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ga

ret

Duchess  
of Parma

The Emperor's  
Daughter  
between  
Power and  
Image





# Foreword

## **WELCOME HOME MARGARET**

The city of Oudenaarde, nestled in the Scheldt Valley in south-east Flanders among the hills of the Flemish Ardennes, has a rich and eventful history. This combination – a green region and an important historic past – lends Oudenaarde tremendous appeal. The city centre with its Grand Place, magnificent late Gothic town hall (1526–37) and belfry – a UNESCO world heritage site – is a major attraction. And it is this historic building, which is also home to MOU Museum Oudenaarde, that provides the perfect setting for the exhibition *Margaret: The Emperor's Daughter between Power and Image* (21 September 2024 – 5 January 2025).

## **PRIDE**

The City of Oudenaarde invests in projects that strengthen its identity, which are rooted in the history of Oudenaarde and, by extension, Flanders. This is particularly the case for Margaret of Parma, governor-general of the Netherlands, who is also well known in Italy. The name 'Margaret', daughter of Charles V and Johanna Vander Gheynst, a girl from a simple family, immediately rings a bell with the people of Oudenaarde. Margaret and the stories of her life and turbulent times are a seminal part of the city's cultural identity and pride.

## **OUDENAARDE, CITY OF TAPESTRIES**

Margaret was an avid collector of Flemish tapestries. The inventory of her collections reveals that she owned more than 200 of these precious textiles. From the fifteenth until the eighteenth century, tapestries were one of Flanders' most successful export products. Oudenaarde, alongside Arras, Tournai, Brussels and Antwerp, was one of the most important tapestry centres in the Southern Netherlands. As a museum that is recognised beyond the city's borders, MOU puts its tapestry collection at the centre of its policy and public outreach, with an emphasis on high-quality presentation. Masterpieces from the local tapestry industry show how this highly skilled craft made Oudenaarde into the city it is today. This fascinating story comes to life in the historic Town Hall, a setting that contributes to making the museum experience even more unique.

MOU has a second major research theme: Oudenaarde as a Burgundian city. These two themes are covered in the exhibition and in this accompanying book. What makes this all the more special, however, is the very close connection between Margaret and the craftsmanship associated with tapestry weaving: Margaret herself collected tapestries, but her mother Johanna was also the daughter of a tapestry weaver.

## **A UNIQUE ENSEMBLE**

The idea of dedicating an exhibition to Margaret of Parma was suggested by MOU curator Geertrui Van Kerkhoven and received the support of the city council. In 2022, the City of Oudenaarde appointed Dr Katrien Lichtert as head researcher and curator of the project. She led a three-year programme of international, interdisciplinary scholarly research in preparation for the ambitious exhibition – the concept behind the project is therefore based on the latest scientific insights.

The exhibition and book feature iconic portraits of Margaret as well as drawings, prints, textile art, jewellery, goldsmithing, tapestries and glassware that encapsulate the magnificence of the sixteenth century, with loans from numerous prestigious European museums and private collections. We are incredibly grateful to the lenders for giving Oudenaarde and MOU the chance to showcase this unique ensemble. The fact that these many works of art, including objects from Margaret's personal art collection, are reunited for the first time in her hometown fills us with pride, in addition to making this exhibition a meaningful and historically significant event for both Oudenaarde and Flanders.

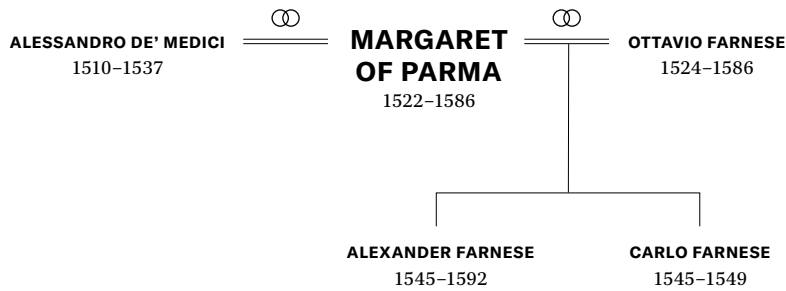
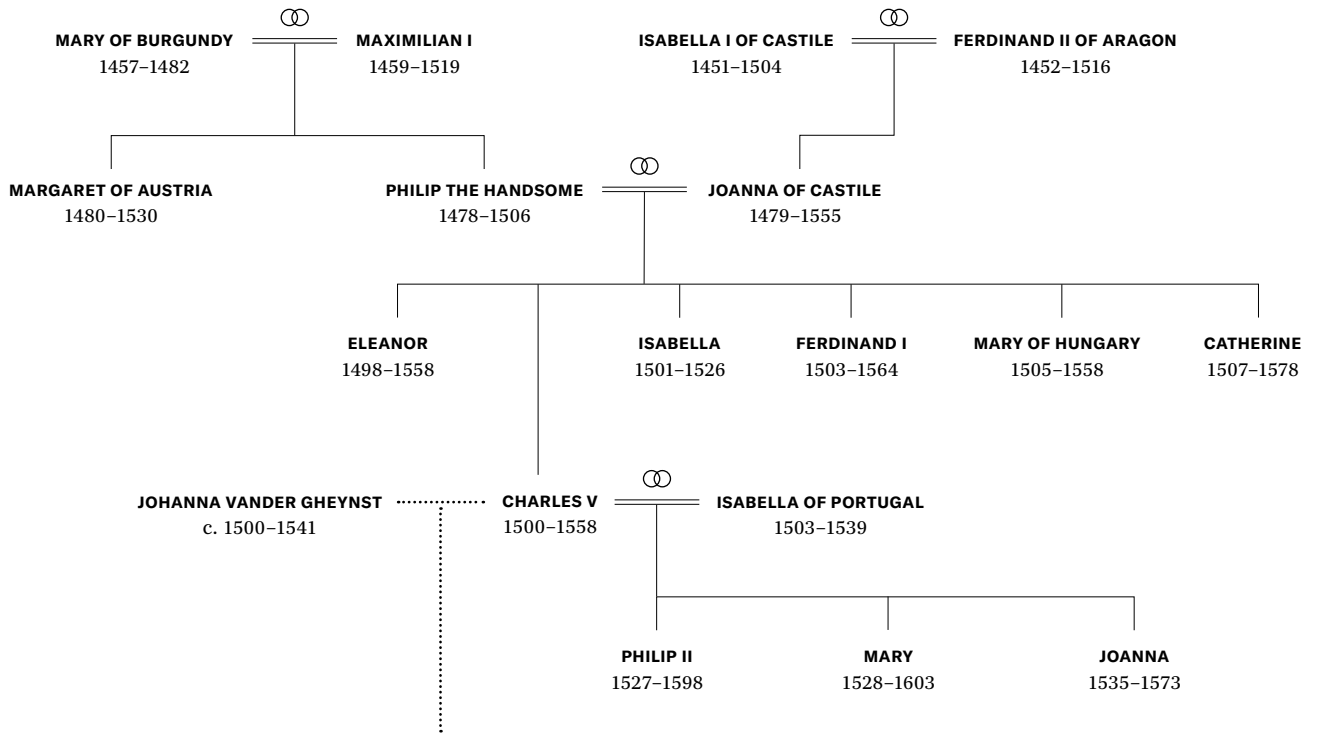
In addition to Dr Katrien Lichtert and Geertrui Van Kerkhoven, the scientific committee also included city archivist Stijn Lybeert, Dr Giuseppe Bertini, Prof. Dr Dagmar Eichberger, Prof. Dr Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, Dr Samuel Mareel, Prof. Dr Violet Soen, Dr Martine Vanwelden, Prof. Dr Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, Alexandra Van Dongen, Dr Sabine van Sprang, Prof. Dr Federica Veratelli and Prof. Dr René Vermeir. We wish to thank them all for their contributions to this project. This book is the first reference work on Margaret of this scale, offering an insight into her lifestyle, her political achievements and her patronage. Moreover, the two worlds in which she lived, namely Flanders and Italy, also converge in it.

