

THE BRUEGHELS



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Temporis

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The Brueghels

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Pieter Brueghel was the first important member of a family of artists who were active for four generations. Firstly a drawer before becoming a painter later, he painted religious themes, such as Babel Tower, with very bright colours. Influenced by Hieronymus Bosch, he painted large, complex scenes of peasant life and scripture or spiritual allegories, often with crowds of subjects performing a variety of acts, yet his scenes are unified with an informal integrity and often with wit. In his work, he brought a new humanising spirit. Befriending the Humanists, Brueghel composed true philosophical landscapes in the heart of which man accepts passively his fate, caught in the track of time.

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The Brueghels

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Editor's Note

Out of respect to the authors' original work, this text has not been corrected or updated, particularly regarding attribution, dates, and the current locations of works. These were uncertain at the time of the text's first publication, and sometimes remain so to this day. The information in the captions, however, has been updated.

Introduction



1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Painter and the Collector*, ca. 1565.
Pen and brown ink, 25 × 21.6 cm.
Graphische Sammlung, Albertina, Vienna.



2. Sir Anthony Van Dyck, *Pieter Brueghel the Younger*, 1627–1635.
Charcoal, 24.5 × 19.8 cm.
Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth.

After an initial period of brilliance, during which time it rose to achieve perfection, Flemish art gradually fell into decline. Although thorough studies of its origins have revealed works, in particular those of the miniaturists, that are deserving of notice and which predate the artistic careers of the two Van Eycks, Hubert and Jan, the genius of the brothers remains stunningly spectacular, surpassing that of their predecessors to such a degree that it would be impossible to find an equally sudden, decisive and glorious evolution in the history of art.

Even so, the lesser artists who followed the Van Eycks, whether they were either directly trained by them or simply influenced by their work, also possessed talent of admirable quality, but their sense and understanding of nature was less penetrating and profound and their execution less scrupulous. In not applying the same closeness of attention, which till then had been a rule of

Flemish painting, these artists lost their opportunity for originality, relaxing their focus on nature and placing the primary importance of their work in its details.

It became increasingly common for these painters to travel to Italy, and consequently their native impressions became mixed with those evoked by the lands through which they passed. Upon leaving the Flemish plains, the monotony of which is scarcely interrupted, the emigrant artists could not help but be struck by the imposing nature of the mountainous regions along their route. The Alps, the Tirols, and the Apennines offered the artists the rugged landscapes once sought by the Flemish Primitives, to whom simplicity had been of no interest. In their depiction of panoramas that stretched as far as the eye could see, these nomads remained faithful to their excessive preoccupation with the picturesque. They were of the belief that no amount of detail could be too much, and they tirelessly added bizarre rock formations and countless rivers to the harsh peaks and mountainous landscapes they painted. In addition, they laid out forests, towns, villages and castles that stretched into infinity. When, during their travels, they spent time in towns, at every step the Flemish painters encountered ancient ruins, monuments of various styles, statues, masterpieces by artists of the Classical age, and works of art no less admired by their less worthy successors; and everywhere they went they came across traditions and new ways of thinking vastly different from those they had known until then. How could they resist the seductions that solicited them from every direction? Their Italian colleagues, who were already organized in associations and guilds, welcomed the Flemish artists, affiliated them with their groups and initiated them into the wonders of the *ars nova*. On their return home, the travellers themselves often became apostles, extolling the principles of Italian painting and art in general, and attempting, though usually with little success, to imitate the Italian style.

In contrast to the strong unity that characterised the Flemish Primitives, these later artists of the Low Countries (who became known as the Romanists) allied themselves to a diverse range of qualities and trends that were frequently conflicting and often irreconcilable. In the treatment of landscapes, followers of academic doctrines, like the Brils and their imitators, aimed primarily for a decorative quality, which, in their somewhat awkward and affected compositions anticipated the noble expression and the poetic inspiration later found in the work of the two French artists Claude Gelée (known as le Lorrain) and Poussin. The Romanists were the only Flemish artists to work in the genre of historical painting, with its emphasis on large and detailed religious and mythological compositions. However, these works became increasingly rare because of the political difficulties that arose during the period: the princes and clergy of the Netherlands were too preoccupied with defending their under-appreciated power, and sometimes even their own existence, to be in a position to encourage painters of historical works.

Having originated with Mabuse, the trend of travelling to Italy was continued by Bernard Van Orley, Michael Coxie, Lambert Lombard, Pieter Coeck, Frans Floris and Martin de Vos, and finally by Otto Van Veen and his illustrious student Rubens. In opposition to these converts, one finds, here and there, a few artists who remained faithful to their national traditions and scrupulous observers of nature down to its most familiar detail. Although they lacked the style of their precursors, these artists nevertheless preserved their sincerity, and left us an irrefutable testimony of the popular customs of the period. In this group, there is no master whose works and life are more interesting than that of Pieter Bruegel. The first in a long line of painters, he was the founder of one of many Flemish families in which artistic talent seems to have been hereditary, for instance, the Van Eycks, the Metsys, the Van Orleys, the Pourbus, the Van Cleves, the Coxies, the Keys, the De Vos, and later, the Teniers.

Having his roots in a line of old Flemish stock, this singular and original artist and thinker drew all of his energy from his native soil and produced a vigorous family tree that sprouted in many directions. One example was his equally renowned son Jan, who is well known by his epithet 'Velvet Brueghel', a painter whose exceptional talent contrasted strikingly with that of his father.

Through the work of these two markedly different masters, we have the opportunity to follow the different phases of Flemish art during a period when its constitution and aims were undergoing profound change.

The frequent similarity of the names and talents in question makes the relationship between the Brueghels somewhat obscure and difficult to follow. In the reader's interest, the authors have reproduced a family tree drawn up by Alphonse Wauters of the three generations of Brueghel artists worthy of discussion, which can be found at the end of this text.



3. Petrus Paulus Rubens, *Jan Brueghel the Elder and his family*, 1612–1613. Oil on wood, 124.5 × 94.6 cm.

Courtauld Institute of Art, Princes Gate Collection, London.

The Century of Pieter Bruegel the Elder



4. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, detail, 1566.
Oil on wood, 115.5 × 163.5 cm.
Königliche Museen der Schönen Künste, Brussels.

The Florentine nobleman Guichardin, who lived in Holland from around 1542 until his unexpected death in Antwerp on 22 March 1589, found the town's inhabitants to be generally cold, staid, and little given to lascivious pleasures, yet gay, and prone to cheerful words "although sometimes too licentiously, and not in the ordinary respect".

Guichardin was struck by the contrast between the serious and hardworking popular class with its excessive moments of amusement, and the refined bearing of the bourgeoisie who undertook public matters on the Nobility Square. He had an appetite for absorbing the novelty of the country, which he experienced as a singular liveliness, whose rustling is perceptible in his book.¹ Written in a vivid and distinct manner, his impressions illuminate the period, which has grown dry and dusty on the archive parchments, with a life-restoring glow.

Guichardin's observations on the customs and life of the inhabitants of Antwerp are illustrated by the various drawings and paintings of Pieter Bruegel. This painter's work constitutes a definitive illustration for the most scholarly of historical treatises of this period. In the same way that even the most accurate pages of official histories always reveal less than a given line of direct observation or turn of phrase by the sagacious Guichardin, the same can be said of the details depicted in a scene by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He succeeded in capturing the soul of his people in his figure of a dancing peasant or in a delicious interior with a few figures seated around a table.

In a study of sixteenth-century Holland, one cannot disregard certain documents of the period. Nor is it possible to speak of Bruegel's work without also addressing the era, which not only served as its setting, but also its source. An intimate relationship, even a penetration exists between the two. Never has an environment had such an important role in the creation of art, and never has an environment been evoked with such sincerity. As a peasant himself, and the son of peasants, Pieter Bruegel was the Dutch painter who best maintained his sense of the national and the traditional. He was gifted with an originality that was not only powerful enough to resist the trend of Romanism that swept his century, but that was also deaf to the call of Italian masterpieces. It is true that Bruegel travelled to Italy, but he did so more out of his taste for adventure than a wish to round out his artistic education.

The catastrophic wars undertaken by Charles I, Duke of Burgundy, and Pope Leo X's endless thirst for money did not impede the Netherlands' development and continuing prosperity. At the beginning of Charles V's reign, this tiny country, situated on the coast of the North Sea, was the richest in the world and had the densest population, with its towns and villages squeezed up against one another.

¹ Description of the Netherlands.



5. Melchior Broederlam, *The Annunciation and the Visitation, Presentation at the Temple, Flight into Egypt*, 1394–1399.

Tempera on wood panel, 167 × 125 cm.

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon.



6. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Hans Rottenhammer, *Rest upon the Flight into Egypt with the Temple of Tivoli*, 1595.

Oil on copper, 26 × 35.5 cm.
Private collection.

