



DE JONCKHEERE
Master Paintings

THEATRUM MUNDI

Questions of morality in 16th and 17th century Flemish painting

8 May – 31 July 2025

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Audiodescription is available for works displaying the symbol 



The Latin term *Theatrum Mundi* means the Great Theatre of the World: a metaphor, already used in antiquity, that transposes life to the universe of the theatre. According to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, or Don Quixote, the world is like a stage where everyone has a role to play. But life appears inconsistent: human beings are no more than puppets operated by strings, with no control over their destiny. And yet, each person has a golden thread – intelligence – which he or she must learn to use in the search for truth. As the centuries passed, the adage took on an air of inevitability. Life is an illusion and only the hope of salvation guides the individual.

Conditioned by the prospect of the afterlife, Flemish 16th and 17th century painting is rife with precepts and symbols of the divine. While these symbols were well understood at the time, their interpretation became opaque over the centuries. This loss of understanding applies even more so to genre scenes and still lifes, which are no less critical of pleasure and idleness at the expense of hard work and good morals.

Since life is ephemeral and impermanent, as futile as a comedy and a mere trial before salvation, its purpose can only be moral and virtuous. But if the world is a stage, then it is also a place of experimentation from which everyone can learn lessons. The painter – an author and creator – places characters in roles that are sometimes good, sometimes bad; for the viewer, it is simply a matter of finding the right balance.

Artists like Pieter Brueghel the Younger were instructive, humorous and even indulgent in their portrayal of good behaviour in their works. For others, such as Pieter Huys, painting morality was also an opportunity to reveal, without artifice, all the deviances of the soul, even its darkest fantasies.

Whether as a guardian of thought or as a pretext for imagery, morality is an integral part of Flemish painting. This exhibition illustrates these different interpretations through the works of the masters of the Southern Netherlands.

IMAGO PIETATIS

Religious morality and images

In the Middle Ages, painters were craftsmen who used their technical skills to satisfy a specific demand: that of the Church. Its conception of morals and virtue was therefore strictly linked to Christian thinking, of which painters were the servants. Images were taken from illustrated bibles and scrupulously respected.

It was not until the 15th century, and the Flemish Primitives, that painters produced works that left the sacred space of churches: this marked the beginning of an art market for private devotion. God, the saints and biblical episodes from the Old and New Testaments were depicted in accordance with the moral code: sinning and attaching oneself to the ephemeral were nothing but folly. Images were therefore used to dissuade the faithful from enjoying the theatre of the world.





🔊 MASTER OF THE EMBROIDERED FOLIAGE

Active in Brussels and Bruges circa 1480 – 1510

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Panel: 50,2 x 33,8 cm

Circa 1490 – 1510

Bursting with vibrant colours and delicate detail, Adam and Eve reign supreme in a paradisaical world. This masterpiece by the Master of the Embroidered Foliage takes us back to the turn of the 16th century: bridging the gap between the mediaeval pictorial tradition and modernity, this anonymous painter was thus named owing to his unique rendering of vegetation. The meticulous detail of the leaves and flowers is reminiscent of mediaeval tapestries known as millefleur.

This depiction of the Fall of Man, when Eve picks the forbidden fruit and offers it to Adam, was highly sought-after in the early 16th century. A quarter of a century after the model by Hugo van der Goes, now in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, on which this painting is based, the subject was painted three times by this artist. The version you see here is certainly the oldest.

This idyllic world is a seductive setting for the naked figures of Adam and Eve. Their intimacy is artfully and graphically concealed. However, beneath its apparent religious morality, this work must have been destined for a private space. Far from any obscene intent, the happy patron of this painting would have been able to appreciate the delicately depicted bodies verging on realism: hence, all is forgiven since the painter has taken care to illustrate, through the figures' repentant look, apple in hand and the serpent of temptation in the background, the disregard of God's laws!



MASTER OF 1518

Active in Antwerp during the first third of the 16th century

The Holy Family with St. Catherine and St. Ursula

Panel: 55 x 37 cm

The Master of 1518, whose real name was Jan van Dornicke, is one of the most illustrious representatives of Antwerp Mannerism, as is clear in this particular work. His crystalline touch flourishes in the refined fabrics and fantastical blue landscapes.