This historic project would not have been possible without the commitment of the enthusiastic and driven MOU team, director Bart Baele, and all the departments and supporting services involved.

**The Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Oudenaarde**

Geertrui Van Kerkhoven, Curator of MOU

# Family Tree



# Timeline

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## LATE JULY 1522

Margaret of Parma is born in Pamele (Oudenaarde) as the natural daughter of Emperor Charles V and Johanna Vander Gheynst, a local maid.

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## AUGUST 1522

Young Margaret becomes a ward of Andries Douvrin in Brussels.

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## JUNE 1529

Margaret is married off to Alessandro de' Medici, the natural son of Pope Clement VII. Pope Clement VII and Charles V sign the marriage contract in Barcelona. Charles V officially recognises his daughter soon after. From then on, she has the right to bear and officially use the name 'Margaret of Austria'.

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## 7 JANUARY 1533

Margaret leaves the Netherlands and travels to Italy.

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## 25 NOVEMBER 1535

Thirteen-year-old Margaret meets her father for the first time in Naples.

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## 28 FEBRUARY 1536

The marriage ceremony of Margaret and Alessandro de' Medici takes place.

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## 6 JANUARY 1537

Alessandro de' Medici is assassinated.

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## MAY 1538

Margaret is promised in marriage to Ottavio Farnese, grandson of Pope Paul III. Their marriage is celebrated on 4 November in the Sistine Chapel.

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## 27 AUGUST 1545

Margaret gives birth to two sons, Carlo and Alessandro (Alexander). Carlo dies in 1549.

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## NOVEMBER 1556

Margaret is summoned to the Netherlands by King Philip II. She travels there with Alexander, now aged eleven.

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## MAY 1557

Margaret returns to Italy. That same year, Alexander travels with Philip II to Madrid, where he is raised and educated at the king's court.

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## MARCH 1559

Philip II appoints Margaret as governor-general of the Netherlands. She officially takes up her office on 7 August.

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## 11 NOVEMBER 1565

Mary of Portugal makes her Joyous Entry into Brussels and marries Alexander Farnese, Margaret's son.

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## 18 NOVEMBER 1565

During the wedding festivities, the Compromise of Nobles is established.

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## 5 APRIL 1566

The nobles submit their petition to Margaret.

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## SUMMER 1566

The situation is tense in the Netherlands. On 10 August, the Iconoclasm erupts.

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## APRIL 1567

Margaret resigns upon learning that Philip II has dispatched the Duke of Alba to the Netherlands. At the end of the year, she leaves Brussels and returns to Italy, settling in Abruzzo.

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## SEPTEMBER 1572

Margaret is appointed lifelong regent of Abruzzo by Philip II.

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## LATE FEBRUARY 1580

Margaret leaves LAquila and returns to the Netherlands as regent at the request of Philip II.

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## 26 JULY 1580

Margaret arrives in Namur. She asks her son Alexander to divide the position of governor-general into separate military and civil roles. He refuses.

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## 31 DECEMBER 1581

Philip II signs Alexander's appointment as governor and captain-general. Margaret is not permitted to leave the Netherlands.

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## 14 SEPTEMBER 1583

Philip II grants Margaret permission to leave the Netherlands. She returns to her beloved Abruzzo.

---

## 18 JANUARY 1586

Margaret dies in Ortona. On 30 May, she is buried in the Church of San Sisto in Piacenza, where her tomb can still be seen today.



MARGARITA AB AVSTRIA,  
AVGVSTI FILIA PARMÆ, AC  
PENNÆ. DVCISSA, NOVARIA QZ  
POTENTISS. HISPANIARVM CA  
INFERIORIS GERMANIÆ  
CHRISTIANÆ PIETATIS,  
OBSERVANTISS. ADECCLESIAE  
DONAVIT. ANNO DNĪ

DIVI CAROLIM  
PLACENTIAE,  
DOMINA .  
CATHOLICO REGE  
REGENS AC  
DIVINI QZ  
HVI9. ORNATV  
M. D. LX II.





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# A Portrait of the Emperor's Daughter



FIG. 1  
Anthonis Mor, *Portrait of Margaret of Parma*, c. 1555  
oil on panel, 87 × 65 cm. Private collection

## OUDENAARDE

Margaret of Parma (fig. 1) was born in Oudenaarde in late July 1522. She was the daughter of Charles V (1500–1558) and Johanna Vander Gheynst (c. 1500–1541), a local maid. In the autumn of 1521, the young emperor (fig. 2) was quartered in Oudenaarde, a strategically located city on the River Scheldt, just a day's march from where he was laying siege to the city of Tournai. The siege of Tournai by Habsburg troops was a chapter in the Italian Wars, a series of conflicts arising from the power struggle between Charles and his rival, the French king Francis I (1494–1547). Although the conflict was fought mainly on the Italian peninsula, the Netherlands and surrounding territories played a strategic role in the geopolitical tug-of-war between the two monarchs.

