

Nigel Clarke
Brueg[h]el's Brush
25 Miniatures

Peter Sheppard Skærved – Violin & Viola

Nigel Clarke - BRUEG[H]EL'S BRUSH

25 Miniatures for Solo Violin & Solo Viola (2026)

Inspired by Paintings by the Bruegel Family (and Followers)
exhibited at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

Peter Sheppard Skaerved – Violin & Viola*

Book I

1.	WEDDING DANCE IN THE OPEN AIR after Pieter Brueghel the Younger	2:15
2.	ADORATION OF THE MAGI after Pieter Bruegel the Elder	3:50
3.	THE FALL OF ICARUS after Pieter Bruegel the Elder (attributed)	3:32
4.	FALL OF THE REBEL ANGELS after Pieter Bruegel the Elder *	2:59
5.	WINTER LANDSCAPE WITH BIRD TRAP after Pieter Bruegel the Elder	3:38
6.	THE CENSUS AT BETHLEHEM (1) after Pieter Bruegel the Elder*	4:44
7.	FRAGMENT OF A KERMIS: THE PROCESSION after Pieter Brueghel the Younger	1:22
8.	YAWNING MAN after Pieter Bruegel the Elder (attributed)	1:47
9.	THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS after Pieter Brueghel the Younger*	4:48
10.	THE CENSUS AT BETHLEHEM (2) after Pieter Brueghel the Younger	4:37
11.	BATTLE OF CARNIVAL AND LENT after Pieter Brueghel the Younger	3:01

Book II

12. THE GOOD SHEPHERD after Pieter Brueghel the Younger 3:03
13. THE PENITENT MARY MAGDALENE after Jan Brueghel the Elder with figure attributed to Hendrick van Balen 3:43
14. CALVARY after Jan Brueghel the Younger* 3:49
15. THE WINE OF SAINT MARTIN'S DAY KERMIS after Pieter Bruegel the Elder 1:46
16. AENEAS IN HELL after Jan Brueghel the Younger 2:59
17. AENEAS IN THE UNDERWORLD after Jan Brueghel the Younger* 2:46
18. THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI IN THE SNOW - after Pieter Brueghel the Younger* 6:42
19. LANDSCAPE after Jan Brueghel the Elder* 2:09
20. VIRGIN WITH THE PERIWINKLE after Peter Paul Rubens, assisted by Jan Brueghel the Elder 3:56
21. RIVER LANDSCAPE after Jan Brueghel the Elder 2:15
22. STILL LIFE WITH FLOWER CROWN AND TAZZA after Jan Brueghel the Elder 3:13
23. UNDERGROWTH WITH FIGURES after Jan Brueghel the Elder 2:36
24. RETURN OF THE PILGRIMS after Pieter Brueghel the Younger 1:11
25. THE MARRIAGE OF BACCHUS AND ARIADNE after Jan Brueghel the Elder, with figures by Hendrick van Balen 3:08

Total playing time 80:04

Brueg[h]el's Brush was premiered in the Bruegel Room at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in the spring and summer of 2026 alongside music that was composed in Bruegel's lifetime by composers including Ortiz, Bassano, Marini, van Eyke and Dowland. These performances were given by Peter Sheppard Skærved on historic instruments, including an early Brescian violin (originally a three-string instrument) dated between 1560 and c.1570. On page 23, you can see Nigel Clarke holding this violin in the Bruegel Room. Peter also performed works in juxtaposition with the Bruegel paintings on a Girolamo Amati violin dated 1629, a time when Pieter the Elder's surviving son, Pieter the Younger, and grandson, Jan Brueghel the Younger, were carrying on the family legacy.

Nigel Clarke's 'Brueg[h]el's Brush'
a personal view

Peter Sheppard Skærved

Towards the end of 2023, Nigel Clarke and I started talking about Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525-1530 – 1569). Over the past thirty years, our collaboration has been led by our areas of shared interest and travel together. This has resulted in concertante, ensemble and solo works inspired by Milton, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Balkan folk tales, the Gobi Desert, the town of Dover, Edith Cavell … for the first time we were going to work on art.

Brueg[h]el's Brush consists of two books of miniatures for solo violin and viola. These respond to 25 works by the Bruegel family in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium, in Brussels. The 11 movements comprising 'Book One' replicate the sequence of paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his son Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564-1638) hanging in room 68, the most celebrated room in the museum. Indeed, this is the order in which I performed them *in situ* for three concerts in spring 2026. The 14 movements making up book two, reflect the constellation of works scattered across the whole site, also including works by Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678), and collaborations with Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Hendrick van Balen the Elder (1573-1632).