The episode depicted here is that of the rest during the flight into Egypt. While the flight itself is recounted in the Gospel According to St. Matthew, the moment of rest, also known as the miracle of the palm tree depicted in the background, is only mentioned in an apocryphal text dating from the 5th or 6th century. Accompanying the Virgin Mary, Jesus and Joseph, St. Catherine rests on the left, identified by the attributes of her martyrdom: the breaking wheel and the sword used to behead her. On the right, St. Ursula looks on with a grave expression, as if aware of the divine Child's terrible fate. She holds the arrow shot by the Huns that sealed her martyrdom.

The solemn nature of the work is intended to move the faithful, for the sufferings of the saints and the Holy Family cannot have been in vain. Everything related to the divine is represented three times: three angels help Joseph gather dates from the tree, three holy women sit in the foreground and, of course, the Holy Trinity occupies the central axis of the panel, from the Infant Jesus to God the Father and the Holy Spirit.



🔊 MASTER OF THE HOLY BLOOD

Active in Bruges circa 1520

***Triptych: Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine (central panel)
St. Barbara and St. Mary Magdalene (side panels)***

Panels: 113,5 x 170,2 cm

This remarkable triptych is the work of the Master of the Holy Blood, an artist who took his nickname from the Brotherhood of the Holy Blood in Bruges, where several of his works are kept. The excellent rendering of textures and perfect mastery of glazes are particularly noteworthy in the work of this early 16th-century artist. Glazes are thin layers of tinted oil which, when superimposed, give shape to a motif. This results in rich and precise ornamentation of astonishing variety.

Good morals are defined here by the stories of the saints whose martyrdoms are integrated into the landscape. St. Barbara on the left, St. Catherine with the Virgin Mary and Christ, and St. Mary Magdalene on the right-hand panel: all have demonstrated such pure faith that they are resplendent with beauty. The fabrics of their clothing are characteristic of the princely attire of the period. The artist has depicted their martyrdoms as small narrative clues in the background of the landscape.

This important Renaissance painter from Bruges seems to have made it a point of honour to paint female figures according to an ideal type: this is the principle of *Imitatio Mariae*, i.e. the encouragement to imitate the sacred figures to whom every good Christian woman should try to conform.



LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

Kronack 1492 – Weimar 1553

Pair of Bust Portraits:

Martin Luther (1438-1546) and Katharina von Bora (1499-1552)

Panels: 18,5 x 14 and 19,2 x 13,6 cm

Circa 1525

First portrait signed indistinctly with the winged serpent (centre left)

The sober works that emerged from the Reformation were in stark contrast to the opulence of Catholic portrayals in 16th-century Flanders. In 1515, Pope Leo X reinstated the sale of indulgences, i.e. a pardon for sins in exchange for a sum of money. Outraged, the priest Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on 31 October 1517, which led to his expulsion from the Church in 1521.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, court painter to the Electors of Saxony, was one of the main artists to give a face to the figures of the Reformation. He began to paint portraits of Luther and his wife Katharina von Bora when they married in 1525. The fine, precise brushstrokes create a harmonious representation that exudes humility. In 1530, the figures of the Reformation argued that clerical celibacy was unfounded in the Catholic Church. Through his marriage, Luther strongly promoted his controversial ideas. Furthermore, his wife's situation as a former convent pupil who had escaped from a cloister, only reinforced the notion of freedom promoted by the Reformation.

More than a simple celebration of their marriage, this pair of portraits defines the exemplary state of the pastoral family and the flourishing of good Lutheran morals. The rare dimensions of these works of art add to their unrivalled value, as they are the smallest rectangular portraits of their marriage painted by Cranach.



LUCAS CRANACH THE YOUNGER

Wittenberg 1515 – Weimar 1586

Christ blessing the Children

Panel: 59,3 x 120 cm

Signed with the winged serpent holding a ring in its mouth, dated 1538, inscription: “VND SIE BRACHTENKINDLEIN ZV IM·DAS ER SIE ANRVRETE · S MARCVS AM X”

Cranach the Elder had two sons, Hans and Lucas the Younger, who were trained in their father’s workshop, which Lucas took over in 1550. He distinguished himself from his father’s style with expressive and meticulously crafted portraits, integrated into mythological and everyday scenes, which were particularly popular. This *Christ blessing the children* is painted after one of his father’s models, and is similar to two other versions, one in Frankfurt and the other in Copenhagen. It is not a commonly portrayed theme and it seldom appears in art before Cranach the Elder. However, it was taken up by his son or his workshop, as well as by other painters such as Anton van Dyck or Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem.