“The excellent and splendid city of Antwerp” was the largest port in Europe, and every year it imported over thirty million florins’ worth of goods. The city’s stock market handled business worth forty million ducats. The town had some 100,000 inhabitants, of which between 10,000 and 15,000 were foreigners. Guichardin counted 13,500 “attractive, agreeable, and comfortable” houses, composed generally of six rooms, which could be rented for 200 crowns a year, the larger ones at 500, an enormous sum at that time.²

The wealth accrued in Antwerp was not due simply to the city’s cosmopolitan element, but also to its rich and hardworking bourgeoisie, who were very influential in its business. While town dwellers went about their industrious efforts, the rough labour of the peasants also continued. In no other country did the peasantry enjoy more freedom: the edicts of 1515 had abolished the last remnants of serfdom, and in consequence intensive agriculture sprang up across the Netherlands.

These are the reasons for which the inhabitants of Antwerp were “pleasingly well-dressed, their houses kept tidy, well-ordered, and stocked with all kinds of domestic objects”. “There is not a single household that does not butcher and salt a cow or two and just as many pigs every year... The air of the land is heavy and damp, but it is healthy and good for the digestion of meat, and especially for fertility and regeneration”. So much information given in a glimpse of just three lines! They reveal a region with a population that is rustic, fond of eating (and eating well), and prolific.

However, Guichardin also noted the characteristics that particularly offended his refined and civilised sensibilities. He was shocked by the natives’ excessive fondness for alcohol. They drink night and day and “do not know how to abstain or subdue this disorderly passion”. Ultimately, he excuses them this behaviour because their cloudy climate makes them melancholy. Wine brings warmth back into their veins, and beer (which Guichardin praises highly) replaces the function provided to the peoples of the south by the Mediterranean sun.

² Dürer, in the account of his stay in Antwerp in 1520, praises highly the luxury of the houses in which he is welcomed.



7. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1563.

Oil on wood, 37.2 × 55.5 cm.

Courtauld Institute of Art, Count Antoine Seilern Collection, London.

Yet the air is healthy; “Such that, if the inhabitants of the land were not so excessive in their manner of living, and if they did not neglect to care for themselves when they fell ill, they would certainly live very long lives. And though there are very few who grow old, there are also very few who die young, as we saw in the region of Brabant, where the land is naturally fertile and where the inhabitants, living stingily and working enough, live very long lives”. And indeed, nor have the Flemish people changed. They still possess a patience, a love of work and an admirable tenacity that are the results of a certain seriousness at the essence of their character, one that alternates with abrupt bursts of humour and joyful frenzies that push them to the worst excesses. In a sense, these apparently conflicting characteristics constitute the price of their gravity.

Today the soil is no longer as fertile as Guichardin tells us it once was, particularly in certain parts of Brabant, and especially in the north where Bruegel was born. If Guichardin was captivated by the abundance and beauty of the harvest, he should have paid homage to the secular efforts of the inhabitants rather than to the natural fertility of the region. Bent low over the poor soil in a constant struggle against the sand, which the sea left behind long ago, they were only provided with moments of respite when they delivered their exhausted bodies to the interminable feasts and drinking bouts whose typical pretext was a wedding or village fair. “Official events are very dear to them, [...] they are a people so devoted to pleasure, to joy and to pastimes, that it does not bother them to travel 30, 35, or 40 miles to go to a feast”. These thrifty peasants had outbursts of extravagance. “They are open and generous at the births and baptisms of their children, at weddings, wakes, and funerals, or at any festival or ceremony”.

These twin, conflicting, states of festivity and desperately hard work did not leave much place for refined culture or an extremely developed sensitivity. Nor did the Flemish peasant suffer from corrupted morals, in that it seemed that a very permissive display, in regard to manners, went hand in hand with a profound honesty; for example, the spectacle of public lovemaking did not

scandalise the typical Flemish person, who found it only a subject of coarse pleasantry. Guichardin also praised Flemish women as being beautiful, clean, and very pleasant.

Since it was the custom of the Flemish to speak freely with everybody from childhood, “they become bold and are always ready to speak with extreme liberty and permissiveness”. Yet Guichardin affirms that they remained honest. Another characteristic of the people was that they married easily. “A teen-age boy will marry an old grandmother, and an old man will couple himself with a young girl”. And it was not uncommon for a commoner to marry a noblewoman, a master his serving girl, or a mistress her servant, thus the intermixing of the classes was an early occurrence in the Netherlands. The nobility speculated on the stock market and worked as traders, and the rich bourgeoisie bought land. The commoner had a great deal of common sense, as well as a sense of equality. He may have lacked certain refinements, but he possessed a sense of the ridiculous.



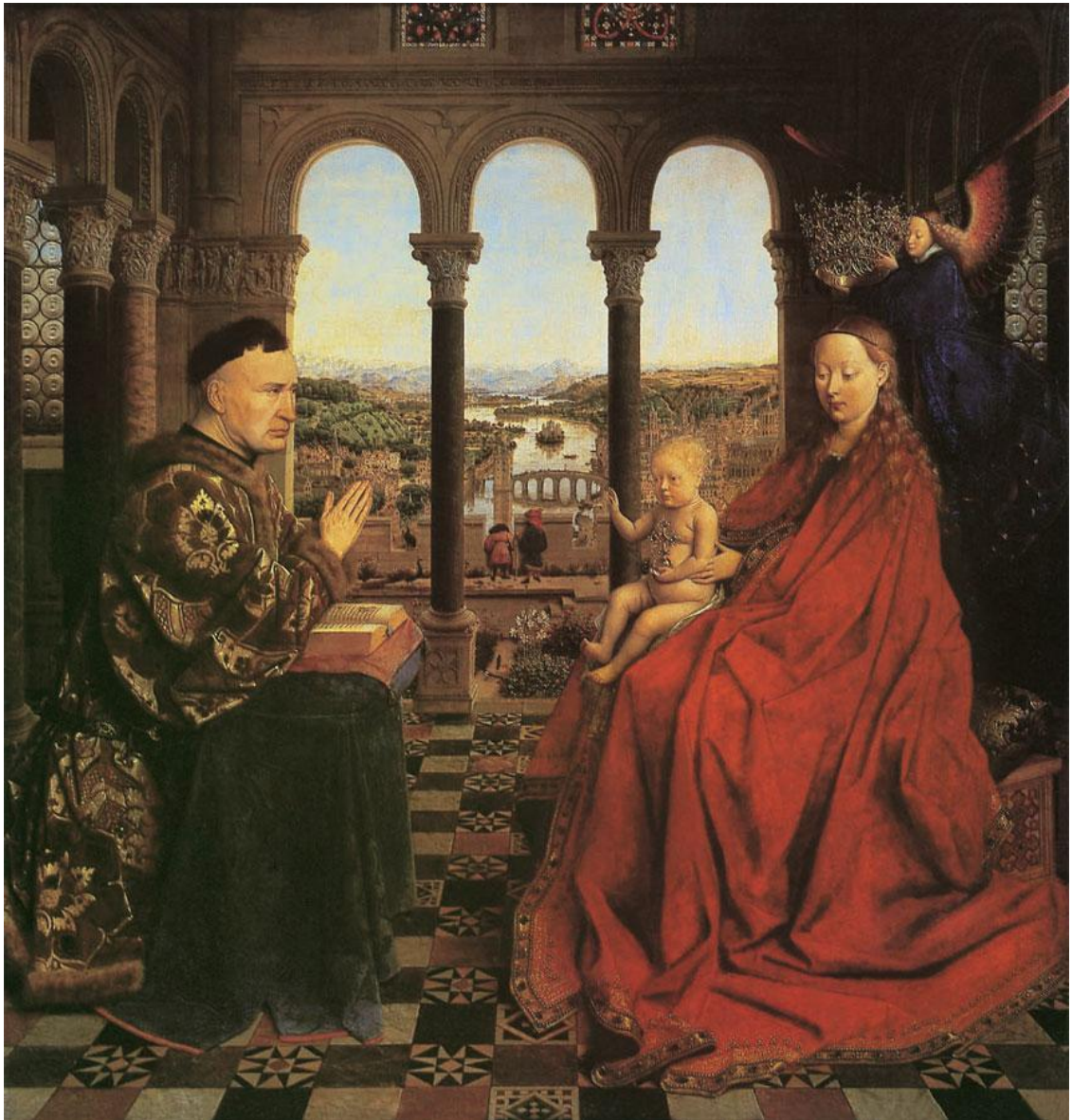
8. Gentile da Fabriano, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1423.

Tempera on wood panel, 303 × 282 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



9. Hubert and Jan Van Eyck, *Adoration of the Lamb*, 1432.
Oil on wood panel, 350 × 461 cm (open); 350 × 223 cm (closed).
Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent.