It was our great honour, that *Brueg[h]el's Brush* was embraced by the community, the family of the Royal Museums of Fine Art. They encouraged us to weave the project into the fabric of ideas, inspiration and activities within the museum. Nigel and I are profoundly grateful to all our friends and collaborators there. They have been an inspiration at every step of the way, and the music would not have happened without them.

Nigel begins with the very first picture by the entrance into the 'Bruegel' room at the museum, *Wedding Dance in the Open Air*. Music is mimetic: it imitates things. Nigel

depicts the sound and movement of a joyful village wedding dance. It's a well-watered one too. While the families haggle over the dowery and the trousseau at a table at the back of the picture, cheerfully lusty couples dance to the music of two bagpipe players leaning against a tree on the right. One of them is armed with a short sword, a poniard. T.S. Eliot described joyful dancers just like these in *East Coker*: "Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes, /Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth/Mirth of those long since under earth.'[1]

The Adoration of the Magi is the most mysterious picture here. This is in part, because of the colour is faded; at first sight, it's almost disappearing into the rough canvas on which it is painted. Nigel answers with delicacy, a lyrical flickering. For me this is a reminded that the 'Wise men from the East' were probably devotees of Parthian cult of Zoroaster, for whom fire was the symbol of light and purity. But there's artistic layering too: the roof of the dilapidated stable reflects the shack in Hieronymus Bosch's 'Adoration' Triptych. This painting was in Bruegel's hometown, Antwerp, until 1574, when it was acquired by Philip II of Spain. Armed soldiers lurk to the side of the painting: reminders of the massacre the journey of the Magi precipitates and the dangerous times in which the Bruegels lived.

I knew *The Fall of Icarus* and, I later discovered, the room where it hangs, long before I saw it. This was thanks to W H Auden's poem 'Musee des Beaux Arts', which he wrote on a visit to Brussels in 1938. Standing in the eponymous museum (his title was the French moniker for the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium), I realised that the poem is about this space. Looking around the room, the poet made his observation about tragedy, 'how everything turns away /Quite leisurely from the disaster.'[2]

Bruegel includes the whole cast of rural characters in Ovid's retelling of the story of Daedalus and Icarus, in the *Metamorphoses:* 'Now some fisherman spies them, angling for fish with his flexible rod, or a shepherd, leaning upon his crook, or a plowman, on his plow-handles – spies them and stands stupefied'.[3] Nigel explicitly represents Icarus's frantic attempt to remain aloft on melting pinions, and the screams of his

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1. 'East Coker', from *Four Quartets*, T S Eliot, Faber and Faber London, 1940
2. W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts" from *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson. © 1979 by W. H. Auden.
3. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VII.

'unhappy father, no longer a father'[4]. Unlike Ovid, Bruegel's countryfolk remain aloof, and (as Auden puts it) 'the expensive delicate ship that must have seen /Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, /Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.'[5] There's a sheathed dagger, like the piper's poniard in the wedding dance, by the plough. We are repeatedly reminded that the countryside is only ever one step away from violence.

The *Fall of the Rebel Angels* took Nigel and I back to an earlier collaboration: his concerto, *Black Fire* was based on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which like Bruegel, referenced medieval and Renaissance storytelling of the 'War in Heaven'. Bruegel's fantastic chaos of tumbling demons, Satan-as-Hydra-Cerberus pursued by an anorexic St Michael and righteous angels, satisfied a market for work in the style of Hieronymus Bosch. Bosch, like Bruegel, used the foundations provided by Dante's *Inferno*. Like the *Wedding Dance in the Open Air*, this miniature conjures up the noise and musics of Bruegel's painting. There are trumpets everywhere. Angels play what look like Roman curved *bucinae*. To the lower left, over the most explicit fart in painting, are two rasping, reedy, instruments – a long shawm and a hurdy gurdy. As Dante says of demon in Canto XXI of Inferno: 'elli avea del cul fatto trompetta' (He made a trumpet of his arse)[6].