This version is notable for its expressive power. It illustrates an event recounted in the first three Gospels, where women rush with their children to Christ to be blessed. The apostles, having first pushed back the mothers before being lectured by Christ himself, retreat to the left of the painting, guided by Peter in blue, whose hands are resigned to warding off the crowd of worshippers. More than a simple biblical evocation, this subject is a standard-bearer for Lutheran reformist ideas. In contrast to the Anabaptists, followers of Lutheran thought emphasised the importance of the biblical text and the sacrament of baptism at birth. The Cranachs’ paintings therefore aim to illustrate Luther’s doctrine by explicitly quoting the sacred text. All the mothers are confident in leaving their infants in Christ’s hands. The infants seem to be drawn to him; for it is only natural for these children to be in contact with God.



HERRI MET DE BLES

Bouvignes circa 1510 – Ferrara circa 1560

Panoramic Landscape with St. Jerome

Panel: 27,7 x 37,1 cm

Signed with an owl, symbol of the artist

A painter of panoramic landscapes, Herri met de Bles demonstrated his talent through his vaporous rendering of the atmosphere, inspired by the principles of Leonardo da Vinci and known as *sfumato*. Drawn to Italy, he became known there as ‘*Civetta*’, after the owl he used to include in his paintings. Can you find it here?

Through this panel, the painter suggests that the correct behaviour to adopt would be that of St. Jerome. A scholar, Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus to revise the translation of the Bible based on the Greek and Hebrew writings. He is therefore often depicted studying, although this is not the case here. This older episode refers to his asceticism in the desert of Chalcis in Syria, contrite at being continuously subjected to numerous temptations. This voluntary withdrawal from civilisation is motivated by a pure and pious quest for meditation. A true beacon of virtue. Here he emerges from a cave, where an altar can be glimpsed in the background.

Although moral in nature, the subject is merely a pretext for Herri met de Bles to address the theme that truly interests him, namely landscape. Here he displays his mastery of atmospheric perspective, inherited from his uncle Joachim Patinir, considered the first Flemish landscape painter.



MARCELLUS COFFERMANS

Helmond 1524 – Antwerp 1581

The Flagellation of Christ

after MARTIN SCHONGAUER (Colmar 1448 – Alt-Breisach 1491)

Panel: 20,5 x 15,3 cm

Art history has long neglected the work of Marcellus Coffermans, considered somewhat archaic for the third quarter of the 16th century. The master's keen interest in the work of his predecessors is also indicative of the tastes and attitudes of a clientele whose Catholic fervour was always emphasised: Spain.

Under the rule of King Philip II of Castile, the Netherlands benefited from extensive trade with the Iberian Peninsula. Since the second half of the 15th century, the latter had been captivated by Flemish painting. Marcellus Coffermans enjoyed great success there, combining Primitive drawings with a delicate velvety touch. As evidenced by the altarpieces and sculptures of the time, the emphasis on Christ's pain was particularly appreciated by the Hispanics. Coffermans therefore emphasised the gravity of the subject: the emaciated Christ stands out owing to the colour of his flesh, marked by the lashes of the whip and spilled blood.

While the similar version in Turin's Accorsi-Ometto Museum is striking in terms of the abundance of blood, our panel is more discreet in this respect. Perhaps this is a manner of protecting the viewer, or evidence of Coffermans' early efforts to cater to Spanish preferences?



BRUNSWICK MONOGRAMMIST

Active between 1525 and 1545

Brothel Scene with Card Players

Panel: 22 x 30 cm

Circa 1540

The importance of this panel lies in the novelty of its iconography, which marks the beginning of genre painting. Research into light and shadow also marked a major turning point in the pictorial evolution of the Northern schools.