10. Jan Van Eyck, *The Virgin of Chancelier Rolin*, ca. 1430–1434.
Oil on canvas, 66 × 62 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

These unions of disparate qualities shocked Guichardin but also stimulated him. He was a man to enjoy laughter and satire. The ‘Festival of the Fools’, or the ‘Festival of the Ass’, celebrated on the day of the Holy Innocents, even profaned the Church. The pope, the bishop and the priest of the fools and their followers participated in a countless number of eccentric acts on the day of Mardi Gras. It was the custom for the fool to play an important role in the performances, games and processions organised by the chambers of rhetoric. He would jeer at the crowd and their faults with singularly trivial eloquence, and served as the medium through which public opinion was voiced. His subversive zeal, however, was not overly appreciated by the authorities and consequently edicts were soon passed in an attempt to curb his influence.

In order to maintain the traditional aspect of the public festivities, the chambers of rhetoric (i.e., the associations of the rich petit bourgeois) like the Landjuweel of 1561 in Antwerp, deployed unheard of amounts of money, yet their desire to placate the powers from which they derived their privileges is tangible. The rules imposed upon the contests strictly forbade the use of obscenities and disrespectful allusions to the Church, and the texts of the rhetoricians became

generally pedantic, casting doubt upon the idea that their heavy-handed allegories mixed with naïve humanism truly corresponded to the true tastes of the popular classes. In contrast, the populace identified with the legend of Ulenspiegel, whose hero entertained them with the crudest of farces. Ulenspiegel's favourite joke was to throw up into a dish which would then be served to a priest, a detail that provides a clear instance of what constituted the humour enjoyed at village feasts and marriages like those attended by Bruegel in the company of his merchant friend Franckert.

The story of Ulenspiegel, the circumstances of whose birth remained mysterious, was especially popular at the beginning of the sixteenth century when it was translated into French, Latin and English. It takes up the biting satire of the great fourteenth-century Flemish poet Jacob Van Maerlandt, in which a lazy and ignorant bawd of a clergyman is mercilessly ridiculed. Sometimes, however, the laughter would give way to indignation, for religious faith was deeply seated and alive in the hearts of the spectators. This was the eve of the great religious upheavals that marked this ardent and impassioned era.

Beginning in 1520, Lutheranism began to spread in Holland, in particular making astonishing progress in the city of Antwerp where German merchants helped to propagate it and where the Portuguese Maranos (Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity) encouraged it out of their spite for Catholicism.³ In response, Emperor Charles V increased the number and severity of his edicts, and the famous inquisitor François Van der Hulst imprisoned suspects. While the admirers of Erasmus, the humanists, were careful not to profess the new doctrines publicly, the popular classes eagerly attended secret meetings, where they analysed the Gospels, and outdoor sermons held by defrocked monks at the very gates of the city. The spirits of the people were carried away by a sort of frenzy, and dogmas were even discussed in workshops and taverns. In an attempt to discourage the heretics with fire, the executioner publicly burned their books and tortured their printers. Others were forced to wear a yellow cross to identify them publicly, but the sight of them only stimulated pity and anger.

The Convent of the Augustines in Antwerp was a hotbed of agitation for the Reformation, and in consequence Henri de Zutphen, the Father Superior, was arrested, taken to the Abbey of Saint-Michel and locked in a cell. However, here he was rescued by a group of women "who undertook in that room such violence that they succeeded in pulling him out".⁴ In were the women who proved themselves most ardent. One, named Marguerite Boonams, was condemned to be buried alive for having insulted the representatives of the law undertaking an investigation in the same Convent, but her sentence was commuted on the condition that she undertake a pilgrimage. Soon the judges became less lenient. The regent, Margaret of Austria, who Henri de Zutphen called "the atheist Jezebel" in a letter from Bremen, had the Convent of the Augustines razed and its occupants taken to Brussels where they were tried. Two were burned at the stake on 1 July 1523, dying with composure. Van der Hulst, who was dismissed as an impostor after the death of Pope Adrian VI, was replaced by ecclesiastical inquisitors.

³ H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*. t. III, p. 340.

⁴ *Die excelente cronike Van Vlaanderen*. See Frederichs-Corpus. t. IV. p.138.



11. Albrecht Dürer, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1504.
Oil on wood panel, 98 × 112 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



12. Rogier Van der Weyden, *The Adoration of the Magi*, central panel, ca. 1455.
Tempera on wood, 138 × 153 cm.
Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Alongside Lutheranism, the people became increasingly interested in theology and other faiths developed. Eloi Pruystinck, who was a simple slate roof-maker and a native of Antwerp, founded the faith of the Spiritual Libertines, 'Loistes' who believed that the Holy Spirit was nothing more than pure reason. "*Spiritum Sanctum nihil aliud esse quant ingenium et rationem naturalem!*" cried Luther in indignant response.

Not much later, Anabaptism from southern Germany made its appearance. Melchior Hoffman, its prophet, announced the end of the world and the Advent of the Reign of God. He preached a libertarian idealism that the baker Jan Matthys of Haarlem tried to make reality through the use of force but the fall of the city of Munster, which was the New Jerusalem and the stronghold of the leaders of the movement, did not put an end to the crisis. The Anabaptists were hunted down like wild animals by Protestants and Catholics alike, who united their efforts against the sect that desired the downfall of society. A notice condemned all Anabaptists, even the repentant, to death, but the heroism of their martyrs only succeeded in inspiring new followers. Although persecution had rendered public and communal confession of the new faith impossible, it was professed in hiding. Hundreds of heretical writings and songs against the Pope, the Church and its priests, and others that exalted the courage of the executed were circulated under the cover of darkness. In

response, the number of edicts against the Anabaptists increased and threatened the penalty of death in each article.

A third doctrine, Calvinism, which would ultimately recruit the greatest number of worshipers, began to spread from 1544. Yet again, in the Low Countries Antwerp became the centre of agitation for the new faith. The cosmopolitan port served as a refuge for exiles, particularly to the French Huguenots who were relatively safe there. Even Philip II of Spain did not dare enforce the edicts to the letter for fear of ruining the commerce that lay at the source of the country's prosperity. A deep political discontent grew out of the religious crisis, for the Flemish felt increasingly oppressed by their Spanish rulers. A revolution was brewing. Angry hordes freed prisoners and chased down inquisitors and representatives of the law. In Brussels on 5 April 1566, the drafters of the famous 'Compromise' gathered for a banquet at the Hotel de Culembourg and shouted the rebellious "*Vive le gueux!*" (Long live the poor, though the term *gueux* had an anti-papist connotation, and later came to signify the Protestants of the Netherlands) for the first time in history. The outbreak of the Reformation carried everyone away. Priests publicly abandoned the Church from their pulpits and the authorities were powerless to stop the iconoclasts who spread throughout the country.



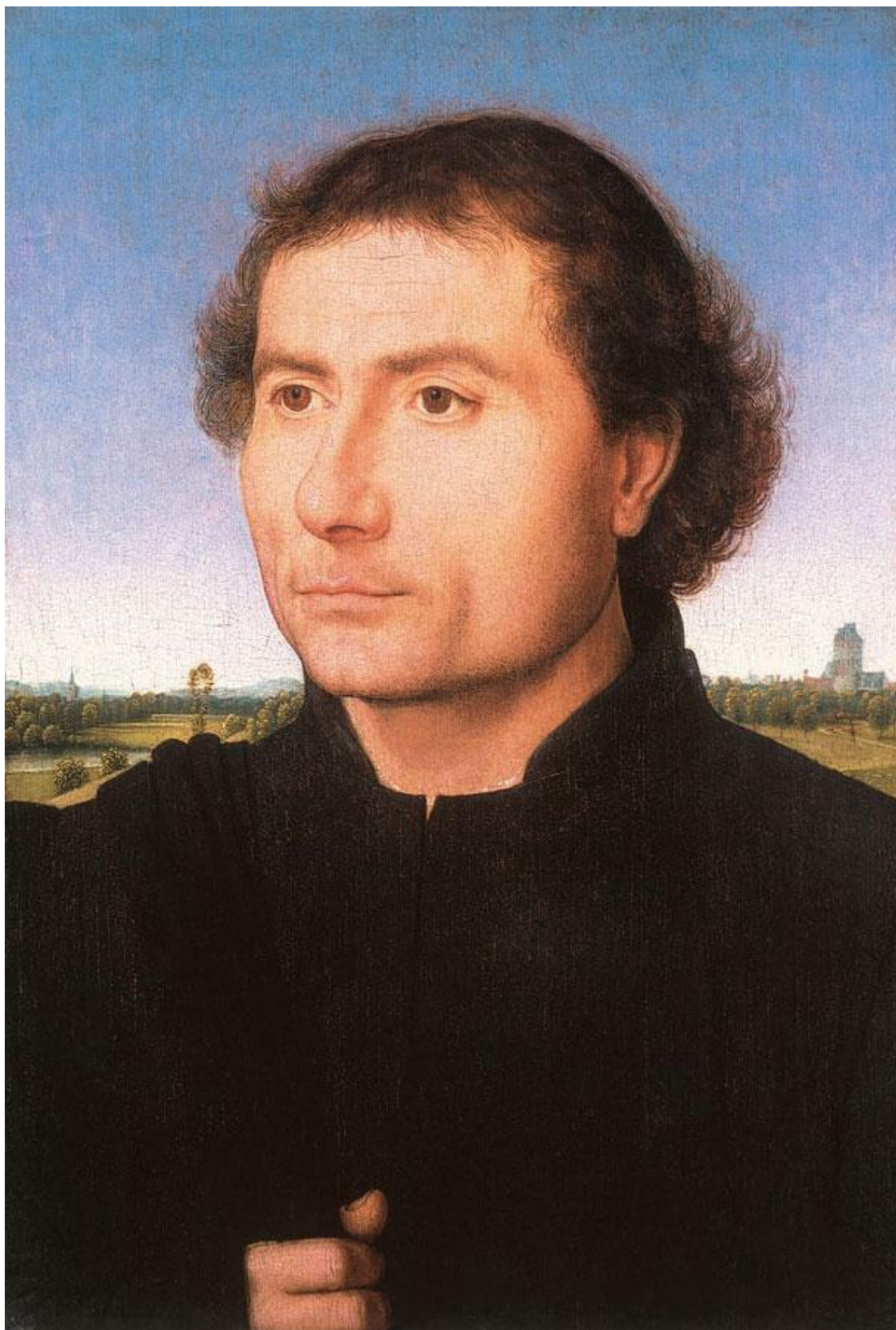
13. Hugo Van der Goes, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, central panel of the Portinari triptych, 1476–1478.