Winter Landscape with Bird Trap is revolutionary, the only painting in this room whose subject is neither humans nor immortals. For this is the first true landscape painting, the beginning of an extraordinary journey, which leads (for this Brit) through Ruysdael, Claude Lorrain, Constable, Wordsworth, Rousseau and Corot, to the dark pastorals of Vaughan Williams, Wilfred Owen, Paul Nash (on the road to abstraction). Human experience is here – particularly cold and hunger, but no story, no analogy, no personalities. This is the closest an early painting comes to the absolute nature of instrumental music, without words, religion, myth or devotion. Nigel calls on Nature's collaborators for help: this is the first appearance of a flock of birds which flit and twitter around his cycle. Listen carefully, the cold is evoked by a phrase from Vivaldi's *Winter*.

The Census at Bethlehem (1) takes place in an imperial environment. These villagers are paying taxes in in a land not their own. The score reminds me that this second

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4. Loeb, book 1, p. 423
5. W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts" from *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson.
6. Dante Alighieri (*Inferno*, Canto XXI, v. 139)



Clockwise from top:

1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder – *Winter Landscape with Bird Trap*

2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder – *Self-Portrait with buyer*

3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Attrib.) – *Yawning Man*





winter scene shows Bethlehem as a village in Habsburg-ruled Brabant. Hanging over the tavern where the enrolment is taking place are the arms of Charles V or Philip II of (ruler by the time this painting was made), complete with double headed eagle, the Order of the Golden Fleece and a glimpse, of the flower of Imperial Spain – the black-centred Red Carnation. Nigel's music hovers between the subtle representation of cold, and of two tragedies this subject pre-figures; the *Massacre of the Innocents*, and the Crucifixion: a tolling motif is heard on the mournful viola.

In the centre of the room, two small pictures hang together. Performing in front of them, they become a diptych. The first, *Fragment of a Kermis: the Procession* seems to have been cut down from a large painting of a village festival (complete versions by Pieter the Younger survive). A small figure of Saint Cornelius (he holds a horn - 'Cornelius' means 'battle horn) is carried in procession by banner-waving peasants. His shrine in at Denderbelle, East Flanders was a destination of pilgrimage. This Kermis is probably for his Saint's Day, September 16th. The stripe-edged banners being waved match those rolled up in '*Return of the Pilgrims*' in Book Two. Nigel's music is miniature, almost Lilliputian. We can only just hear the march in the distance.

To the modern mind, the next small painting, *Yawning Man* might represent tiredness, or *ennui*. From the late Renaissance point of view, something more judgemental is being essayed, and the science of physiognomy is at work. This is one of the Seven Deadly Sins- 'Sloth' or 'Acedia'. Such spiritual lassitude, apathy, boredom are perilous – our yawner is on the torpid path to hell. This is Nigel at his most mimetic, onomatopoeic even: the music sounds like a yawn looks like and sounds like. It's an opportunity for satirical tautology, which the composer relishes. The yawner pops up in different garbs, throughout the cycle: he's in the very first movement and the very last.

When I first played *The Massacre of the Innocents* in the gallery, it was apparent this is the heart of Book One of *Brueg[h]el's Brush*. Nigel spoke movingly to audiences about facing the challenge of how to respond (how to compose!) to such unimaginable horror. His answer was to look for the quietest sadness in the picture – just off centre. Here a mother sits with her dead baby on her lap, her hands clasped in grief and prayer. Bruegel had been to Rome, and he would have seen the impossibly idealised beauty of Michelangelo's 'Pieta', with the Virgin cradling the dead Christ. This is the reality of infanticide.

The room of eleven paintings, and this first book of eleven pieces, are finely poised between two similar pictures. In both, depictions of *The Census at Bethlehem*, an enrolment for Imperial taxation (be it Roman or Habsburg) takes place. In both a pig is slaughtered, and a population likewise bled dry in the snows of winter (Christmas garlands hang in both pictures). But between the two artists the aesthetic is in flux. Pieter Brueghel the Younger was only four years old when his father died. He somehow picked up his torch and carried the family *imprimatur* into the 17th century. Like him, Nigel uses almost the same material for *The Census at Bethlehem (2),* and tells the same story, but with subtle differences: we are now on the violin, and in the aftermath of the Massacre of the Innocents. There is a new sense of resignation. But most importantly, nature offers comfort: birds from *Winter Landscape with Bird Trap* have come to sing joyfully, just as they are more visible in the leafless trees of Pieter the Younger's painting than his father's.

