

Touching the Ears, the Eyes, and the Soul: Sensory Experiences in Late Medieval Preaching in the Low Countries

For the Middle Ages, preaching was the primary avenue for religious education: the regular sermons coming down from the pulpit bringing doctrine, devotional practice, and deeper understanding of religious issues. While considered primarily an oral/aural experience – the preacher talking, the audience listening – preaching was an inherently multisensorial event: the preacher’s voice was accompanied by dramatic gestures and facial expressions, intended to give a performance that would emotionally touch the listeners and have the message take root. Moreover, the location in which a sermon took place could itself exert an influence on the audience’s emotional state: people were instructed to come to church in a devotional mood and once there, were exposed to the numerous sensory stimuli of paintings, sculptures, mingling odours and so on; all of which could interact with the preaching event and thus the communication of religious knowledge. This paper, focusing on preaching in the 15th century Low Countries and Middle Dutch sermons, will examine how the multisensory experience of medieval preaching enabled the desired emotional response, and in doing so allowed for an effective process of religious education.

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