Oudenaarde, which was famed for its tapestries, was deliberately chosen as a temporary residence. The city was within easy reach of the battlefield, and security considerations also played a role. Since the early fifteenth century, it had been a loyal ally of the House of Valois-Burgundy and the House of Habsburg. The Lalaing family, in particular, produced descendants over several generations who became prominent courtiers of the Dukes of Burgundy and later the Habsburgs. From late October until mid-December – with a brief, one-week interruption – the emperor stayed with the then-governor of the city, Charles de Lalaing. He lived in the Burgundian castle (which no longer exists) on the right bank of the Scheldt. According to the most plausible version of the story, the young emperor got to know Johanna at one of the festivities the governor organised in his honour. Although several authors have 'reconstructed' the meeting between the emperor and the maiden – sometimes in excruciating detail and often highly romanticised – the exact circumstances in which they met remain unknown.

Johanna, daughter of a tapestry weaver, hailed from Nukerke and worked as a maid in the Lalaing household. She was of humble birth, but her daughter would go on to join the highest political echelons in turbulent sixteenth-century Europe. Margaret was born in late July in Pamele. Since we have no birth or baptismal certificate, we must rely on other sources to partly reconstruct the context of her birth and the timeline of preceding and subsequent events.<sup>1</sup> An agreement was signed with Johanna on 1 August, granting her a lifetime annuity.

Her daughter must thus have been born a few days earlier. Johanna was also 'compensated' with an arranged marriage, allowing her to climb up the social ladder. In 1525, she married Johan Van den Dycke, lord of Zandvliet; the couple had several children and ended up settling in Brussels.<sup>2</sup>



FIG. 2  
**Jakob Seisenegger,**  
*Portrait of Emperor Charles V, 1532*  
oil on panel, 205 × 123 cm. Vienna,  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. A024/1995

## LA PETITE FILLE BASTARDE, RESIDENTE À BRUXELLES

From the outset, Margaret of Austria (1480–1530), the great-aunt of young Margaret, played a defining role in the life story of the emperor's daughter from Oudenaarde. Margaret, who was regent of the Netherlands at the time, was a competent ruler and diplomat as well as a prolific patron of the arts. Under her rule, the court of Cambrai in Mechelen became a thriving political and cultural hub.<sup>3</sup> Charles, who was born in Ghent in 1500, was entrusted to Margaret's care and raised at her court in Mechelen. "*La bonne tante et mère*" ("the good aunt and mother") exerted tremendous influence on the emperor until she died in 1530. Margaret was a paragon of female diplomacy. Her main achievement was the Ladies' Peace (also known as the Treaty of Cambrai) between the emperor and king, which she negotiated, as the emperor's representative, with Louise of Savoy, the mother of Francis I.<sup>4</sup>

Margaret was probably the first to recognise the importance of the (unborn) child. The emperor's first daughter could be deployed on the European political-diplomatic scene to defend the dynasty's interests. Arranged marriages for state interests were common in those days. After her formal recognition, the girl could take her place in the European marriage merry-go-round. This system of dynastic marriages of convenience was not limited to children born within a marriage. The Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty had a long tradition of including illegitimate children in its strategic marriage policy.<sup>5</sup> Charles also fathered numerous children outside his marriage to Isabella of Portugal (1503–1539).<sup>6</sup> So the fact that Margaret, who, *stricto sensu*, was the emperor's pre-marital child, was initially seen as an illegitimate child was not in any way considered an obstacle to a glorious future. Nor did it matter that, in this particular case, the social divide was very wide. In the sixteenth century, Charles V was one of the most powerful men on earth and the ruler of the first real global empire, whereas Johanna was on the very bottom rung of the social ladder as a maid of humble origins.

Shortly after the birth, Margaret of Austria honoured the city of Oudenaarde with her presence. The regent became the child's godmother, and Margaret was named after her. The emperor's daughter was subsequently sent to Brussels, where she went to live in the household of the Douvrins family, with whom she remained in touch throughout her life.<sup>7</sup> Andries Douvrin, later lord of Bodegem and Drogenbroek, was 'the master of the gifts' of Ferdinand of Austria, Charles's brother. Margaret spent her early years living in the shadow of the court in Brussels, although she did visit her godmother in Mechelen.<sup>8</sup> The regent played a vital role in this early stage of her goddaughter's life, serving as her guardian – albeit from a distance. Margaret of Austria spent large sums on textiles, toys and all manner of items, which she lavished on "*la petite fille bastarde residente à Bruxelles*" ("the little bastard child who lived in Brussels"). She also saw to it that the girl received a proper education, an essential factor in the success of her endeavour to use the emperor's daughter as a pawn in the European geopolitical landscape. Margaret was destined to become an accomplished Habsburg princess. As a result, she was also brought up according to the norms and values of the Burgundian-Habsburg household and initiated into ceremonial court life. In addition to arts and music, she was also taught physical skills such as dancing, skating, horse riding and falconry. Margaret was also taught more feminine skills such as sewing and embroidery, something she would continue to enjoy throughout her life.

Around the same time that the emperor officially recognised his daughter, Margaret of Austria set about commissioning three portraits of the young princess. The accounts of 1528–29 show that the regent paid court painter Vermeyen "*Pour l'estoffe, couleurs et bois de trois tableaux faicts à la figure de la fille bastarde de l'empereur, lesquels ma dite dame a envoyé, assavoir: ung au pape, ung à l'empereur, et l'autre elle l'a retenu et mis en son cabinet*" ("For the fabric, pigments and the wood for three paintings of the emperor's bastard daughter, which my lady sent to the following: one to the pope, one to the emperor, and one that she kept in her art gallery").<sup>9</sup> In the past, this commission was linked to three existing portraits attributed to Jan Sanders van Hemessen: one in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin (fig. 99, p. 166), one in the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts (fig. 4) and a copy in the National Gallery, London.<sup>10</sup> In her own cabinet of art and curiosities, the painting was hung in the *première chambre* ('first room'), next to portraits of Emperor Charles V, Isabella of Portugal, Mary of Hungary

FIG. 3

**Bernard of Orley, *Portrait of Margaret of Austria, after 1518***  
oil on panel, 37 × 27 cm. Bourg-en-Bresse,  
Musée du Monastère de Brou, inv. 975.16







and other descendants of the dynasty.<sup>11</sup> The diplomatic presentation of portraits was a fixture of dynastic marriage policy with the purpose of convincing potential candidates – or rather their family members, given that these candidates were sometimes very young – of the qualities of their betrothed.

