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Front cover  
Detail of fig. 3  
Studio of PETER PAUL RUBENS  
*Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia, Archduchess of Austria*

Frontispieces  
JUAN PANTOJA DE LA CRUZ  
*Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia, c. 1600*  
Oil on canvas, 58.5 × 50.8 cm  
Dallas, Meadows Museum, Algur H. Meadows Collection

Detail of fig. 89  
ANONYMOUS  
*The Archduchess Isabel Clara Eugenia at the  
shooting contest of the Guild of St George in Ghent*

ISABEL CLARA EUGENIA (1566–1633), the eldest daughter of Philip II of Spain, was one of the most significant female political players of the seventeenth century. Isabel, however, should not be seen as a political figure alone but also as a woman, embedded in the material culture of her times in manifold roles and through varied practices.

She was born into an era of unprecedented political upheaval for the Spanish Habsburg dynasty. The year of her birth, 1566, was marked by the opening of a series of rebellions against Habsburg rule in the Low Countries, a conflict known by modern historians as the Eighty Years' War or the 'Dutch Revolt' (1568–1648). The Dutch Revolt became intertwined with the highly destructive and complex Thirty Years' War (1618–48), during which Spain and France fought for European hegemony. Isabel's accession to the co-sovereignty of the Low Countries in 1599 with Archduke Albert of Austria, whom she had married that year, placed her at the epicentre of a Europe at war. According to contemporary documents Isabel could be characterized as having combined diplomatic nous, personal charisma and firm religious and moral principles. Her death in 1633 marked the political and economic eclipse of the vast Spanish empire created by her grandfather, Charles V, and her father. Yet, credited for her vital contribution to the consolidation of Spanish power in the ten southernmost provinces of the Burgundian inheritance after the Dutch Revolt, an area corresponding roughly to the borders of modern Belgium, she left a legacy that still shapes the political landscape of today.

These achievements are intricately linked to her material legacy. The Brussels court of Isabel and her husband was renowned for its extraordinary splendour. The display of princely magnificence was one of their strategies to compensate for the legal infringements of their sovereign status as stipulated by the Act of Cession of 1599. The comprehensive commissioning and restoration of religious art and architecture, on the other hand, was a register for Isabel's success in mending the shattered fabric of Catholic life in her realm. As a cultural agent she is therefore unendingly rich and fascinating.

The fourteen authors of this in-depth study bring a considerable diversity of approaches, methods and perspectives to our understanding of the infanta as a political and cultural figure. She comes alive not only as a historical person on the broader diplomatic stage of early modern European politics but also in the specific visual, devotional and ritual practices which underpinned female sovereignty. As the first publication of its kind, this book will prove essential reading for anyone interested in the subject. Generous and well-produced illustrations and lucid, non-specialist language makes the essays easily accessible to the general reader.



# ISABEL CLARA EUGENIA

## FEMALE SOVEREIGNTY IN THE COURTS OF MADRID AND BRUSSELS



CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS EUROPA HISPÁNICA  
PAUL HOLBERTON PUBLISHING

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THE INTEREST FELT AT THE PRESENT DAY IN THE FORMS OF WOMEN'S PERSONAL government in modern Europe enjoys an extensive field of study in the Habsburg dynasty, in which a whole gallery of strong women exercised or consolidated their family's enormous influence in the political and religious history of the West. The talent and skill with which the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia (1566-1633) administered the Spanish Netherlands over thirty-three years make her one of the most prominent figures of that line of sovereigns; and that is demonstrated by this collection of studies of her remarkable career between Madrid and Brussels.

Philip II brought up his beloved eldest daughter in his own Catholic devotion and zeal for affairs of State; among the latter he included a number of matrimonial projects whereby she was to reinforce the Spanish hegemony by means of international alliances. The bride of Europe, as she was for years, finally married in 1599 her cousin Archduke Albert, and together they carried on the Habsburg sovereignty in Flanders, after the seven northern provinces had consummated the secession that gave rise to the Dutch Republic. Widowed in 1621, she continued until her death in 1633 to wield the power that she had originally inherited as "Domina et Princeps proprietaria" of territories that were vital to the Spanish Empire, and thanks to her exceptional sovereign status she guaranteed the autonomy of those lands without a full renunciation of control on the part of the Spanish Crown.