The subject draws inspiration from representations of a popular theme from the Bible, the parable of the prodigal son. According to the text, an ungrateful son, unappreciative of his father's devotion, leaves him to squander his inheritance as he pleases. Overcome with remorse, he returns pitifully to ask for forgiveness and to be reinstated into the family. Just as Adam and Eve permitted nudity or the Temptation of St. Anthony illustrated lust, the religious source allowed painters to show the prodigal son in good company in cabarets. Loose morals and licentiousness were indeed very popular on the market, so much so that there is no reference to the parable here: the work unambiguously presents a brothel scene. Of course, the work could not be appreciated as such: one had to take offence – or at least pretend to – at the decadence of others. Perhaps, it also had a cathartic and purgative purpose. The softness of the lines and the mastery of the highly accomplished white highlights correspond in every way to the corpus of the anonymous master commonly known as the Brunswick Monogrammist, owing to the location of his most eminent work. With the varied and languid poses of the characters, his light palette and his assertive personality, this artist is seen as a precursor of Pieter Bruegel.



🔊 PIETER HUYS

attributed to

Antwerp circa 1519 – Antwerp 1584

The Temptation of St. Anthony

Panel: 45 x 62 cm

Reminiscent of the style of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Huys, an excellent colourist and draughtsman, followed in his footsteps and developed a repertoire of forms in which denouncing Evil, and more broadly immorality, allowed him to give free rein to his imagination. His favourite subject? The Temptation of St. Anthony, of which this is an interesting example.

Here, the saint's piety is put to the test: following his example, the faithful must allow their faith to triumph over the many temptations. An ardent sin we have to face features in the centre: lust, personified by a naked woman holding a mysterious orb. While she is pleasing to the eye, she is surrounded by deformed creatures. In the foreground, on a fallen pole, monsters pile up and defile themselves, a behaviour associated with physical pleasures.

In short, the confrontation between Good and Evil is unbalanced here: the saint occupies only the lower corner of the panel, while immorality flourishes and monopolises all the attention. Although St. Anthony's final choice is foreshadowed by the gestures of his hands, he is nevertheless observing the scene intently when he should be looking away. How ironic for the man who preached "*always have God before your eyes*"!



HENDRIK VAN STEENWIJCK THE YOUNGER

Antwerp 1580 – Leiden 1640

Interior of a Gothic Church during a Christening, facing East

With the participation of **DAVID VINCKBOONS** (Mechelen 1576–Amsterdam 1633) for the figures

Panel: 34,5 x 48,5 cm

The result of a fruitful collaboration, this *Church interior* places the viewer at the centre of the spiritual experience. David Vinckboons' fine, precise workmanship combines with Hendrik van Steenwijck's clear organisation to animate the space and create a genre scene. Bound by their keen sense of observation, these artists reproduce a real space with their skilful interplay of light and shadow, creating a mystical atmosphere.

This interior bears similarities with other church portraits, including the one in the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig (Germany), evidence that a model must have circulated between workshops. This goes hand in hand with the desire to depict a church that the faithful could recognise, reminding them of its beauty.

Is this an invitation to contemplation or a call to order? While it is difficult to determine the exact meaning and role of these representations, they are a reminder of liturgical practices in the 17th century, and of the need to reassure the faithful after the iconoclastic fury.



JAN BRUEGHEL THE ELDER

Brussels 1568 – Antwerp 1625

Lot and his Daughters, the Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Flames

Panel: 21,5 cm

Signed and dated at the bottom centre *BRUEGHEL / 1609*

Dated 1609, this *tondo* tells the stories of Lot, his wife and two daughters. Jan Brueghel the Elder, a brilliant 17th-century landscape painter, has created a composition with two time lines. In the background, Sodom and Gomorrah are engulfed by divine fire and brimstone, while in the foreground, Lot and his daughters, the only survivors of the wrath, are about to commit incest.

Far from being central, the figures give way to the real subject of the work: the landscape. These cities torn apart by flames, breaking with the stillness of the night, are among the most sought-after compositions by Jan Brueghel the Elder. Here, the artist displays all the boldness of his rapid, precise style, with brushstrokes that give the contours a shimmering movement.

Although the act of incest raises many moral issues and there are multiple possibilities concerning the ‘sin of Sodom’, perhaps the best way to approach this masterpiece is to appreciate its exceptional artistic qualities and its rarity. Would it not be better to consider this as a witness to another time, one that is unfamiliar to us?