Oil on wood panel, 250 × 310 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



14. Joachim Patinir, *Saint Jerome in a Landscape*, ca. 1530.
Oil on wood, 74 × 91 cm.
Museo del Prado, Madrid.



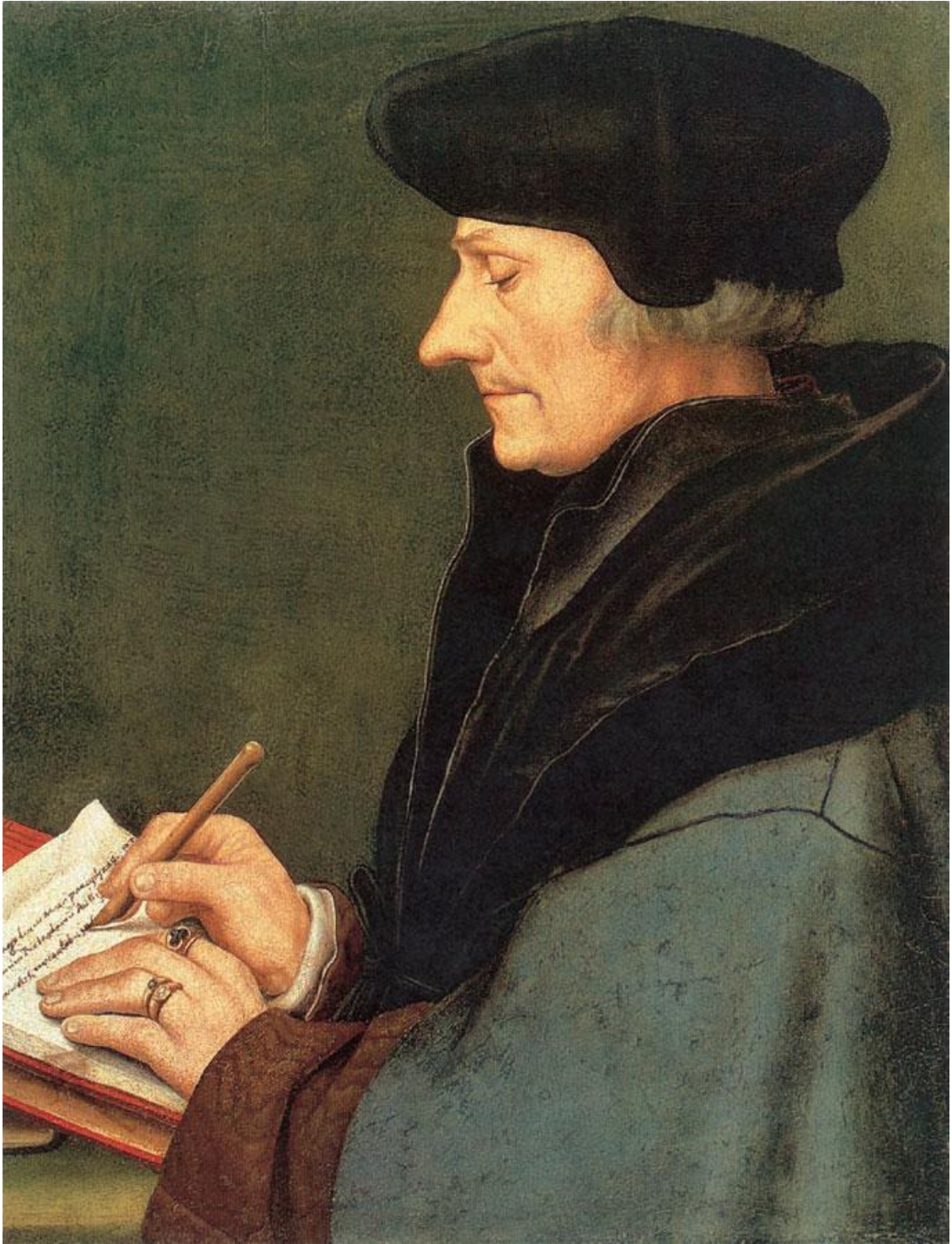
15. Quentin Metsys, *Portrait of a Man*, 1510–1520.
Oil on wood, 80 × 64.5 cm.
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

A gentleman from Ghent, Marc Van Vaernewyck, a man who remained faithful to the Catholic religion and his prince, made a scrupulous record of the events.⁵ “On the chosen day (Sunday, the last day of July 1566) a man dressed in secular garb, in a meagre squirrel-skin blouse and a grey felt hat preached near the Saint-Liévin gate (in Ghent) on a hilltop surrounded by trees [...] He removed his hat to speak, and his carriage was modest. Seated on the capes and coats that his listeners had laid down, before him he had a book from which he occasionally read a few lines [...] he commented upon the Gospel chosen that day, admonished the sinners, and prayed that God would enlighten the King and the Pope [...] Men, women, and children were gathered into three groups of about thirty people each, in tightly formed rows facing their instructor. Now and then the listeners sang Psalms, and the little books where the Psalms were printed in the form of songs were offered for the price of a denier. Each member of the congregation had one”.

A few days later, a crowd of people from Ghent, including many women, walked all the way to the walls of Bruges, 32 kilometres away, just to attend a sermon. Every evening men and women walked through the streets singing Psalms arm in arm. In the marketplace, the people applauded jesters’ songs ridiculing the clergy with the refrain “*Vive le gueux!*” Caricatures and their accompanying texts began to appear, such as a church being shaken by three men while a group of – priests attempted to shore it up. Underneath the portrayal of the destruction the caption read, “The Lutherans in Germany, the Huguenots in France, and the *gueux* in Holland cast the Catholic Church to the ground”. From the mouths of the priests the author added, “If all three continue to shake, adieu Roman Church and its business”.

In Antwerp people sold pictures of a parrot in a cage. A monkey named Martin tried to rip it apart with its claws and teeth, and then a calf trampled the cage with such force that it was completely destroyed. The parrot was a symbol of the Catholics and the cage their power. The monkey, Martin, was none other than Luther himself, the man who had laid bare the deceit of the clergy; and the calf was a representation of Calvin, who was expected to completely annihilate the power of the church. The Catholics responded with their own caricatures (against the *gueux*) that called them good-for-nothings, vagabonds and pillagers. In turn, the Protestants called the priests jesters, acrobats and conjurers, saying that they juggled at the altar like conjurers practising sleight-of-hand.

⁵ *Troubles religieux en Flandre au XVI^e siècle*. Translation: Hermann Van Duyse.



16. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, ca. 1523.
Tempera on linden panel, 36.8 × 30.5 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

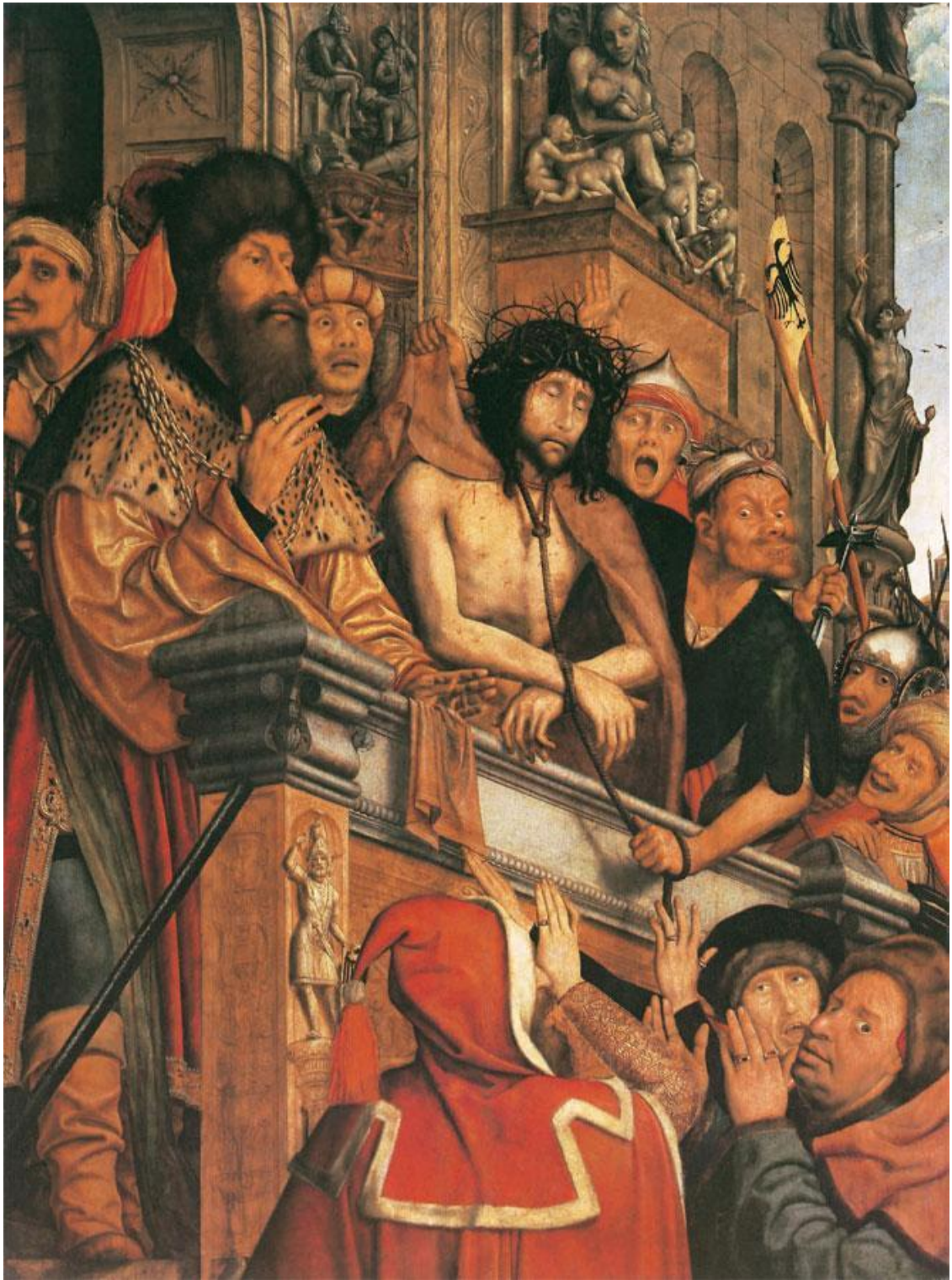
Between 11 and 17 August, the iconoclasts invaded Western Flanders. “They formed a band of three thousand Flemish and Walloons with a look of adventurers and louts. They were accompanied by twenty horsemen who seemed to be of noble birth. In bands of eighteen to twenty they invaded the churches, destroying painted and sculpted images and tearing to shreds the brocaded canopies, tunics and chasubles...”. These odious brutes were nevertheless honest. Van

Vaernewyck attests that in certain towns, after having melted down, weighed and inventoried the ciboriums and sacred vases, these were surrendered to the authorities.

In Ghent, the iconoclasts called for the “removal of idols”. The bailiff, who sensed his relative powerlessness, procrastinated. Furious mobs sacked the churches and convents one after another, scandalously damaging the Abbey of Saint-Pieter. In vain, the abbot offered the mob a great deal of money to remove the art without destroying it, but to the cry of “Hop! Hop! It’s done!” the fanatics tore everything down.

“They even profaned the saints’ shrines. The wild mob opened the reliquaries and threw the relics and bones out the windows and into the wind, saying they looked like ordinary bones and that they had a terrible stench. The abbot and his monks kept quiet and did not dare to thwart the boors. It is said that one of the mob held a pistol to the abbot’s chest, asking if he planned on opposing what was being done to his convent. The abbot replied: ‘I shall do no such thing’. It is said that the monastery was pillaged for over 11,000 pounds worth of marble, alabaster, touchstone, and other precious materials, and that the wine cellars of the convent were sacked during the evening and the night of 22 August, for over 900 florins of wine. In certain parts of the cellar, beer and wine reached the tops of the men’s shoes”. During the night of the pillaging, the wine-soaked horde overran the town against the wishes of the very leaders of their movement, “such that no church, chapel, convent or hospice no matter how small or poor was safe from harm”.

The iconoclasts set to work in Antwerp on 20 August: “It was a Tuesday, around four in the afternoon. The devils started by mocking certain statues enclosed by the church of Notre-Dame. Addressing a statue of Mary they said, ‘Hello there Marietta of the carpenters,’ or even ‘Hello there icons, you’ll be struck down before long’. Then one of the leaders of the fools, a good-for-nothing, mounted the pulpit and began to preach, being pulled back down, he climbed up again and was driven out again, but those who forced him out were beaten with the butts of the muskets that some of the *gueux* wore hidden beneath their capes. A mob came running, and one of the richest churches in Europe was so brutally pillaged that nothing was left except shapeless rubble, even the metal parts of the chapels and altars”.



17. Quentin Metsys, *Christ Presented to the People*, ca. 1515.
Oil on panel, 160 × 120 cm.
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Despite the fact that the violent movement lasted only a few weeks, it resulted in deep and lasting unrest. The authorities, whether they liked it or not, were forced to allow the practices of the dissident religions. In the towns, wooden churches were built, and in the country the new rites and offices were celebrated in barns. Brawls broke out between Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists, between civilians and soldiers. These soldiers, groups of Walloons, German mercenaries

(lansquenets), and Spanish infantrymen (fantassins), lived off the native population as though they had conquered a new land.

They made incursions into the countryside, where they emptied cellars and granaries of their provisions, took away fabric, clothes and furniture, and drove away the livestock. “They allege that they are poorly paid and that they must live in some manner. They promise to pay well those that lodge them; but they never keep their word. If they do pay at all, it is in cavalier’s currency (that is to say, in blows from the broadside of their sword)”. Three brothers, all slaughterhouse workers, picked a fight with a soldier and cut his throat like they might a beast’s. “The wounds were so large that one could place one’s hands inside them”. In a free-for-all that broke out between Walloon soldiers (“the red hoquetons”) and the bourgeois, a man named Jacques Hesscloos, who was the valet of a company of arquebusiers, seized an ash pole. “All of the Walloons that found themselves in his path were beaten down. He struck their arms with such terrible blows of his club that their rapiers flew in all directions and littered the ground around him. He struck their sides and shoulders so heavily that they fell to the ground with a single blow. Excited by the battle, he ripped the bands ornamenting the shoes of the Walloon soldiers, defying them to approach...”.

Van Vaernewyck recounts these bits of news by the hundred. Alarm bells rang out across the countryside, and peasants armed with pitchforks fell upon their marauders. The land was filled with shady characters, vagabonds and bandits. The act of begging, which had been encouraged by the large number of charitable institutions founded in the Middle Ages, increased to take on appalling proportions, and emigration added yet another form of decay. “All of the Low Countries complains of having been deprived of its rich and honest merchants who had once assured the comfort of a considerable number of the poor. In the good towns, there remained only futureless and penniless indigents who could hardly feed themselves. Although it was the height of summer, a general misery was perceptible in Ghent, and the poorhouses were called upon for demands beyond their resources. Evidence of poverty could be seen in the weekly second-hand markets. Where there were once many clothes, brass, and pewter objects for sale, now there was scarcely any, for the needy had sold everything, save the miserable clothes they wore. They were hopeless and without any other resources. They filled the streets, forced by desperation to pick through the rubbish and dung. They sent their children to pick through the refuse of the town dump to miserably fill up hats, little sacks, pots, and other receptacles with their bare hands. To add to the desolation of this spectacle, the gallows remained erected throughout the land. Sometimes the executed hung in groups of four or five, strung together to serve as an example”. The Duke of Alba would soon add to this when he set alight the executioner’s pyres, thereby consummating the ruin of what were once the richest of provinces.



18. Pieter Aertsen, *Peasants by the Hearth*, 1556.

Oil on wood panel, 142.3 × 198 cm.

Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp.

This tormented period, when the violence of religious struggles degenerated into a series of vendettas, had its painter: Pieter Bruegel. Unlike the painters of the first Flemish Renaissance, he no longer felt the need to express an ideal faith. The noble compositions of Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, the pleasant figures of Memling, and the passion that pains with gentle clarity the Virgin's face in the works of Rogier Van der Weyden conveyed powerful realism. He lived in a time when the Dukes of Burgundy finally forced the Flemish to agree willy-nilly among one another.