The authors who are here assembled under the direction of Cordula van Wyhe present different facets of the personality and the political activity of Isabel Clara Eugenia in their historical context. With a variety of methods, reviewing sources that were already known or bringing to bear others hitherto unpublished, they analyse the basic stages of her life. At the same time they explore the specific nature of her role as governor and as the essential mediator of the Crown. That authority is made clear in her relations with her court entourage in Brussels and with her correspondents in Madrid, but also in her diplomatic manoeuvres between Spain and the Holy See, or in the missions she entrusted to Rubens in other European courts, over and above his official activity as a painter. This book also devotes attention to other less familiar aspects of the Infanta's career, such as her childhood upbringing in Madrid and her earliest tastes and appurtenances, or the subsequent creation of her image in public opinion through the literature and gazettes of the time, without forgetting her architectural patronage for the benefit of the religious orders that were close to her own personal devotion.

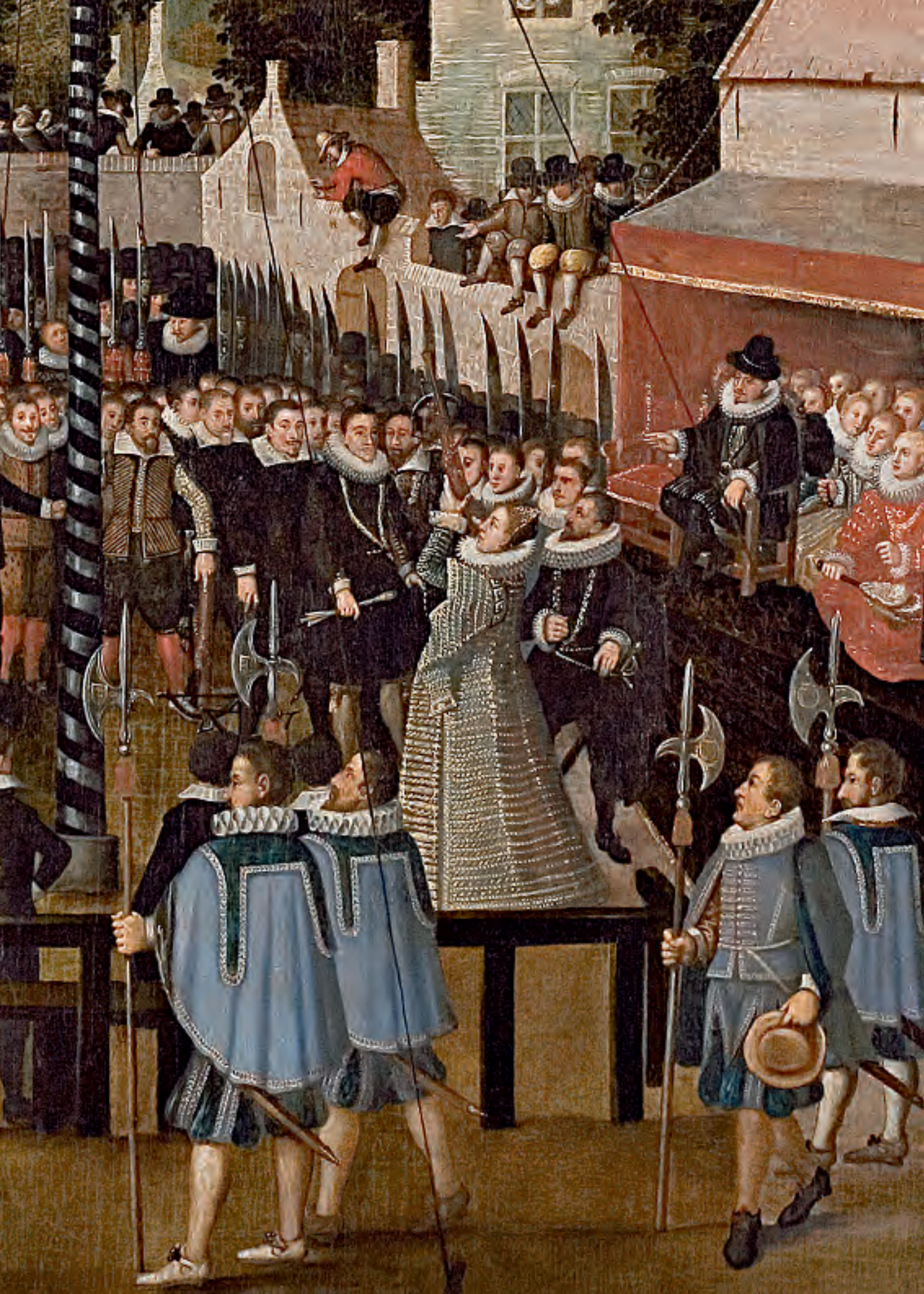
With this title, the Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica adds a sixth volume to the series devoted to the House of Austria. Once again, it is a matter of deepening and updating our knowledge of one of its outstanding figures, in this case thanks to the collaboration of an international group of historians who are specialists in the politics, diplomacy, religious ideas and art of the Modern Period in Europe. As is usual in the collection, the multi-discipline approach is backed by an abundant iconography relating to the protagonist and by visual correlation of the events and personalities discussed. To conclude, the book appears simultaneously in two versions, Spanish and English, as a result of our collaboration with Paul Holberton publishing, to whom we are indebted for the care of the English texts, together with significant improvements in the design of the collection and new possibilities for its distribution outside Spain.