### WEDDING MERRY-GO-ROUND

In Margaret's case, it was clear from the outset that her future husband would be a member of an influential noble Italian family. The search took several years – Charles had already opened negotiations with the Medici family in 1525 and with the Duke of Ferrara in 1526 – culminating in an arrangement in 1529. During the Treaty of Barcelona (a pact between the emperor and pope that was supposed to restore peace after the Sack of Rome in 1527 and create a joint alliance against the Ottomans), Charles acknowledged his daughter, who was almost seven by then. From then on, she had the right to bear and officially use the name 'Margaret of Austria'. In the wake of this treaty, the emperor brokered a deal in Barcelona with Giulio de' Medici, better known as Pope Clement VII (1478–1534), a scion of the glorious Medici family. The marriage contract stipulated that Margaret would marry Alessandro de' Medici (1510–1537), nicknamed 'Il Moro' ('The Moor') (fig. 19, p. 40). Alessandro was the natural child of the pope – although his father passed him off as his nephew – and an enslaved African woman (hence his nickname). He was the first Duke of Florence and also Duke of Penne. The pope hoped that Alessandro's marriage to Margaret would consolidate the Medici clan's position in Florence. Charles, for his part, lobbied through this union for papal support in his power struggle with the French king. As leader of the Catholic Church, the pope also wielded tremendous secular power of a precarious nature, as his authority was entirely personal and consequently temporary. In other words, papal policy was subject to the family politics of the incumbent prelate, something Charles was very well aware of and for which he had no qualms about using his daughter. Margaret's future in Italy was thus sealed with the Treaty of Barcelona.

On 7 January 1533, ten-year-old Margaret left Brussels with a vast entourage of courtiers and headed south. She crossed the Alps for the first time, a long and arduous journey – especially in midwinter – that she would make many times during her lifetime as she commuted between north and south. The caravan headed for Naples, where Margaret moved into Pizzofalcone Castle. A kingdom under Habsburg rule, Naples was an important and strategically located bastion on the Italian peninsula. There, the princess was entrusted to the care of Madame de Lannoy, the widow of the former viceroy of Naples, Charles de Lannoy. Margaret's Italian upbringing prepared her for her impending marriage to Alessandro de' Medici, which took place three years later (fig. 5). The emperor stipulated that the marriage would not be consummated until Margaret was sixteen years old, implying that the union could still be dissolved before this date, a smart move. In late February 1536, Alessandro and Margaret married in Naples. Following her wedding, the emperor's daughter adopted the title of 'Duchess of Florence and Penne'. Less than a year later, the duke was assassinated by his cousin Lorenzino on Twelfth Night (6 January) 1537.

Thus Margaret found herself dramatically and unexpectedly widowed at the tender age of fourteen. Emperor Charles V immediately set about finding a new husband for her. In the meantime, Pope Clement VII had died. His successor was Pope Paul III (1468–1549), a scion of the Farnese family. On 4 November 1538, Margaret (now aged sixteen) married Ottavio Farnese (1524–1586), grandson of the incumbent pope, who gave the marriage his blessing in the Sistine Chapel (fig. 6). From the outset, Margaret was displeased with her younger husband. This is evident, among other things, in the correspondence between father and daughter, in which Margaret repeatedly protests about her husband, and the emperor chides her, reminding her to fulfil her marital duties. In one letter, she describes Ottavio as "*brutto, piccolo, rozzo e sporco*" ('ugly, small, coarse and dirty'). But over time, Margaret's affection for Ottavio grew. In time, their union, perhaps best described as a 'long-distance marriage of convenience' (with the couple living apart),<sup>12</sup> would bear fruit, both for the Habsburgs and the Farnese.

FIG. 4

Attributed to Jan Sanders  
van Hemessen, *Young Woman  
playing a Clavichord*, c. 1528–29

oil on panel, 67.2 × 55.2 cm. Worcester (Massachusetts),  
Worcester Art Museum, inv. 1920.88

FIG. 5  
Giorgio Vasari, *The Marriage  
of Alessandro de' Medici and  
Margaret of Austria*, c. 1556–62  
fresco. Florence, Palazzo Vecchio