The Flemish were left to enjoy their wealth and spend their disorderly energy at parties and banquets. For these people, among whom later the remarkable John Ruysbroeck was born, the rapture of pure idealism and the call of abject materialism entwined to the point they became impossible to separate. This curious dual character inevitably manifested itself in the work of painters, who were also a spontaneous product of their milieu in the same way that the great Flemish Primitives had been. These painters revealed their particular genius for realism – in the precision of each detail, the striking accuracy of their portraits with all of their moral and physical flaws intact, the indefinable solidity, and the integrity of this art that draws from nature its power to please and to touch the viewer – despite their bias for subjects that portrayed the prodigious eruptions of faith typical of their time.

Following the relaxation of religious discipline, new abuses had plunged honest and timorous souls into a state of painful astonishment. Thirty years of Lutheranism had thrown their spirits into disarray and cast doubt into their hearts. In these troubled times, the preoccupation of personal and material preservation, and the vengeance of deaths left little time for meditations on serene ecstasy. The brutal explosions of joy in the form of village fairs, games and endless feasts were a necessary antidote. The people's need to believe transformed itself into fanatical hatred. Blows from the arquebus, and the unfortunate exploits of the iconoclasts took the place of works of good

faith and charity; while the violence and cunning ever present in the Flemish character, which no longer maintained any discipline, became the new rules to live by.

It has already been remarked how wealthy Flemish cities, and particularly Antwerp, became during the reign of the crude and gluttonous Charles V, a man who accurately reflected the vices as well as the patient virtues of his people. This opulence encouraged the development of the arts, and a necessity to exteriorise, particularly through painting, the confused aspirations for beauty that touch the human heart. The arrival of an original artist whose work could summarise this critical moment in his people's history was inevitable.



19. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Adoration of the Magi*, triptych, ca. 1510.
Oil on panel, 138 × 72 cm (central panel); 138 × 34 cm (side panels).
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Even in their paintings of gentle fire-lit interiors, the old masters always included a window that opened onto the landscape beyond that showed details of contemporary daily life. Pieter Bruegel brought to the foreground these tiny realist compositions designed to bring closer to the viewer's heart the already poignant scenes of Christ's Passion. Religious subject matter seems to have almost disappeared from Bruegel's concerns.

At a time when Catholics and Protestants were fighting to the death over the interpretation of the scriptures, religious matters were increasingly reserved to the individual's conscience, and thus foreign to the work of artists. Bruegel was left with the attractive material of the changing seasons and the spectacle of the common man whose vehement passions, in groups or individually, exhibited their own stigmata. This became the subject upon which Bruegel, with his jolly and

satirical Flemish verve, exerted his keen sense of observation, and his marvellous gift for capturing the burlesque or tragic nature of the masses.

But what of the much-discussed humour of Bruegel? Many authors see only this aspect, citing works like *The Battle between the Fat and the Thin*, *The Fight between Carnival and Lent*, and *The Stones of Folly*, where the portrayal of grotesques set in fantastic and nightmarish scenes seems to betray the bitter philosophical outlook beneath the mask that is often worn by misanthropes. Yet, too much emphasis has been placed on the purely exterior qualities of these fanciful works, to the point that they are the only works retained in Bruegel's oeuvre. His people called him, 'Bruegel the Droll', 'Vieze Bruegel', or 'Zotte Bruegel', as some critics continue to do, as though they believe it is possible to encapsulate the nature of his diverse productions with such a simple epithet. René Van Bastelaer has written an important work consecrated to the glory of Bruegel that justifies treating the work of one of the most original painters of the sixteenth century with such limited perspective.⁶

But Bruegel is not just amusing. Though he is frequently accomplice to unmeasured buffoonery testifying the fertility of his imagination, it is buffoonery in the style of Rabelais. In his *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, Rabelais captured the people and thinking of his time, and combined tragedy, drama, and the character studies of both ancient and modern comedies in one epic farce. Just as the work of Rabelais does not necessarily evoke laughter, even a hasty evaluation of the work of Bruegel must also surpass its evaluation as purely comic.

Of course, the crude verve, good humour and the satire of Bruegel make up an essential aspect of his production, but these are also qualities inherent in the work of numerous Flemish painters of the same period, and even of previous centuries. Traditional Flemish folklore contains hundreds of comical characters, and numerous cases where it was normal to mock one's neighbours to excess: cuckolded husbands, stolen wives, young women still unmarried at twenty-five, abandoned mistresses: in sum, all those whose misery and vice gives amusement to others. Almost every Dutch village has a nickname that mocks or ridicules the inhabitants of the neighbouring town. At the time of the religious struggles, sniping insults, satirical proverbs, and crude jokes struck like clubs. This kind of humour, which never manifested itself with as much intensity as in the sixteenth century, found its place in Bruegel's works, which were intimately tied to the popular culture of their time. But again, humour constitutes just one of the characteristics of Bruegel's genius, one of the vastest and most profound of which the Dutch school can be proud to call its own.

When considered from another point of view, it is tempting to define Bruegel, as does Van Mander, as a painter of the peasantry, for it is true that he produced a great number of pastoral scenes. In particular, Bruegel studied the morals of rural life and seems to have been attracted to his subjects through a secret sympathy and certain affinity for their thinking and sentiments that were born out of his own common origins. This connection withstood his stays in large cities, his contact with elite circles of scholars and artists, and his encounters with Italian landscapes and masterpieces. None of this would change Bruegel's powerful originality, which resisted influence like a diamond resists the marks of other stones.

⁶ *Peter Bruegel l'Ancien, son œuvre et son temps*, by René Van Bastelaer, Librairie nationale d'art et d'histoire, G. Van Oest and Co, Brussels, 1905.



PETRO BRUEGEL, PICTORI.

Quis nouus hic Hieronymus Orbi
Boschiuſ ingenioſa magiſtri
Somnia peniculoque, ſtyloque
Tanta imitariet arte peritus,
Vt ſuperet tamen interim et illum?

Artifice haud leuiores mereris.

Macte animo, Petre, mactus vt arte.
Namque tuo, veteriſque magiſtri
Ridiculo, ſalibuſque referto
In graphiceſ genere inclyta laudum
Præmia vbique, et ab omnibuſ vſlo

Th. Galle excud.

Dem. Lampsonius.

20. Dominicus Lampsonius, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, in *Portraits of Famous Netherlandish Painters*, Antwerp, 1572, plate 19.

Royal Library of Albert I, Print Collection, Brussels.

Translation:

TO PIETER BRUEGEL, PAINTER

A second Hieronymus Bosch,
Who retraced the vivid images of his master,
Whose masterful brush rendered his style with fidelity,
And in doing so, perhaps surpassed him?
You elevate yourself, Pieter, when through your fecund art,
In the style of your old master you draw pleasant things
Made to amuse; with him, you merit
The praise of the greatest artists.

Although Bruegel found lasting pleasure in the portrayal of the lives of the peasantry, this is not a sufficient reason to reduce this illustrator of life to the specialised label of genre painter. His characters, be they rustic or bourgeois, must be seen in the light of the appetites, ulterior motives, material needs, and moral aspirations that were reflections of their time. With a sudden glow, each face, by the hundreds in certain canvasses, illuminates anecdotes from Van Vaernewyck's memoirs: blinking eyes in a face creased with malice, others with angular, hastily composed features possessing a carved marionette's strange wooden steadiness, or a particular flat-browed profile with a lipless gash of a mouth. The group compositions reveal the depth of Bruegel's genius even more than their individual faces.

Take for example, the famous *Massacre of the Innocents* that hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It is the snowy scene of a Flemish village, its houses huddled beneath their white hoods. To each side, a few trees slash the grey winter sky that swells with a mysterious hostility. In the centre of the background, a compact group of soldiers on horseback advances slowly. They are covered head to toe in blue armour and their spears rest on their saddles, thrusting upwards, vertical and parallel. In the foreground, horsemen wearing feather-adorned felt hats gallop with their lances at the ready. On foot, other soldiers unsheathe their cutlasses, while some of them hack into the houses' plank doors. In the middle of it all, a group of weeping women, dismayed villagers, and perceptibly terrified children, complete the intense realism of this composition. Bruegel renders this scene with sober effects, and achieves an intense pathos without exaggerating a single bearing or gesture.



21. Hieronymus Bosch, *Haywain*, triptych, 1500–1502.
Oil on panel, 140 × 100 cm.
San Lorenzo Monastery, El Escorial.



22. Pieter Brueghel the Younger or Jan Brueghel the Younger, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, after 1616.
Oil on wood, 73.5 × 106.5 cm.
Copée Collection, Tenneville.