JOSÉ LUIS COLOMER

Director

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## Introduction

FIG. 1  
FRANS II POURBUS  
*Isabel Clara Eugenia, Archduchess  
of Austria*, c. 1598  
Oil on canvas, 134.9 × 98.2 cm  
Boston, MA, Isabella Stewart  
Gardner Museum

ALMOST AS SOON AS THE INFANTA ISABEL CLARA EUGENIA, PHILIP II'S eldest daughter, had died on 1 December 1633 in Brussels her personal popularity transformed itself into quasi-sanctity for her adoring subjects. In a commemorative sermon given in her honour in the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk in Antwerp on 29 January 1634 Aubertus Miræus, chaplain and librarian of the court, called on the people of the Low Countries "vehemently to strive, if we wish to be useful to church and state, to excel in every kind of virtue, emulating the most holy Princess Isabella".<sup>1</sup> Monsieur Gaston d'Orléans, brother of King Louis XIII of France, and other members of the Brussels court even supported efforts to bring about the beatification of Isabel. This enthusiasm was shared by the wider community of courtiers and servants, who are reported to have plucked relics from Isabel's body during her funeral.<sup>2</sup> The present collection of essays investigates the way in which Isabel constituted and negotiated political continuity and change during her time as princess of Spain and her subsequent thirty-three years as ruler of the Spanish Netherlands (fig. 1). The volume is the first independent scholarly investigation of the Infanta Isabel's life from her earliest childhood years in Spain to her last office as widowed governor-general since Countess Marie Hennequin de Villermont published the first study of the Infanta Isabel in 1912, a voluminous two-volume biography mainly based on Villermont's research of the collection of material which was assembled by the priest of Isabel's oratory in Brussels, Philippe Chifflet, shortly after her death for the purpose of authoring a hagiography.<sup>3</sup> Consequently Villermont's account, interspersed by lengthy transcriptions of the Chifflet documents, generally subscribes to the idea of the dutiful, warm-hearted and human Infanta, who was guided through the political upheavals and personal trials in her life by an unwavering piety and sense of personal virtue.

The portrait, attributed to the studio of Peter Paul Rubens, which contributes the jacket image to this collection of essays is an evocative likeness of the Infanta Isabel as co-sovereign of the Spanish Low Countries (fig. 3). The portrait references the conflict between political durability and transformation to which she responded. She ruled the Netherlands jointly with her husband and cousin, the Archduke Albert of Austria, from 1599 until Albert's death in 1621 and afterwards as governor-general until her own death. Albert is represented on the pendant image (fig. 2). Scholars have customarily regarded the political and material legacy of Isabel and Albert to be the hispanicization and restoration of Catholic life in the ten southernmost provinces of the Netherlands after the so-called 'Dutch Revolt' against Habsburg control over the old Burgundian hereditary lands had erupted in





## The Power of Proximity: The Cámara of Albert and Isabel at their Court in Brussels

Detail of fig. 120  
FRANS FRANCKEN  
THE YOUNGER, PAUL  
VREDEMAN DE VRIES and  
UNKNOWN MINIATURIST  
*A Ball at the Brussels Court*