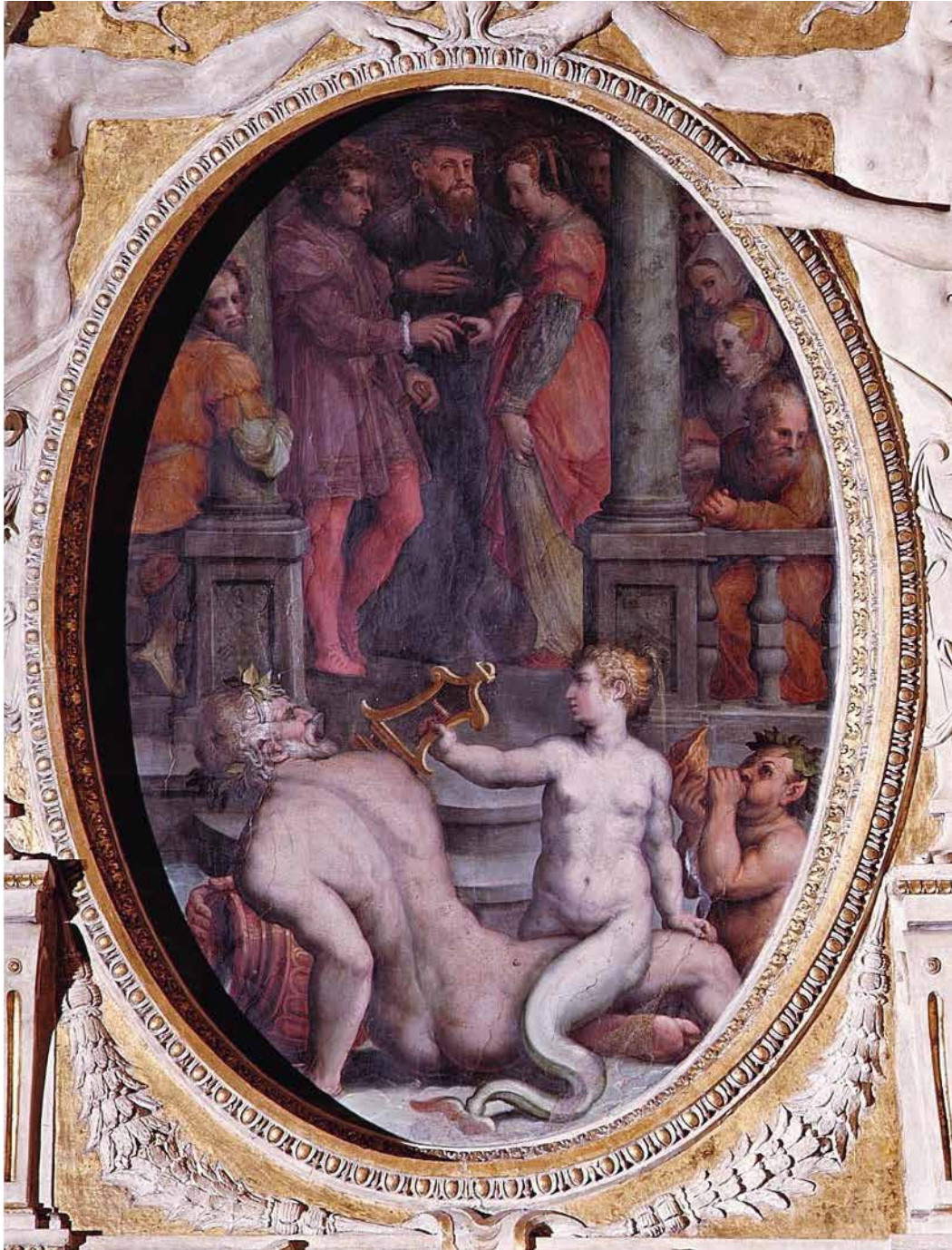


FIG. 6  
**Taddeo Zuccari, *The Marriage  
of Ottavio Farnese and  
Margaret of Austria*, 1538**  
fresco. Caprarola, Villa Farnese





FIG. 7  
**Alessandro Specchi, *Palace of the Grand Duke of Tuscany in Piazza Madama, 1699***  
 etching, 215 × 350 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. BI-1916-0215-100

### MADAMA MARGARET: THE FIRST LADY OF ROME

In her capacity as Duchess of Florence and Alessandro de' Medici's young widow, Margaret inherited several important assets, including the Medici Palace in Rome. After her marriage to Ottavio in 1538, she moved into the palace, called the Palazzo Madama, which is named after her and is now the seat of the Italian Senate (fig. 7). It was her primary residence for twelve years until she moved to Parma in 1550. As the main representative of imperial authority, Margaret found herself at the centre of the political world in Rome. She defended the emperor's interests at the papal court, won the pope's trust and cultivated a close relationship with him. The Holy Father gave his granddaughter-in-law many precious jewels and sought her advice on various political issues. Margaret's pro-imperial politics during this period were aligned with

her father's main objectives, namely to broker religious peace in Germany, obtain the joint support of the pope and the French king for a campaign against the Turks, and for the consolidation of imperial power in Italy.

As the first lady of Rome, Margaret was the most powerful woman in both the city and Italy as a whole, and attracted a lot of attention. All the cardinals, envoys and ambassadors sought to stay in her good graces.<sup>13</sup> It was during her time in the city that Margaret developed her excellent diplomatic and political skills. The Palazzo Madama became a vibrant and fashionable political and cultural hub, with Rome's high society visiting daily. The same was true for the Villa Madama (also named after her), the Medici country residence that, like the Palazzo Madama, she had inherited as a young widow. In this magnificent suburban villa, built by Raphael on the orders

of Pope Clement VII, the emperor's daughter surrounded herself with numerous works of art and archaeological artefacts, including the colossal statues – part of the famous Medici collection – that adorned the gardens and terraces there (fig. 8).<sup>14</sup>

Margaret was also introduced to Ignatius of Loyola, founder of Societatis Jesu, which was recognised by the pope in 1540. Loyola became her spiritual adviser, and the emperor's daughter was happy to oversee all charitable undertakings of the Jesuits. She maintained a close affiliation with the Jesuits throughout her life; later, as governor of the Netherlands, Margaret was responsible for introducing the Jesuits and their militant order to the country.

### SUCCESSION ASSURED

After almost seven years, Margaret's marriage to Ottavio finally led to the desired dynastic result: in August 1545, she gave birth to two boys, Carlo (1545-1549) and Alessandro (1545-1592), named after her father Charles and her brother-in-law Alexander. They were baptised soon after their birth by Margaret's confessor, Loyola, a common practice to ensure the salvation of their souls in times of high infant mortality.

Initially, in the years before the twins were born, Margaret's political ideology was clearly pro-Habsburg and anti-Farnese. This changed with the arrival of two heirs, although Carlo, the eldest child, died as a toddler.



FIG. 8

Maarten van Heemskerck, *View from the Loggia into the Garden of the Villa Madama*, c. 1535

brown ink on paper, 136 × 211 mm. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. 79D2 24r



FIG. 9  
**Anthonis Mor, *Portrait of Alessandro Farnese*, 1557**  
oil on canvas, 153 × 95 cm. Parma,  
Galleria Nazionale, Complesso  
Monumentale della Pilotta, inv. 300



FIG. 10  
**Titian, *Portrait of Philip II*, c. 1550–54**  
oil on canvas, 187 × 98 cm.  
Naples, Museo e Real Bosco  
di Capodimonte, inv. Q127



In the following years, Margaret lavished her full attention on her only surviving son; her primary mission was to secure and guarantee a glorious future for her heir. In 1547, her father-in-law, Pier Luigi Farnese, was assassinated in Piacenza with the emperor's consent. Pier Luigi (1503–1547) had consistently charted an obstinate course that ran counter to the emperor's interests. The assets of Parma and Piacenza had long been the subject of a dispute between the emperor and the House of Farnese. After Pier Luigi's assassination, imperial troops captured Piacenza. Just three weeks later, Margaret's husband Ottavio was crowned Duke of Parma and Piacenza, bestowing the title of Duchess of Parma and Piacenza on Margaret. Two years later, Pope Paul died at the age of eighty-one. Ottavio thus became the new head of the Farnese dynasty.

By then, the Habsburgs' distrust of the Farnese family was deep-seated. The behaviour of Margaret's recalcitrant husband – often benefiting the Franco-papal alliance to the detriment of the emperor's interests – meant that Margaret's half-brother, Philip II (1527–1598), who had become king of the Spanish-Habsburg empire following Charles V's abdication in 1555, also harboured a deep distrust against the Farneses. To prevent young Alexander – one-quarter Habsburg and three-quarters Farnese – from being too influenced by Margaret's in-laws, Philip II required his half-sister to bring her son to Brussels to be raised at the king's Spanish-Habsburg court. In November 1556, Margaret crossed the Alps with Alexander, en route to Brussels. Mother and son – with an impressive entourage of about 170 men – made their Joyous Entry into Brussels on 26 December, after which they stayed at Philip's court for several weeks. In the spring, they travelled with the king to England, where Philip visited his new bride, Mary Tudor. In May, the caravan returned to the European mainland, after which Margaret headed back to Italy, leaving her eleven-year-old son in Brussels.