Of course, Bruegel was little concerned with the cruel Herod or the individual emotions suffered by the mothers of Bethlehem, whose children were being torn from their grasp, and disregarded the details of the historical setting. The subject matter, inspired by a fallacious legend, is here only a pretext, a simple label useful for classifying the canvas within the complete work of Bruegel or in a museum catalogue. This painting holds a deeper meaning. Bruegel had seen marauding bands of German, Walloon and Spanish soldiers that terrorised the countryside and unfortified towns, bursting into villages to pillage and sometimes kill. *The Massacre of the Innocents* represents all of the arrogance, insolence and the unbearable burden of foreign domination at the hands of these mercenaries, clustered together like a block of steel, contemptuous and invulnerable, pushing before the chests of their horses the hounded flock of unfortunates. These mothers, these peasants clasping their hands, these women collapsed in suffering, are those that Bruegel saw begging for their husbands, themselves, or even for their children to be spared. These are the unfortunate women he found weeping alongside the road, under the same December sky, and in the same atmosphere of inexpressible sadness that envelops *The Massacre of the Innocents*. A singular combination of the familiar and the tragic, this work moves us to our very core and surpasses the powerful masterpiece by Rubens by the same title that hangs in the Pinakothek in Munich, with its dishevelled mother, “Hairy, screaming, savage/A literal dog”, leaping with her nails bared, ready to bite the face of one of Herod’s soldiers. The sincere Bruegel remains superior to his great rival.

It is clear that the epithet “painter of the peasantry” does not suffice to describe such a profoundly human body of work. All the same, an analysis of the extraordinary *Triumph of Death* in Madrid’s Prado justifies his reputation for buffoonery, and does justice to his nickname ‘the Droll’.

It has already been mentioned that Bruegel visited Italy, but it is not clear if he saw the famous fresco on the subject of the *Triumph of Death*, in Pisa’s Campo Santo. This fresco, attributed to Orcagna, is a remarkable commentary on the work of Dante. In his writings, Vasari praises the mystical terror and earthly weakness for the voluptuous that infuses this painting. The horror of death resides less in the horrible figure of death himself, an old man with bat’s wings, than in the spectacles he gestures to with his scythe: a group of horsemen representing the grace and beauty of youth are stopped before three open coffins; in one, rotting flesh is still clinging to a skeleton, and in another a monstrous gut bloats beneath an ermine robe. On a hillside, pious hermit monks go about their work, and farther in the distance women smile, expressing their happiness to be alive and beautiful. They do not think to raise their eyes to the battalion of vampires and spectres that are rushing out of the distant sky.

In this manner, the artist portrays the contrast between life and death. On the one hand, he illustrates the pleasantness that exists in life, the gazing upon blue skies and experiencing the world with a voluptuous shiver of excitement, but on the other he also shows the inevitable horror and pestilence that life becomes. Beneath it all, he reveals the laughter of hideous demons, as though to express the irony of this contrast. The philosophy of death in Bruegel’s work is not thrown into such relief. Rather, death is featured without the foil of life. His conception of death seems to have been borrowed from a little panel in the Academy of Fine Arts in Siena, a simple illustration for Petrarch’s *Triumph of Death*. In a snowy landscape at dusk, the figure of Death recedes into the distance, with the slow pace of the oxen that pull his wagon. His wake is littered with cadavers. Yet the work of Bruegel is far more vast, boldly executed, and teeming with movement.



23. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1564.
Oil on wood, 124 × 170 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

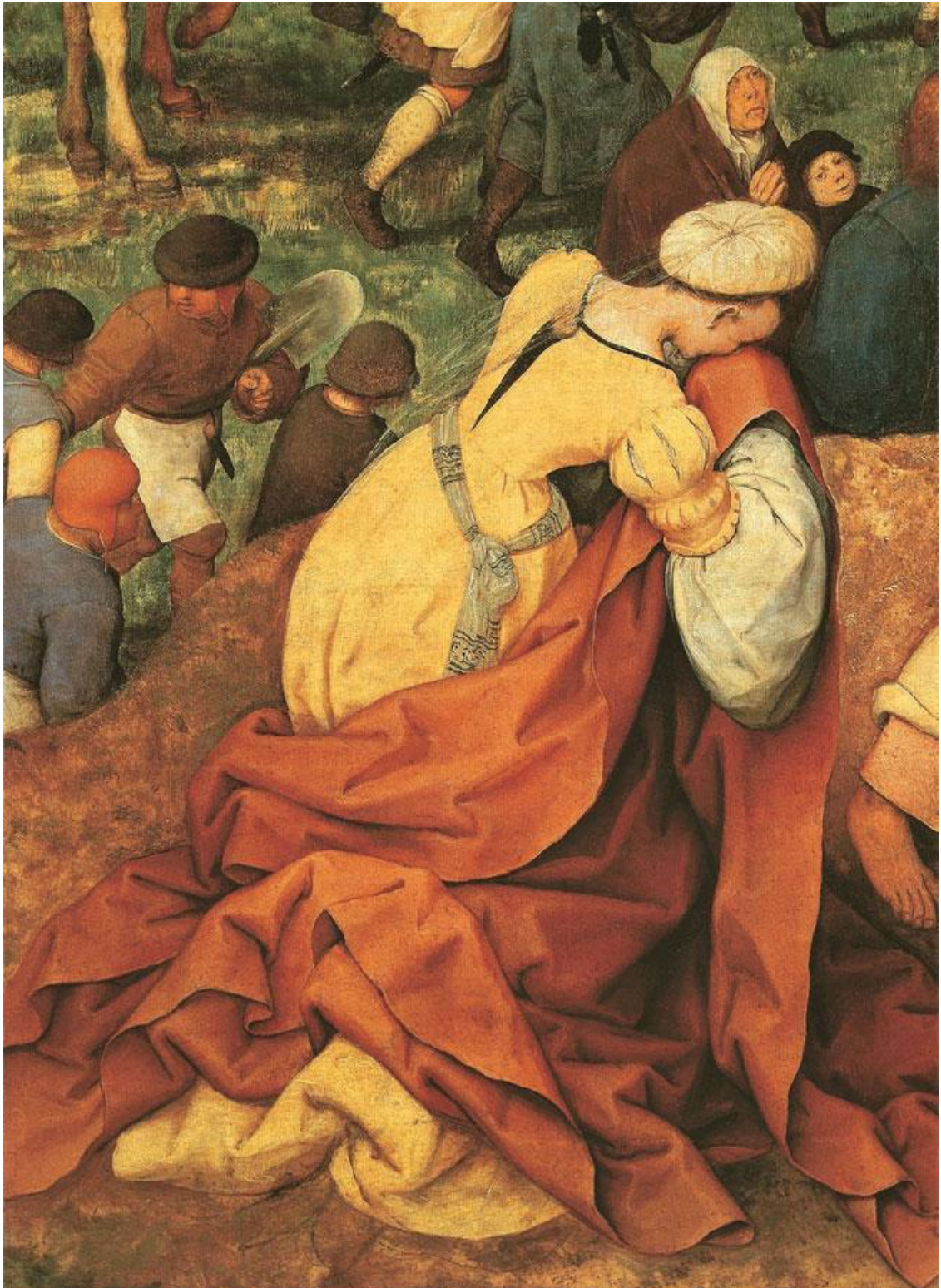
In the left foreground of Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* a horse of the Apocalypse draws a cart heaped with skulls, with the shovel used to collect them thrown across the top. A skeleton, ringing a bell with one hand and holding an hourglass in the other is seated on the nag, which grips the waist of a horrified and wild-eyed woman in its jaws. Before them, we see a king dressed in royal purple, a miser counting his gold and a priest seized by bony arms; a woman and her baby are nibbled by a frail greyhound. The gates of Hell open at the base of a hill, and an army of skeletons armed with scythes descends on the human race. The unfortunate are driven off with blows of lances and rods in a horrific stampede, others are snatched up head-over-heels in a net. Over the top of this fantastical free-for-all rides a particularly daring skeleton, even skinnier than the others, wielding a scythe in one hand, his horse stretching its neck, vertebrae protruding. Similar scenes can be seen in the background; in a little cemetery, the dead rise up and welcome a funeral procession with fierce rejoicing. Elsewhere, bodies are hanged and decapitated, gallows and executioner's wheels are thrown up against a sky blackened by the smoke of fires and stakes, while ships sink on the distant sea that stretches to the horizon.

This is not a nightmare, but the lucid vision of a man capable of descending into the abyss with a clear head, the literal translation of a rare philosophy that probes the depths of emptiness, the secret aspiration of a soul astonished to discover its taste for ashes. One thinks of the executioner's stakes lit across the Netherlands by Charles V, of the atmosphere to which the lovely Flanders awoke, the occasional foetid whiff of a distant mass grave, and the great shadow which darkened the sunny countryside, the dark queen that took to the air. Bruegel was familiar with its presence and rendered it palpable in his work, nailing it up by its wings like some rural-dwellers still nail bats above the doors of their houses. Though a Trappist monk digging his own grave must sometimes have the same thoughts as a gardener spading his garden, one cannot get used to Bruegel's canvas, which places a particular emphasis on "brother, one must die".