ERRARE HUMANUM EST

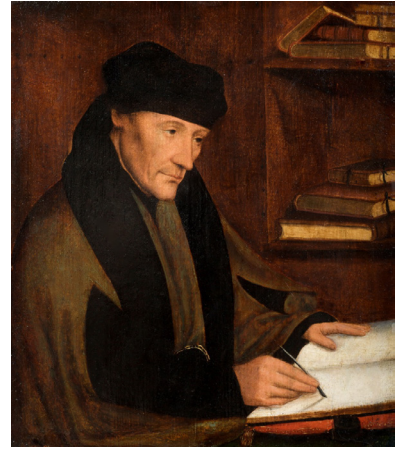
Proverbs and popular imagery

The 16th century saw the blossoming of Renaissance ideas in the paintings of the Northern schools. Initially literary, these theories introduced a new relationship between human beings and society: a wind of freedom was blowing. Although people remained very religious, life was becoming less subject to God.

Individual free will, particularly that of artists, could be expressed.

For instance, in the Netherlands in the 16th century, there was a keen interest in popular proverbs and sayings, which were published in numerous works and collections. Full of irony and wisdom, they were appreciated for their ambiguity. They found expression in travelling theatre and among Flemish painters, and society remained fond of these philosophical puns well into the 17th century. This popular imagery warns against immorality, using characters staged in a counter-example as is the case in puppet shows. This is what makes the painting of this period so entertaining even today.





FLEMISH SCHOOL

16th century

Portrait of Erasmus (Rotterdam 1466/7 – Basel 1536) at his Work Table
after QUENTIN MASSIJS (Leuven 1466 – Antwerp 1530)

Panel: 23,5 x 20 cm

Inscribed on the back: *DESIDERUS ERASMUS / ROTERODAMUS*

Elevated to the rank of Prince of Humanists, Erasmus is still considered one of the greatest European philosophers of the 16th century. Born in Rotterdam circa 1466, the Dutchman travelled all over Western Europe, maintaining close ties with the scholars of his time. Our portrait is a copy of a work commissioned by Erasmus himself from Quinten Massijs. It is part of a pair of matching portraits, the other one featuring his colleague and friend Pieter Gillis, known as Petrus Ægidius, that were offered to their British correspondent Thomas More. Having befriended each other during a stay in England in 1499, the three men and thinkers turned to art as a way to symbolise their friendship. More hung this pair of portraits in his office and sent his own portrait to his friends, so that he would also be present among them on the other side of the Channel.

Erasmus is shown here writing, perhaps the *Adages*, a publication dating from 1500, the result of his work and research to compile more than 800 proverbs, all commented on and explained. Called ‘*sinneken*’, literally little allegories, over 4,000 were listed in the Basel edition of 1536.



PIETER BRUEGHEL THE YOUNGER

Brussels 1564 – Antwerp 1638

The Birdnester

Panel: 61,7 x 77,5 cm

While some artists had a harsh view of the world around them, Pieter Bruegel the Younger considered his contemporaries with empathy and indulgence. Proverbs form the central part of his work, calling on the viewer to reflect and thus exercise judgement.

Such is the case in *The Birdnester*, the title taken from the character perched in the tree stealing a nest. This important work, filled with mischief, is based on a composition by his father, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The subject is said to be inspired by an old Flemish saying: “*He who knows where the nest is, has the knowledge; he who robs it, has the nest*”. The viewer is thus taught that it is better to act than to know. Another interpretation stresses that it is better to mind one’s own business than to focus on the problems of others. As shown here: the character in the foreground seems to be condemning the perilous acts and acrobatics of the thief, a poor hunter on the verge of falling, who has already lost his game bag! The bundle on the ground probably contains birds stolen from the farmyard visible in the background. However, the informer does not see that he himself is about to fall into a stream!



🔊 PIETER BRUEGHEL THE YOUNGER

Brussels 1564 – Antwerp 1638

The Blue Cloak

All Merchants Vaunt their Merchandise

Panels: 18,8 and 18,6 cm

The first is signed bottom centre *P.BREVGHEL*, after 1616

These two small round panels are called *tondi*, which means ‘round’ in Italian. The first one illustrates a Flemish proverb that could be translated as “*I’m hiding under a blue cloak. But the more I hide, the more people see me*”. The man’s attempt to hide under his cloak fails to divert the attention of the couple on the other bank of the river, who, ironically, are being guided by a dog, a symbol of fidelity. In the Middle Ages, the blue cloak was the attribute of cuckolded husbands. Brueghel the Younger uses a mirror effect to juxtapose two relationships in which the good-naturedness of the figures reveals all the master’s humour.

However, these proverbs do not necessarily highlight mistakes. They also serve as advice, as in *All merchants vaunt their merchandise*.