“WE HAVE PROMISED [THE PEOPLE] HERE THAT WE WILL MAKE USE OF THEIR services in all the principal offices of the household, for such is the tradition in these countries. And I, being the mistress of the house, am the first to live up to [this promise].”<sup>1</sup> When in 1606 the Infanta Isabel wrote these words in one of her many letters to the Duke of Lerma, she was referring to her belief that the main domestic positions at the Brussels court had of old been reserved for native inhabitants of the Netherlands. For this reason (Isabel told the duke), she deeply regretted not being able to comply with one of Lerma’s requests, which was to offer a position in the archducal household to Don Sancho de la Cerda, Marquess of La Laguna de los Cameros and – as it happened – Lerma’s brother-in-law.<sup>2</sup>

The infanta probably realised all too well that her argument was based on loose grounds, but she used it very consciously nonetheless. Ever since the ancient palace on the Coudenberg in Brussels had become one of the chief residences of the Habsburg dynasty, it had been a gathering place for nobles from all over the continent, some of whom had held prominent offices in the household of Emperor Charles V and in those of the subsequent governors in the Low Countries (fig. 117).<sup>3</sup> Evidently the local ‘tradition’ that the infanta was referring to had not deterred Albert and Isabel from organizing their court after the Spanish fashion, including Spanish etiquette, Spanish catering and, above all, Spanish courtiers.<sup>4</sup> Yet by claiming that she was bound by local custom, Isabel skilfully managed to avoid having to grant Lerma this particular favour. She had good reason for doing so.

Don Sancho de la Cerda had been the Spanish ambassador in the Netherlands since 1603, but it would appear that he lacked the diplomatic skills necessary to leave his mark on the relationship between Brussels and Madrid. The Belgian historian and archivist Joseph Lefèvre even went so far as to state that de la Cerda’s importance as a diplomat “was truly nil”, which seems to summarize both modern and contemporary opinions of the ambassador rather well.<sup>5</sup> When the Spanish Consejo de Estado finally decided to recall de la Cerda in 1606, Archduke Albert himself did little to hide his contempt for Don Sancho’s overly meddlesome and indiscreet approach.<sup>6</sup> Hence it is no surprise that when Lerma asked the archdukes to offer the former ambassador a position in their household, so as to express their gratitude for his services over the past three years, they were not very eager to comply.





FIG. 117  
 JAN VAN DE VELDE  
*Curia Brabantiae in celebri et  
 populosa urbe Bruxellensis*, from  
 Joan Blaeu, *Novum ac magnum  
 Theatrum urbium Belgicae  
 foederate*  
 Amsterdam, 1649  
 Coloured engraving,  
 36 × 47 cm  
 Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional  
 de España

The main reason, however, why Albert and Isabel were reluctant to indulge Lerma on the matter was the fact that the duke wanted them to appoint his brother-in-law to the important office of *mayordomo mayor* (lord high steward) of the archducal household. This was probably not Lerma's first attempt to achieve this. Ever since Francisco de Mendoza, the archdukes' former *mayordomo mayor*, had fallen from grace and been sent back to Spain in 1602, Madrid had insisted on the appointment of a more trustworthy candidate.<sup>7</sup> In fact, when in 1603 it was announced that Don Sancho de la Cerda would go to Brussels in order to offer the king's condolences on the death of Albert's mother, rumour had it that he was to replace Mendoza as the archdukes' next *mayordomo mayor* as well.<sup>8</sup> Things, however, turned out differently – Don Sancho was given the post of ambassador after the transfer of his predecessor, Don Baltasar de Zúñiga, to Paris instead.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile Mendoza's position was kept vacant, and it would appear that Albert and Isabel were not in a hurry to find a replacement. They knew perfectly well that if Lerma were to succeed in installing one of his cronies in such an important position, the duke would thenceforth possess a significant political advantage (fig. 118).