Orcagna's fresco in Pisa conveys the sentiment of the perishable; Bruegel's painting throws us into death's arms. The fresco provides a sense of regret, but a consolation as well. The smile

of the young woman, in spite of the painter's intentions, is stronger than the rictus of the rejoicing Death. Bruegel's work is more brutal, leaving only the physical sensation of profound coldness and the sudden betrayal of our vital forces, as though on the brink of crossing the supreme divide between life and death. The painter of *The Triumph of Death*, who would not be rivalled by the other Bruegels that followed him, was Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

What was Bruegel's position in relation to the other painters of his time? In 1525, a few years before his probable date of birth, Jan Gossaert, known as Mabuse or Maubeuge, returned from his stay in Italy. He was the first Flemish painter to admire the masterpieces accumulated for over two centuries in the churches and palaces of Rome and Florence. This was the era of Michaelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, who represented the most blinding brilliance of the blazing light of the Italian Renaissance. Yet, less than fifty years before, the Italians had borrowed aspects of the Flemish method of painting from nature, and the taut and powerful technique used by Jan de Bruges (as they called the elder Van Eyck), Hugues Van der Goes and Rogier Van der Weyden. These borrowed techniques enabled the blossoming of Florentine art under Masolino da Panicale, Masaccio and Andrea del Verrocchio, who were the direct precursors of the great Italian masters of the first half of the sixteenth century.



24. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, detail, 1564.
Oil on wood panel, 124 × 170 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



25. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, triptych, 1505–1506.
Oil on wood, 131.5 × 119 cm (central panel); 131.5 × 53 cm (side panels).
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon.



26. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1603.
Oil on wood, 116 × 162 cm.
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

During this period, there were no Flemish artists who could distract from the great dawn of art in the south. Not even Quentin Metsys was able to counteract this taste for the exotic. The time had come for Flemish artists to seek their principles elsewhere, principles, which after a period of

bastardisation, revived their art, with Rubens finally showing what the Flemish were capable of. The Romanist paintings of Mabuse were immensely popular, and certain of his works demonstrate the contemporary craze for powerful and fleshy nudes, heads of Madonnas whose perfection did not distract from the power of the total composition, vivid colours, golden lacquers, emerald greens, indigo blues, in sum, brilliant examples of an art previously unknown in the Netherlands. Between the original and profound Quentin Metsys, who possessed a great gift for illustrating pathos inherited from the great Rogier Van der Weyden, and the brilliant but superficial Mabuse, a constellation of painters would choose the Italian model, entering this dead end of exoticism.

The preference of the powerful and the general public lay with these Romanists, as they were called. The mediocre Bernard Van Orley, whose work seems to attest to the sense of poverty he must have felt in the presence of his teacher Raphael, was named the official court painter of Margaret of Austria, where he was overwhelmed with commissions and honours. The more nervous talent of Frank Floris, admired by Vasari, deserved his nickname, 'The Flemish Raphael'. Worthy of this remark, Floris was equally ready to construct the victory arches of Philip II as he was to copy the work of Italians. The rich bourgeoisie and proud nobility that was connected to the Netherlands' Spanish rulers must have preferred the flourishing of a foreign school. A gulf formed between the popular and the upper classes of the country. Although it would seem that art cannot flourish without encouragement from the powerful, the Flemish people had such an intense need to express themselves through original works that they never lacked their own painters.



27. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, ca. 1606.

Oil on copper, 13 × 18 cm.

Gift of Betty and David M. Koetser, Kunsthhaus, Zurich.



28. Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1510–1535.
Oil on wood, 76.7 × 83.5 cm.
Palacio Real, Madrid.

Firstly, there was Joachim Patinir, who Dürer praised as “a good landscape painter” when he passed through Antwerp in 1520. Patinir’s habit of decorating his paintings with the little figures of men stooped over their fields attests to his humble origins, a habit that annoyed Van den Branden. Josse de Clèves comforted himself over the lack of esteem held for him by his countrymen in answering the call of François I to paint his portrait. He was less happy in England, where the craze for Italian art drove him insane with resentment. Corneille Metsys, the son of Quentin Metsys, did not allow himself to be seduced by the foreign beauty of Italian art like his brother Jan Mandyn and Pieter Aertsen, known as ‘Lange Peer’, can also be counted among those, one of whom was Bruegel, who during this time of development in Flemish art pursued a traditional Flemish style of painting more or less happily.

Too frequently, the painters of the humorous schools are exclusively cited as Bruegel’s precursors, particularly Hieronymus Bosch, who lived less than half a century before Bruegel. Yet a rapid examination of Bruegel’s work convincingly shows that he worked through direct

observation; he studied the spectacles of daily life more than the paintings of his predecessors. Regarding certain comical works, he simply employed the widespread technique of appropriating the traditional caricatured style of portraying clowns, without there being a clear connection between his paintings and drawings and those of his predecessors.

Bruegel's art is not the result of any particular school in the strict sense of the word. The best of his students, his son Pieter, known as the 'Hell Brueghel', simply copied him. Pieter Bruegel the Elder occupies an exceptional place in the history of Flemish painting, as much for the creative power of his genius as for his personal technique. It would be fair to consider him an extreme, a crowning achievement of the realist tendency that characterises Netherlandish painting. He applies himself to his subjects drawn from the daily lives of the Flemish people with a primary concern for sincerity before satire. It was only after completing a scene of daily life that he would attach a proverb or a certain moral sense to it. His work is so natural that he frequently does not seem to have set out with the preconceived idea of painting a particular moral lesson or proverb.

Bruegel's precursors include Flemish painters since Melchior Broederlam, whose *Flight into Egypt*, is a diminutive painting of profound and ingenious realism, with its splendid portrait of Joseph raising a cup to his lips. There is also Hugues Van der Goes with his triptych *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, in the Uffizi in Florence, the very image of Flemish rustics whose rude features seem to be lit with the purest flame of idealism that burned in this master's heart.

Closer to Bruegel, again, is Quentin Metsys, who, in one of the panels of his triptych in Antwerp, shows the boozy faces of the executioners stoking the fire around the cauldron where Saint John can be seen from the waist up, imploring the heavens. In Bruegel's preferred genres, it is necessary to seek out those artists who worked in similar veins before him, artists attached to popular subjects, particularly when taken from the lives of rural dwellers: in sum, the satirists, humorists, and moralists. The work of Hieronymus Bosch, exhibits many traits in common with that of Bruegel without it being possible to confuse these two profoundly original masters.



29. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, 1559.
Oil on oak panel, 118 × 164.5 cm.

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



30. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, detail, 1559.
Oil on oak panel, 118 × 164.5 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



31. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, triptych, ca. 1500.
Oil on wood, 200 × 195 cm (central panel); 220 × 97 cm (side panels).
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

The first artistic Renaissance that appeared at the beginning of the thirteenth century inevitably consisted of a movement towards realism, a return to nature and the living in an art that had since the end of ancient times been nothing more than a servile imitation of Byzantine models and techniques. From an unknown source, a new breath animated the paralysed limbs and almond-like mosaic eyes of the oriental Madonnas. Their forms took on weight, connecting them to reality, and painters no longer hesitated to enliven their dull eyes with the glint of a gaze, the flickering flame of a soul. This trend surely occurred in the Netherlands at the same time as Florence, Siena and Pisa, and the production of unknown Flemish artists must have corresponded to the works of the great precursors of the Italian Renaissance like Giotto or Duccio di Buoninsegna.

The inherent genius of the Flemish artists was also active, that talent for perceiving and rendering colour were too deeply ingrained in their character for them not to have realised the inanity of the conventionalism that characterised the art at that time. They must have sought to express their innate thirst for truth, perhaps gropingly and clumsily but nevertheless with power and frankness. The scholarly work of Deshaines and the admirable teachings of Courajod and Flerens-Gevaert put an end to the legend that claimed the Van Eyck brothers had sprung forth suddenly, as though prepared by Providence, to create the masterpiece of the human spirit, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, without recourse to guide, lesson or example.

Today we know their predecessors, works like the Broederlam hanging in Dijon, previously mentioned. His small panel in the Musée van den Bergh of Antwerp depicts the Virgin wearing an azure dress asleep on gold-speckled fabric next to the naked Christ child warmed by the breath of a cow and a donkey. Though Broederlam is the only Flemish artist whose fragmented work has survived from this period, he must have had many students and emulators given the richness of his time, its numerous fertile spirits, and generous patrons who created an atmosphere favourable to art. In the absence of paintings, surviving fragments of sculptures attest to the vigour of execution and the strength of temperament of the Flemish sculptors in the second half of the fourteenth century. By that time they had already achieved the supreme integrity, harmony and equilibrium that mark perfection.

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