings to the fashioning of grandeur in everyday practices by luxurious attire, exclusive etiquette, and a grand household, as well as in social interactions as diverse as religious cults and warfare, hunt and diplomacy. Moreover, we aim at

crossing national borders looking at the influence of different religions, political constellations, and cultural traditions on the use of magnificence.

Courtly Ethics

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the concept of magnificence had evolved from the personal quality of *μεγαλοπρέπεια* belonging to a rather abstract group of the extreme rich into a far more socially restricted concept related to court societies, be that a restriction under constant pressure. In splendid rituals and festivities, and in a rich diversity of courtly fashioning and self-fashioning *magnum facere* would become a most welcome concept for absolutist aspirations with the grand performances of Louis XIV in Paris and Versailles as most illuminating examples.

A magnificent act needs to be seen in the context of other moral decisions a prince takes. So magnificence closely intermingles ethics and politics. As magnificence implies the art of expenditure on a large scale, both for personal reasons as for the benefit of the community, a magnificent act must be considered in relation to virtues as liberality, which is the virtue of giving right to the right people, the right amounts and at the right time. Liberality in turn is related to justice in the sense of the fair distribution of richness. Magnificence is also associated with pride (magnanimity), and sometimes is even confused with it, as both are related to a conception of greatness.

Virtues as magnificence and their recognition can only exist in a community with shared values. The early modern courts can be seen as such communities which more or less shared an ethic of virtue. Interesting, however, is that heterogeneity certainly existed. Political decisions at court were evaluated according to virtue ethics, which meant that they were assessed as expressions of the character of the actors (kings, queens and noblemen): the actions of Alfonso V in the light of his magnanimity, of Lorenzo de Medici taking in consideration his magnificence, of Louis XIV in relation to his *gloire*. After all, virtues refer primarily to the character of persons rather than to their actions.

Especially in seventeenth-century magnificent courtly ceremonies, the accessibility of the prince came under pressure, which could lead to accusations of tyranny and corruption. How was the balance between magnificence and conversation acquired in the seventeenth-century magnificent courts? Another question is if magnificence continued to be regarded as a virtue, or if it acquired a more instrumental significance. The Spanish Jesuit author Juan de Mariana, highly critical of courtly splendour, which he saw as an expression of corruption, nevertheless stated in *De rege et regis institutione* (1599), that pomp and brilliance were necessary in order to impress the subjects and evoke the image of a quasi-divine king. Moreover, Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670) forms an artistic climax of sharply satirizing the appropriation of courtly and royal magnificence by the *nouveaux riches*. We need to gain further insights in how the rise of bourgeois magnificence related to absolutist magnificence.

Christian ethics

The reception of Aristotelian ideas by scholastic thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and Giles of Rome expressed in princely mirrors and glossaries of Aristotle, brought with it their adaption to Christian ethics, which led to contradictions. Especially typical aristocratic virtues as magnificence and magnanimity were difficult to combine with Christian ideas of humbleness, charity and an ascetic way of life which condemn pride and outward display of wealth. Though in scholastic thought magnificence has been made compatible with poverty and magnanimity with humility this tension continued to exist in the world of the court.

Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528), emphasizes the aristocratic values, among them magnificence and associates outward display of richness with beauty which in turn is connected to virtue. The description of Federico da Montefeltro makes this clear. He was famous because of his prudence, humanity, justice, liberality, unconquered courage and military discipline, but also because of one of his most "praiseworthy deeds": the building of "a palace regarded by many as one of the most beautiful to be found in Italy" which he decorated with what was "rare and excellent". Against this interpretation of magnificence, another model written from a perspective of *contemptus mundi* was formulated by Antonio de Guevara, who in his *Reloj de príncipes* (1529) proposed the model of the wise king, and criticised magnificence in the sense of expenditure in big palaces and festive culture.

Different spiritual sensibilities, combined with a diversity of ethical and religious traditions, ranging from Thomism to Aristotelianism and Stoicism, found this way their expression in a range of propositions for political models in the seventeenth century: the wise, virtuous, holy or glorious king, the "king shepherd", etc. In the conference the discussion of these propositions will take an important place.

Republics and Municipalities

Besides, we will pay attention in how far republics and powerful municipalities use the concept of magnificence to perform splendour and thus to express power, but have to deal with ethical restrictions of expenditure. According to the well-known, and disputed, theory of Quentin Skinner, the classical republican virtues had an anti-aristocratic character, and virtue was not rooted in lineage or richness, but acquired through political participation, and sacrifice for the common good. From this perspective, the manifestations of magnificence become easily identified with corruption. However, great expenditure in building projects and festivities in republics and by municipalities, such as the building of the Amsterdam Town Hall, were fiercely defended with the argument of magnificence by most prominent authors. So how could the abstract constellation of the *res publica* be presented as magnificent in comparison with specific dynastic rulers with absolutist aspirations?

Much research still needs to be done, but we can assume that magnificence was increasingly interiorised. In his dedication to the influential *Hora novissima* (1663) Otto Belcampius relates the magnificence of the Amsterdam burgomasters to the divine. The Calvinist preacher does not only define the city government as the sun, which was a common metaphor to praise the splendid appearance of dynastic rulers as well, but also with the Biblical metaphor of the seal ring, the glimmering jewel that emphasises God's trust in specific rulers. In this strict Calvinist context, the Amsterdam rulers' *magnum facere* is presented as the performance of

overwhelming radiance, but also related to good government in the strict sense of direct care for the citizens by maximally facilitating justice, religion, and peace. In the Anglican context, magnificence was also less and less connected with spending exceptional large sums of money, and more and more with symbolic expressions of grandeur. For example, the Elizabethan pamphleteer Thomas Dekker praised the London mayor for planting ‘severall trees of magnificence’.

Art and Architecture

Furthermore, there is the impact of magnificence in art and architecture in both catholic and protestant regions. Thus far, magnificence in seventeenth-century art and architecture is predominantly linked with the Baroque and the Counterreformation. As this is never done with a clear definition of what magnificence might mean in this particular context — a recent exhibition catalogue entitled *Baroque 1620-1800. Style in the Age of Magnificence* did not even have the entry ‘magnificence’ in its index (Snodin & Llewellyn) —, we strive at developing crucial insights for this context and link it with the seventeenth-century ethical-political definitions of magnificence.

Moreover, we can also see an interiorisation of magnificence in seventeenth-century art theory, as there the focus shifted from magnificence in patronage to magnificence in the person of the artist. In appropriating magnificence to define the ideal artist, the Dutch art theoretician and Calvinist theologian Franciscus Junius was ground breaking. Whereas he clarifies that eventually a magnificent work of art overwhelms and elevates the viewer to sublime heights, he puts the emphasis on the importance of the mental capacity of the artist to find a splendid subject for his work of art. Therefore, magnificence is related to the first phase of creation, the so-called *inventio*. In line with Aristotle and Pliny, Junius compares the magnificent spender and the magnificent artist as both need delicacy and taste. He sees this as a natural gift, thus anticipating theories on the artist as genius which will be developed among other artists by Roger de Piles. In his *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintres* (1681) Piles praises Rubens for his innate delicacy and taste in finding the most extraordinary subjects for his splendid paintings.

Thus regarding the interiorisation of magnificence in art, political, ethical and religious theories questions arise, such as how the artist’s magnificence relates to protestant magnificence, how both relate to the very explicit and publicly performed magnificence of the Baroque in courtly and catholic contexts and even within one and the same artist, such as Rubens, and how from the end of the seventeenth century onwards the concept of magnificence is increasingly appropriated to evaluate the effect of specific painters and specific works of art.

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