During this period, court painter Anthonis Mor created an impressive, life-sized portrait of the young Alexander (fig. 9). At the king's request, Mor drew inspiration from a depiction of the monarch painted a few years earlier by Titian (fig. 10).<sup>15</sup> The striking resemblance between uncle and nephew illustrates the influence Philip II would have on the young heir from then on.

The lifelike portrait was sent to Margaret – she paid Mor through the chapelmaster Pierre du Hot – and she placed it in her portrait gallery. Her cabinet contained several portraits of the young Alexander. That way, she was still able to keep her absent son close. It was not

until eight years later, in 1565, the year of Alexander's marriage, that mother and son met again.

### A GOVERNOR IN TURBULENT TIMES

In March 1559, Margaret was appointed governor-general of the Netherlands. Her candidature was far from obvious. It helped, however, that she had been born in the region as a princess of the blood. Like her aunt Mary of Hungary (1505–1558), the new governor lived in Coudenberg Palace. For eight years, the palace became the seat of Margaret's bustling court and her reign, which acted at the behest of the central government in Madrid.

Little did Margaret know that the next few years would be very turbulent. The Netherlands were on the eve of a deep religious, political and economic crisis. Initially, the governor-general – and her adviser, Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (1517–1586) – sought to adhere to a hardline policy on religious matters at the insistence of the court in Madrid. Ultimately, she fell out with the obstinate prelate and urged King Philip II to recall him to Spain. After Granvelle's departure in 1564, she made a concerted effort, along with Dutch noblemen and *stadhouders* such as William of Orange (1533–1586) and the Count of Egmont (1522–1568), to keep the peace. She succeeded admirably for a time, thanks to her zigzag politics and many negotiations. Ultimately, however, the combination of the power struggle between the monarch and the nobility and rising religious tensions led to an untenable situation that Margaret, despite her relatively lenient stance on religious matters and her conciliatory politics, could no longer control. Moreover, when she learned in early 1567 that Philip II intended to send the Duke of Alba (1507–1582) to the Netherlands, she protested repeatedly. In April 1567, she resigned, thereby expressing her dissatisfaction with the course of events. In her letter of resignation, she reprimanded her half-brother in no uncertain terms:

Your Majesty has little concern for my satisfaction and consolation, but even less for my reputation, to which, given the position I hold here (not to mention other reasons), I must attach great importance. As a result of the extraordinary restrictions that Your Majesty has imposed on my authority, you have stripped me of all my power and deprived me of the means to restore order in this country again: now you see that everything is going as it should, you seek to confer this honour upon others, while I alone have had to deal with the fatigue and the dangers... I have therefore resolved, before

consuming what remains of my life here on earth, as my health has suffered, to retire and lead a more tranquil life in the service of God, even though I cannot do so with my husband because of the bad understanding that reigns between us, as Your Majesty knows, which has arisen solely from my desire, above all else, to serve and please Your Majesty.<sup>16</sup>

The king accepted her resignation, and in late 1567, Margaret left the Netherlands to return to Italy.

Just two years earlier, one of the most important events in Margaret's life had taken place in Brussels: the long-awaited marriage of her only son to the Portuguese Infanta Mary in the autumn of 1565. The governor transformed her palace and Brussels city centre into a magnificent setting on the occasion of this wedding of the century and the accompanying pomp and circumstance with royals and other prominent guests travelling to the capital. Unfortunately, what was supposed to be a high point for Margaret – as the emperor's daughter, governor and matriarch – also turned out, in retrospect, to be an unfortunate low point. During the festivities, which lasted several weeks, several noblemen hatched plans that set in motion a series of events that would eventually culminate in the Iconoclasm, the Dutch Revolt and the final separation of the Northern and Southern Netherlands.

#### RETIREMENT IN ABRUZZO

After this professional and personal defeat, Margaret retreated to her beloved Abruzzo, a group of towns and estates in Italy that partly belonged to her personally. The emperor's daughter returned to the Netherlands once more in February 1580, at her half-brother's request. After the death of Don Juan in 1578 – the then regent who was another bastard child of the emperor and thus Margaret's half-brother, with whom she was very close; she brought up his young daughter who was named after her – Alexander Farnese succeeded him as governor of the Netherlands. However, the king wanted an alternative. He first thought of Margaret and Cardinal Granvelle, but Granvelle declined the honour. Philip then came up with a new plan: Margaret was to share the role of general-governor with her son Alexander. Once again, Margaret showed willing, but this time, her own son boycotted her. Alexander refused her request to divide the role into a civil and military component, and became governor-general of the Netherlands. Margaret's last sojourn in the Netherlands thus ended on a sour note once again.

The emperor's daughter spent three more years in Namur, albeit reluctantly. In September 1583, King Philip finally granted her permission to leave. Two months later, the people of L'Aquila organised a glorious Joyous Entry for her, and Margaret moved into her residence at Ortona on the Adriatic coast. That is where she died on 18 January 1586.

#### WOMEN IN POWER

The sixteenth century was a fascinating period in many ways, not least because an unusual number of influential women held important gubernatorial positions, an unprecedented achievement in European history. The Netherlands took the lead. During the sixteenth century, power was in the hands of women for an almost uninterrupted period, barring a few brief interludes. The first in this long line of powerful women was Margaret of Austria. At the request of her father, Maximilian I (1459–1519), emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, she became regent of the Netherlands in anticipation of the coming of age of her nephew, Charles of Luxembourg, the future emperor. On her death in 1530, Margaret was succeeded by Mary of Hungary, the emperor's sister, a woman of great governmental prowess, much like her predecessor. During her long political career, she guided the northernmost part of the Habsburg empire through several wars and crises. Mary tended her resignation in 1555 on the abdication of her brother, Emperor Charles V. Together with her sister Eleanor, she accompanied the emperor to Extremadura, where he spent his last years as a hermit in the monastery of Yuste. Mary died in the same year as her brother, in 1558. The Habsburg line of female rulers was continued by her niece, Margaret, the emperor's daughter who hailed from Oudenaarde. The Netherlands is thus unique in that it was almost continuously ruled by women in the sixteenth century. Ferdinand Seibt, Charles V's biographer, had the following to say on the matter: "More than any of their male predecessors and successors, the three Habsburg ladies, each in their own way, succeeded in making their rule a happier time for the Netherlands. But time has just tended to value men's efforts more."<sup>17</sup>

In the early fifteenth century, the Italian-French poet Christine de Pizan, who advocated for women's equality, observed that women were just as competent as men in administrative matters. However, women's governance was not evident in the patriarchal society of the late Middle Ages and the early modern era.<sup>18</sup> In Margaret's time, the societal role of women was also a subject of discussion.