As *mayordomo mayor* Don Sancho would not only hold sway over the archdukes' immediate entourage, but he would be entitled to act as their right-hand man as well. Among other things, this meant that he would have access to them at all times; that every visitor would be required to ask his permission to see their highnesses; and that every piece of information would have to pass through his hands first.<sup>10</sup> All this would render Don Sancho an indispensable go-between for



FIG. 118  
PETER PAUL RUBENS  
*The Duke of Lerma on horseback*,  
1603  
Oil on canvas, 283 × 200 cm  
Madrid, Museo Nacional  
del Prado



those who wanted to reach the archdukes, and hence an ideal spy for Lerma, who would be sure to keep abreast of even the smallest event that was to occur at the court of Brussels. Needless to say, Albert and Isabel were not in the least prepared to let the duke get away with this. Even if the infanta's argument about the local custom in the Netherlands was not exactly watertight, she did manage to get the message across. Lerma, who was perfectly able to read between the lines, hastened to drop the matter. Soon after that Don Sancho was on his way back to Spain, where – rather conveniently – he was given the office of *mayordomo mayor* in the household of Queen Margaret.<sup>11</sup>

The story illustrates that caution was always in order when it came to the appointment of new household officers at the Brussels court, certainly so when they





FIG. 119  
DANIEL and JAN-BAPTIST  
VAN HEIL  
*The Archduchess Isabel Clara  
Eugenia in the gardens of the  
Palace of Brussels, c. 1630*  
Oil on canvas, 137 × 205.5 cm  
Brussels, Musée de la Ville

were to become members of Albert and Isabel's immediate entourage and were to have unrestricted access to the princes themselves. Over recent decades, scholars specializing in the thriving field of court studies have continued to emphasize that having access to the monarch constituted an essential component of power in the early modern era.<sup>12</sup> In a society still highly dependent on the authority of a single ruler, and therefore subject to such unpredictable variables as princely caprice, favour and patronage, the ability to live and work in physical proximity to the prince could become a vital asset in the rat race towards individual and familial advancement and, in many cases, political influence. While this awareness has led to exciting new insights into the nature of early modern politics in England, Spain or France, it has yet to prove its value where the reign of Albert and Isabel is concerned.<sup>13</sup> Attention has mainly been paid to the formal structures of power in Brussels, such as the advisory councils and the central administration, whereas their informal counterparts, such as the princely household, have been ignored. It could nevertheless be argued that the archducal 'Casa y Cámara' was in many ways a powerful political entity, and deserves to be studied as one.

This chapter seeks to penetrate into the very heart of the archducal palace on the Coudenberg hill in Brussels (fig. 119). Guarded by ushers and preceded by a sequence of hallways and anterooms, the Cámara (bedchamber) enclosed the archdukes' personal living quarters. Most European courts featured a household for the monarch and another one for his consort, but the court of Brussels was exceptional in that Albert and Isabel did not maintain separate households.<sup>14</sup> Apart from financial reasons, the rationale behind this was that an obvious distinction





FIG. 120  
FRANS FRANCKEN THE  
YOUNGER, PAUL  
VREDEMAN DE VRIES and  
UNKNOWN MINIATURIST  
*A Ball at the Brussels Court*,  
c. 1610  
Oil on panel, 68.6 × 113.3 cm  
The Hague, Mauritshuis

between the households of both spouses would have tended to emphasize the lower hierarchical status of the consort as opposed to that of the sovereign. Obviously, there could be no question of this in the case of the archdukes, who legally shared co-sovereignty over the Habsburg Netherlands and were thus unmistakably equal in status. As was customary at the time, however, the service of the *Cámara* was divided into a male and a female section.<sup>15</sup> For reasons of convenience, Albert's quarters were situated on the first floor of the residential wing of the palace. There he was served by a number of *gentilhombres de la Cámara* who took their orders from the *sumiller de corps* (body valet; head of the bedchamber). The infanta dwelled on the second floor of the building, and was accompanied by her *damas de la Cámara* and the *camarera mayor*. In both cases, access to the private apartments of the archdukes was restricted to a limited number of people (fig. 120).

#### NORMS AND PRACTICES

When seen as a benchmark to determine who could physically approach Albert and Isabel and who could not, the term 'access' can be taken quite literally.<sup>16</sup> Jeroen Duindam has asserted that "[court] ordinances invariably attempted to structure access on the basis of rank or function, using the ruler's timetable as well as the spatial arrangements of the palace as their main devices. Spatial and temporal thresholds were set up to prevent outsiders from intruding; guards and ushers barred the way, checking the status of unknown visitors before letting them pass."<sup>17</sup> The entrance to the princely residence, and the doors within, thus formed physical barriers that separated the rank and fashion from the *hoi polloi*. Granted only sparsely, access to the royal apartments was then employed as a political tool