A shopkeeper offers ‘*nets*’ and ‘*pipes*’ – two terms already evocative in the early 17th century of traps and deception – to an uninterested fat farmer. This big oaf is not going to let himself be taken in: on the contrary, he asks the merchant to go and sell his junk elsewhere. Pieter Brueghel the Younger warns viewers to beware of smooth talkers, who are always motivated by self-interest. The artist has chosen to place the scene in the peasant world because it is easier to laugh at. However, Brueghel the Younger does not limit the scope of his maxims to this stratum of society: he also has some choice words for the well-to-do, the most educated and the most pious.



PIETER BRUEGHEL THE YOUNGER

Brussels 1564 – Antwerp 1638

Outdoor Wedding Dance

Panel: 43,1 x 59 cm

Signed and dated *BRUEGHEL 1614*

A true masterpiece by Pieter Bruegel the Younger, this *Outdoor Wedding Dance* is one of the most popular subjects in this great artist's body of work. Particularly refined and balanced, and in remarkable condition, this version is one of a series of compositions based on a lost original by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Signed and dated 1614, our painting features among the earliest and finest versions of the theme.

A sacrament celebrating spiritual union, marriage is a pledge of fidelity, support and also salvation. Initially swept along by the revelry and the dancers, it takes a while to realise that this is a wedding! The young bride in the middle of the composition is all alone under her bluish canopy. Pieter the Younger teases this young couple, already separated even though their union has not yet been consummated. Where is the groom? Perhaps he is dancing in the foreground or relieving himself against the building?

The painting has a lively rhythm, expressed through its colours, and the intensity of the light highlights emphasises the elegance of the figures and the richness of their garments. The excesses particular to a festive atmosphere are thus cleverly hidden at first sight. Through a cheerful vision and the celebration of anecdotes from Flemish folklore, Bruegel invites us to share in the intimacy of this peasant wedding.



DAVID VINCKBOONS

Mechelen 1576 – Amsterdam 1632

Pair of Proverbs:

The Parable of the Blind

The Birdnester

Panels: 7,7 x 9,2 cm

Monogrammed and dated DVB 1603

True to the iconographic tradition of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, this pair of proverbs painted by David Vinckboons in 1603 is remarkably detailed. Dated, monogrammed and kept together, these two miniatures demonstrate the close link between vision and morality in the iconography of the Northern schools.

The Parable of the Blind is taken from the Gospel According to St. Matthew. Here, Vinckboons depicts four blind men about to fall in turn into a stream, to which he adds a notable element, namely a dog. While the dog is often associated with vigilance, it is sometimes seen as a scavenging predator. Vinckboons is inviting us to understand that with greater vigilance, the blind would surely not have fallen, and that moreover, a lack of lucidity leads to danger. Of course, the blindness referred to here is of a spiritual nature, and there is no doubt that most of Bruegel's contemporaries and followers saw it as an allegory of the folly of the times.

As for *The Birdnester*, the pictorial translation is always that of a thief caught by a peasant in the act of petty theft. However, Vinckboons has added another element to the nest scene: a pickpocket in action, stealing a poor farmer's purse. Alongside the moral precept, Vinckboons seems to have slipped in a touch of bawdiness. For society at that time, images of birds being hunted had an erotic connotation. This licentiousness is conveyed in the gesture of the figure on the left, who literally puts their hand on the central figure's purse.



FRANS FRANCKEN THE YOUNGER ***and workshop***

Antwerp 1581 – Antwerp 1642

Death and the Miser

Copper: 22,4 x 16,8 cm

In the 17th century, there was one painter who dominated the Antwerp art scene: Frans Francken the Younger, who also responded to art lovers' keen interest in paintings of proverbs. Here, he illustrates a saying from antiquity, the *memento mori*, which literally means “*remember that you must die*”.

The ephemeral nature of life is mankind's primary obsession. In this small composition, Death, personified by a skeleton violinist, comes to play one last dance to a man who resembles a moneylender. Francken's vivid white highlights and vibrant touch give the skeleton a truly frightening aspect. Its foot rests on an hourglass, symbolising time and a reminder of Death's perpetual triumph over it. In other words, the time has come. The coins scattered on the table, the chest, the purse on the floor and the splendour of his garments are all evidence of his wealth. The glasses, objects, bottles and paintings refer to the culture and knowledge developed by the man himself. With a fierce look on his face, the old man steps back and points to his own foot, pretending that pain is preventing him from joining in the dance. Unfortunately for him, neither wealth nor intellect can defy death, the sole master of when and how it will happen!