FIG. 11  
**Anonymous, *Margaret of Parma, Cardinal Granvelle and the Pope Support Alba's Mission, 1572***  
 engraving, 185 × 135 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-P-OB-79.010

Gubernatorial qualities were often seen as typically masculine. Margaret's aunt, Mary of Hungary, was repeatedly compared to a man and described as "*la mâle chasseresse*" ('the male huntress') and a "virago".<sup>19</sup> Recent research shows that she deftly used the disadvantages of being a woman in her policy and actions.<sup>20</sup> Writers also repeatedly attributed masculine qualities to Margaret, and the role of powerful women was long ignored in historiography. Fortunately, in recent decades there has been an increasing focus on women as political agents, and (art) historians are rewriting the stories of these prominent early modern ladies.<sup>21</sup> The renewed interest in Margaret, as attested by this book, also ties in with this trend.<sup>22</sup>

### IMAGE-BUILDING

In addition, Margaret of Parma has had to contend with an often cliché-based approach, at any rate in the historiographical tradition to the north of the Alps where she is mainly associated with her role as governor-general.<sup>23</sup> She is often described as a puppet of Granvelle and Philip II, a woman without a public image, and a woman who moved in the shadow of power.<sup>24</sup> Adjectives such as 'characterless', 'weak' and 'inconsistent' reinforce this image. Her so-called masculine appearance (including a moustache!) completes the picture.<sup>25</sup>

The image of Margaret to the south of the Alps, where the emperor's daughter lived most of her life, is very different, as attested by epithets such as 'Madama' and 'La Serenissima'. During her lifetime, her governmental qualities received widespread praise. Even today, Margaret is a well-known historical figure in Italy, unlike in the Low Countries.

Her relative absence from the northern historiographical tradition and the collective portrayal as well as her pejorative treatment is due to the decisive period and difficult circumstances under which Margaret ruled the Netherlands and the early days of the Dutch Revolt. This war between the Spanish-Habsburg and strictly Catholic government and the Protestant insurgents was also the first time that propaganda was deployed on a large scale. Although the printing press was invented much earlier, this marked the first time in history that the medium was so widely used to influence public opinion, especially with anti-Spanish pamphlets, propaganda prints and mocking texts.<sup>26</sup> Alba, Granvelle and the pope were the main targets of this propaganda. However, Margaret is also depicted in such pamphlets, often as a puppet of these gentlemen (fig. 11). This misleading image remains alive in the collective memory.

**THE EMPEROR'S DAUGHTER BETWEEN POWER  
AND IMAGE: REHABILITATION**

Over the past two decades, Margaret of Parma has come under more intense scrutiny. On the 500th anniversary of her birth in 2022, numerous academic and also more public-friendly initiatives were organised.<sup>27</sup>

The exhibition *Margaret: The Emperor's Daughter between Power and Image* and this accompanying book tie in with this renewed interest. Call it a (belated) tribute to the emperor's daughter from Oudenaarde.

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>1 On the occasion of the exhibition <i>Margaret: The Emperor's Daughter between Power and Image</i>, Oudenaarde's city archivist Stijn Lybeert conducted research on Margaret's birth and her mother's lineage. This resulted in new insights based on a reassessment of the professional literature and the discovery of new archival material. See Lybeert and Vanwelden, 'Margaret, the Amiable Princess from Oudenaarde', p. 46.</p> <p>2 See Lybeert, 'Margaretha, beminnswaardige prinses uit Oudenaarde', <i>G/OUDE</i> 2024/2.</p> <p>3 Eichberger 2002; Mechelen 2005.</p> <p>4 For the Ladies' Peace of Cambrai see Dumont et al. 2021.</p> <p>5 The illustrious Burgundian duke Philip the Good fathered dozens of illegitimate children; the most famous was Anton of Burgundy, aka the "Grand Bâtard de Bourgogne".</p> <p>6 In addition to Margaret, Charles fathered two other illegitimate daughters during the period 1522–23. Of these three, the emperor's daughter from Oudenaarde was the firstborn and the only one recognised by Charles. In 1547, Gerónimo was born, who would later become Don Juan. See Tamussino 1994, 84–166; Parker 2020, 393–394; Pedrera López 2022.</p> <p>7 Her court included several 'Doverinos', who always moved with her from the moment she left Brussels in 1533 until her death in Ortona in 1586. See Colapietra 2003, 177; Bertini 2012, 18.</p> <p>8 To this day, scientific literature asserts that Margaret was raised by Margaret of Austria at the court of Cambrai in Mechelen. On Margaret's early years in Brussels and her visit to Mechelen during this period, see Lybeert and Vanwelden, 'Margaret, the Amiable Princess from Oudenaarde', p. 46.</p> | <p>9 Houdoy 1872, 517; Horn 1989, 61, no. 52; Eichberger and Beaven 1995, 238, note 107.</p> <p>10 Wallen 1983, 32, 285–286.</p> <p>11 Eichberger and Beaven 1995, 238.</p> <p>12 Geevers 2024, 137. Margaret's resistance to Ottavio was already a subject of speculation in her own time. The Sieneese poetess Laudomia Forteguerra dedicated five sonnets to Margaret. The affection between the two women, combined with Margaret's independent life at a distance from Ottavio, led to the hypothesis that the two women were lovers. See Eisenbichler 2001.</p> <p>13 On the Roman years and Margaret's power as the emperor's daughter, see De longh (1965) 1981, 135–149.</p> <p>14 These sculptures became part of the renowned Farnese collection after Margaret's death, now on display in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. For information on the Medici legacy, the Farnese collection and Margaret's indispensable role as a link between them, see Lichtert, 'Education, Taste and Patronage of a Habsburg Princess. Margaret's Fabulous Collection', p. 167. For Heemskerck's drawing, part of his Roman sketchbook, see DiFuria 2018, 401–402.</p> <p>15 Meijer 1988, 120–125, 227; Bertini 2014.</p> <p>16 Gachard 1848, 523–524, letter no. 545: "<i>Votre Majesté a peu de souci non-seulement de ma satisfaction et consolation, mais encore de ma réputation propre, à laquelle, tenant ici le lieu que je tiens (sans parler d'autres motifs), je dois attacher beaucoup d'importance. Par les restrictions extraordinaires que Votre Majesté a mises à mon autorité, elle m'a enlevé tout pouvoir, et m'a privé des moyens d'achever l'entier rétablissement des affaires de ce pays: à présent qu'elle</i></p> | <p><i>voit ces affaires en un bon état, elle en veut donner l'honneur à d'autres, tandis que, moi seule, j'ai eu les fatigues et les dangers... J'ai donc pris la résolution, avant de consumer ici ce qui me reste d'existence, comme j'y ai perdu la santé, de me retirer, pour mener une vie plus tranquille, au service de Dieu, bien que je ne puisse le faire avec mon mari, à cause de la mauvaise intelligence qui règne entre nous, comme Votre Majesté le sait, laquelle a procédé uniquement de ce que j'ai voulu, par-dessus toutes choses, servir et contenter Votre Majesté."</i></p> <p>17 Seibt 1990, 192–193.</p> <p>18 For a recent overview including literature references, see the introductory essay in: Deen and Huysman (eds.) 2024.</p> <p>19 Helmstutler Di Dio 2020. See also Lichtert 'Amazons. Equestrian Ladies and the Art of Hunting', p. 75 in this publication.</p> <p>20 Vercammen 2024.</p> <p>21 See for example Eichberger 2024; García Pérez 2024, both with extensive literature references.</p> <p>22 Mantini 2024 with extensive literature references.</p> <p>23 In this respect, it is telling that three-quarters of the most recent biography of Margaret focuses on the period when she was governor of the Netherlands. See Steen 2013; Sánchez 2015.</p> <p>24 See for example: Pirenne 1909, 368; Arnade 2008, 56; Van Eck 2012, 68–69.</p> <p>25 For this image formation see Cools 2024 and Lichtert 2024. See also Kuipers 2015, 158–159.</p> <p>26 Knuttel 1978; Horst 2003; Stensland 2012.</p> <p>27 See for example Mantini 2012; Bertini and Cecchinelli 2024; Mantini 2024.</p> |
|---|--|--|

