The Vita beati P. Ignatii Loiolae Societatis Iesu fundatoris (Life of the Blessed Father Ignatius Loyola, Founder of the Society of Jesus) was published in Rome in 1609 on the occasion of Ignatius’s beatification. This book contains the first elaborate cycle illustrating the life of the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits): seventy-nine copper engravings depict scenes from Ignatius’s life, beginning with his birth in 1491 and including his conversion at the castle of Loyola, his retirement to Manresa, his journey to the Holy Land, and so forth until his death in 1556.

The fact that the Vita was published the very year of Ignatius’s beatification means that it was in preparation long before that and was part of the Jesuits’ strategy to make vivid Ignatius’s holiness and to place him in the public eye as an important holy man, worthy of being declared a saint. Although the Vita was published in Rome, the engravings were executed by the Galle workshop in Antwerp (Belgium) and were the work of Flemish artists, including Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), who indisputably designed at least one (Ignatius Presents the Students of the Collegio Germanico to Pope Julius III, fol. 64) and probably more of the prints. Some scholars believe that Rubens may have been even more closely involved in the project.


The Vita’s engravings were often used later as models for subsequent images of Ignatius produced by painters and sculptors from Peru to China. It is notable that the engravings include various types of face for their representation of Ignatius. For example, in engravings 3-35, he has a face that is elongated with sunken cheeks and a short goatee, whereas later in the book, he is shown as clean-shaven.

Also noteworthy in this series is that Ignatius begins to be depicted as a priest—standing before an altar, wearing a chasuble, and celebrating Mass. The first such depiction was by Rubens in 1608; it was quoted by him again and again in later paintings and copies and adapted by other artists. Ignatius in chasuble would henceforth become an integral part of Jesuit iconography, a development not altogether unrelated to the insistence of the Council of Trent (1545-63) that Holy Orders was an authentic sacrament instituted by Christ, a belief denied by the Protestants. Ignatius in chasuble is Ignatius as orthodox.
The conversion of Ignatius

Ignatius presents the students of Collegio Germanico to Pope Julius III

The death of Ignatius