DAVID TENIERS THE YOUNGER

Antwerp 1610 – Brussels 1690

Landscape with Rat Poison Seller

Canvas: 32,8 x 24,8 cm

Circa 1660

Signed bottom left on the rock *D. TENIERS.f.*

Engraved by Pierre-Étienne Moitte (1722 – 1780)

Considered one of the greatest Flemish painters of the 17th century, David Teniers cast a tender and humorous eye on his times. He particularly enjoyed painting portraits of imposters: quack doctors, amateur apothecaries and small-time alchemists. By highlighting their dubious practices and questionable morals, the painter maintains the facetious tone of an era.

In this painting, Teniers portrays a rat poison seller on the outskirts of a village. The sole painting of this subject in Teniers' work, this canvas was previously only known from an engraving, a print of which is kept at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. With a mischievous look on his face, the seller carries a wooden box containing what is undoubtedly rat poison, although live rats are scurrying around on his pole and in a cage perched above. In the 17th century, the sale of rat poison was officially entrusted to certified apothecaries, who were responsible for dispensing it. However, illegal trade increased the rate of arsenic poisoning. Just like our moustachioed friend, travelling salesmen roamed the towns and countryside selling their secret but corrosive recipes to anyone who would buy them.



ABRAHAM TENIERS

Antwerp 1629 – Antwerp 1670

Singerie with Smokers and Drinkers,

after DAVID TENIERS THE YOUNGER (Antwerp 1610 – Brussels 1690)

Panel: 23,4 x 34,4 cm

Brother of David the Younger, Abraham Teniers was a skilled painter of genre scenes, replacing human figures with cats or monkeys dressed in the fashions of the day. This painting is a copy of a work by his brother in the Prado Museum.

The caricature of humankind par excellence, the monkey has been used by painters for satirical purposes since the Middle Ages. Set in a tavern, seated at tables and engaged in activities considered decadent and immoral, this group of monkeys illustrates human vices. Drinking and smoking were already considered dirty habits that led to addiction and drunkenness. With one encouraging the other, the tavern is the ideal place for excessive consumption. However, this only serves to stupefy the mind, and the substances consumed clog up the body. The monkey on the far left is so drunk that he has become dizzy. And the one on the right is inviting us to drink with him!

The monkeys' postures and outfits attest to the irony of the genre, where monkey business mirrors human vanity. That said, Abraham Teniers favours amusement over severity, treating the subject in a whimsical and colourful manner.

VANITAS VANITATUM ET OMNIA VANITAS

Still lifes and symbolism

Popular in the Netherlands in the 16th century following the Reformation, the still life emerged as a glorification of the world's natural beauty. Sometimes even becoming botanists, painters intensified their precision to ensure that each species was scientifically identifiable. The early 17th century, however, was still marked by religious tradition and images remained largely dictated by Christian precepts. Still lifes had a deeply symbolic dimension. It was not until the turn of the 18th century that painting succeeded in freeing itself from morality, no longer needing a religious or mythological pretext to exist: nature alone sufficed.





GEORG FLEGEL

Olmütz 1565/1566 – Frankfurt 1638

Still Life with Strawberries, Walnuts, Fresh Butter and Glass of Wine

Panel: 23 x 38 cm

A worthy heir to the Flemish tradition, Georg Flegel was Germany's most talented master of still life painting in the early 17th century. This painter was renowned for his abundant compositions, in which the choice of foods and their arrangement were never left to chance. This painting is an apt illustration of the dietary principles based on the theory of the four humours. Aiming to balance diet with regard to the basic qualities attributed to each food, it was recommended that strawberries, which are cold and moist, be paired with walnuts, which are warm and dry. This precept was explained by the Hessian physician Johann Draynder (1500–1560).

Besides this theory, these fruits were a product of the Garden of Eden according to popular imagination at the time. Harvested in spring, strawberries were associated in Christian iconography with the biblical events of the period, namely the Passion and Resurrection. The same is true of walnuts, whose apparent hardness conceals the bittersweet taste of their heart, a traditional characteristic of divine providence. Wine and bread refer to the Eucharist, the transubstantiation of the body and blood of Christ celebrated at mass. Finally, butter is also cited in the Bible as a metaphor for the wealth of divine virtues.