# Charles's Imperium. An Emperor's Power and Powerlessness in Sixteenth- Century Europe



FIG. 12  
Fra Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli,  
*Bust of Charles V*, c. 1539–41  
marble, height 78 cm. Naples, Certosa e Museo  
di San Martino, inv. AM 10824, Dep. 421

## THE EUROPEAN CHESSBOARD

Twenty-two-year-old Charles (fig. 12) was arguably the most important monarch in Europe in 1522, when his first child, Margaret, was born out of wedlock. He had ruled the Netherlands since the declaration of his age of majority in 1515. He became King of Castile and Aragon after the death of his grandfather, Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516), in 1516. In 1519, he succeeded his other grandfather, Maximilian of Austria, as lord of the Habsburg hereditary lands and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

The fact that Charles inherited more, and more prosperous, territories than any other monarch in Europe was the result of a sophisticated marriage policy and biological coincidence. The diligent deployment of the family's young scions in the royal marriage market was a tried and tested method for forming alliances and serving dynastic interests. While an immediate political 'return' was not on the cards, a useful marriage could always yield patrimonial results in the long term due to the unpredictable nature of successions. The Burgundian state-building process owed much of its success to this approach, and Maximilian of Austria also used it in a calculating way.

Maximilian's own marriage to Mary of Burgundy (1457–1482) in 1477 ushered in the dynastic union of the Burgundian Netherlands with the Habsburg territories in and around present-day Austria. Ties with the Holy Roman Empire were also strengthened in the process. Maximilian's alliance with the emerging kingdoms of Castile and Aragon at the end of the fifteenth century was sealed with the double wedding of his daughter Margaret of Austria and his son Philip the Handsome (1478–1506) to the Spanish crown prince John of Aragon (1478–1497) and his younger sister Joanna (1479–1555), respectively. The death of three successive heirs to the Spanish throne in just a few years meant that Joanna inherited the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. After her husband's untimely death in 1506, their son Charles of Ghent thus became the universal heir to all these territories. And that is exactly how things unfolded between 1515 and 1519.

## A COMPOSITE STATE

Charles did not inherit a unified state, however, but dozens of kingdoms, duchies, counties and seigneuries, each with its own history, administrative traditions, and political culture. The Holy Roman Empire, in particular, was nothing more than a loose federation of more than 300 secular and spiritual principalities and imperial cities. While the imperial crown granted Charles unprecedented prestige,

it did not come with a lot of real power, as the German sovereigns and imperial cities were adamant about retaining their independence. Essentially, Charles's empire – contemporaries called it a 'monarchy' – was a *composite* state, an association of separate territories that shared the same head of state as a result of hereditary succession, thus forming a personal union. In theory, these territories existed separately alongside each other. Charles would nonetheless seek to establish a form of political unity in his empire by creating several overarching administrative institutions. In keeping with medieval traditions, he also attempted to establish a visible presence across his territories where possible. Between 1519 and 1555, Charles spent about 29% of his time in Castile, 10% in Aragon, 26% in the Netherlands, 24% in the Holy Roman Empire and 2% in his Italian territories; 9% of his time was spent in territory that was not his.<sup>1</sup> Charles V was thus a roaming ruler, a monarch who did not govern from one central capital, but who constantly moved from one regional centre to another. For practical reasons, however, he also attempted to break with these medieval customs by choosing Brussels as the capital and seat of a central government in the Netherlands as early as 1531.

During his absences, he left the administration of his main territories to authorised deputies, whose titles were 'viceroys', 'regents', 'governor-general' or 'governor'. In the Netherlands, he chose a close relative, his aunt, Margaret of Austria, for this office. Upon her death in 1530, the position passed to his sister, Mary of Hungary. His successors also usually chose blood relatives, even if, like Margaret of Parma, they were not the fruit of an official marriage. This was not deemed an issue as the genetic aspect, the royal bloodline, carried more weight than any other (moral or religious) considerations. The only condition was that the monarch had to have officially recognised the natural child. Margaret was formally recognised by her father in 1529, perhaps because Charles had already decreed that the then almost seven-year-old girl would one day be married to Alessandro de' Medici. The recognition and subsequent political deployment of illegitimate children for state-building purposes was especially common in the Burgundian era.<sup>2</sup>

Charles's composite state was fragmented. The distance between the empire's three core regions – the Netherlands, the Austrian hereditary lands and the Spanish kingdoms – was many hundreds of kilometres. An international network of paved roads was virtually non-existent, and natural obstacles, such as mountain ranges and seas, were







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**Anonymous, after Anthonis Mor**  
*Portrait of Margaret of Parma, c. 1560*  
oil on panel, 38.9 × 27.1 cm  
London, Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 404911

### BACK COVER

**Alonso Sánchez Coello**  
*Portrait of a Lady, c. 1560*  
oil on panel, 80 × 63 cm  
Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, inv. 1295





*Margaret*