🔊 BALTHASAR VAN DER AST

Middelburg 1593/1594 – Delft 1657

Pair of Still Lifes:

Fruits in a Wanli Porcelain Bowl, Shells on a Table

Flowers in a Wicker Basket, Butterfly and Shells on a Table

Pair of panels: 22,8 x 29,5 cm

Signed and dated *B. vander. ast . 1625* and *B. vander. ast 1625*

In this rare pair of panels, which have remained together and are dated 1625, Balthasar van der Ast immortalises a resplendent image of nature that will not fade over time. He combines the technical perfection of his drawing skills with the poetry of the whole.

Executed with the meticulousness of a miniaturist, every element here is symbolic: the quince, the grapes and the rose refer to the Passion of Christ; while the jasmine and lily of the valley call for humility. The flowers, at the height of their bloom, have been cut. They will fade and lose their radiance, especially as their beauty is the source of desire for insects that will only accelerate their deterioration. The fruit is also starting to spoil, showing signs of fatigue. Nature and its products may be miraculous, but everything is perishable and ephemeral, just like human beings. The fear of time passing is reflected in the discreet presence of a fly, evocative of torment, attracted by the sweet smell of the quince.

As a sign of reassurance, the butterfly, symbol of the soul and metamorphosis, reminds us that the true purpose lies beyond earthly beauties and pleasures, in an eternal and unchanging world.



ABRAHAM GOVAERTS Antwerp 1589 – Antwerp 1626

Vertumnus and Pomona

Copper: 37,5 x 54 cm
Signed et dated A. GOVAERTS 1620

Signed and dated 1620, this copper is one of Abraham Govaerts's masterpieces, if not his crowning achievement. A mythological subject celebrating fertility and abundance recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, this portrayal of Vertumnus and Pomona contains numerous symbolic references.

Set in lush, Eden-like vegetation, the artist presents depicts Pomona, goddess of gardens and fruit, and Vertumnus, god of change and orchards. Vertumnus has the gift of changing his appearance, a power he uses to trick the beautiful goddess and convince her to '*open the gates of her garden*' to him. The god chooses to disguise himself as an elderly woman, a symbol of wisdom, extolling to Pomona the merits of marriage as the sum of every person's qualities and strengths. It is also the guarantee of love and the pledge of good care, fidelity and gratitude that Vertumnus promises. Only under these conditions, and when Vertumnus reveals his true self, does Pomona agree to let him in.

Here, there is no notion of morality, let alone consent: the mythological subject is an ideal pretext for depicting the bounty of nature and the coveted woman. The watering can heralds the denouement of the story through its function and evocative shape. Watching the scene, the monkey is the animal counterfeit of man; he is about to bite into the forbidden fruit, echoing the cherries whose sexual symbolism is linked to the colour red. The door of the temple pavilion in the background is ajar, as if to reveal what is to come.



DENIJS VAN ALSLOOT Mechelen 1570 – Brussels 1628

Wooded Landscape opening onto a Mountain Range

With the participation of the workshop of **JAN BRUEGHEL THE ELDER**
(Brussels 1568 – Antwerp 1625) for the figures

Canvas: 117 x 173 cm

The works of Denijs van Alsloot – an artist who played an important role in the development of the panoramic landscape – can be found in the Louvre, the Prado, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. His profound and elaborate rendering of nature is magnified here by the large format and quality of the pigments, which guarantee the beauty of the work and are indicative of an important commission.

Executed in the first decade of the 17th century, this idealised forest scene of Flemish nature gives the viewer the feeling of being the subject of the painting itself. Although it occupies a prominent place, the picturesque figures animating the composition and depicting everyday peasant life should not be overlooked. In this well-established humanist context, the freedom taken by the new figures of the Renaissance is cause for some comment. While the doctrine places humans and their fulfilment at the centre of considerations, it should not be forgotten that humans remain insignificant in comparison with nature, and therefore with God himself. The peasants pictured are absorbed in their work, leading their herds, transporting supplies, and following the trail: they appear rational and reasonable. The symbolism is not as obvious as before; here, humankind in its simplicity and nature are celebrated. Our rare painting already foreshadows the complete emancipation of morality that was to take place during the Enlightenment.



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