Battle of Carnival and Lent brings Book One to a close, and *in situ*, full circle in the room. The painting is overwhelming: it is almost too much for me, and I need the composer's clarity to lead me through. Like the picture, Nigel presents a riotous free-for-all, a 'quodlibet', looking back- and for-wards in the cycle: pastoral melody from *Fall of Icarus* appears as fanfares, the *Yawning Man* theme runs amok, great shell bursts from *Fall of the Rebel Angels* shake the very frame of the picture. This whirling 'Dance Reel' (as marked), winds up to a maddened tarantella, with more than a feeling of Nordic 'hardangar' fiddle-playing. Of all the paintings, this is surely the noisiest – there are guitars, flutes and drums, bagpipes, a griddle being scraped with a knife, a 'Rommelpot', a metal shovel being banged, and singing, and dancing and shouting, as hunger and excess depicted in the painting do battle.

The Good Shepherd was the first miniature Nigel wrote when we began work on the project, and the first to be played in public, in Zagreb in 2025. The image churchgoers normally associated with this description of Jesus is milksop peaceful. The Bruegels were cognisant of the perils of shepherding, just as Jesus was clear about the danger depicted here: 'the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.'[7] Nigel reaches out to Beethoven, Vivaldi and Prokofiev to illuminate his story. The pastoral idyll of the *Fall of Icarus* is recalled, with a high-lying rendering of the

7. John 10 11-13, King James Bible.

theme of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. Under this the 'la caccia' (hunt) from Vivaldi's Autumn is plucked. Both are menaced by the wolf from *Peter and Wolf*, as the deadly conflict begins.

The *Penitent Mary Magdalene* seems to be a collaboration with Hendrick van Balen the Elder. The subject and presentation, echo an earlier work by Pieter Bruegel the Elder: 'Magdalena Poenitens' survives in engraving by Joannes & Lucas van Doetecum. In this, the prayerful, Magdalene meditates on a crucifix and a skull, in rustic enclosure/cave.

Both the music and painting hint at the sinful (perhaps joyful) earlier life of which Mary Magdalene repents. There are libidinous rabbits, and in the music, bracketed memories are marked 'dancing'. The venom of sin is drawn out by beautiful blue cornflowers, symbols of purity: in classical myth the centaur Chiron used this flower to staunch his wounds. Musical absolution comes to Mary with mysterious harmonics, marked 'with purity'.

In his poem W.H. Auden wrote: 'About suffering they were never wrong, /The Old Masters: how well they understood/Its human position'[8]. This is explicit in Jan Brueghel the Younger's *Calvary*. It is a day of rainstorm and sunburst: In the middle distance the Crucifixion is illuminated, stranded, amid a vast crowd, fighting and arguing, indifferent and cruel. Far away, there are Bosch-like gibbets and corpses, and in the foreground human and animal bones, identifying 'Golgotha/Place of the Skull'. At the heart of the composition, a heartbroken Virgin is comforted by Mary Magdalene and beardless St John, the 'disciple that Jesus Loved'. Nigel returns to the viola, as the more compassionate instrument. There are great yawps of outrage at such cruelty, but an exquisite melody, marked 'Melancholia' offers some kind of absolution: (perhaps a hint of Bach - 'Comfort ye/Ebarme Dich'). Meanwhile Auden notes: 'the dogs go on with their doggy life', playing, gnawing at bones.

Nigel's music, and Brueghel's painting for *The Wine of St Martins Day Kermis* celebrate the debauchery this erstwhile 'Old Hallowe'en' (November 11th) offered. The second week of November marked the end of the harvest season, and a chance to sample the new wine. On the the right hand of the painting Saint Martin making his rather curmudgeonly offer of half of his robe, to a beggar. In the centre a seething mass of villagers crowd around a vast tun of wine, with mugs, cups and bowls, clearly drinking

8. W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts" from *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson.





1. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder – *The Massacre of the Innocents*

2. Pieter Brueghel the Younger – *Wedding Dance in the Open Air*

themselves to oblivion. The music is full of revelry, lurching, yahoo-ing, and the inevitable vomit (you can hear the *Yawning Man* is at the revels!).

Two similar paintings by Jan Breughel the Younger, *Aneas in Hell* and *Aeneas in the Underworld* depict Virgil's hero's journey, in the Aeneid[9]. In the first, Aeneas is led by the Cumean Sibyl under 'a huge, dark elm' (ulmus opaca, ingens), and surrounded by the monsters Virgil describes. Jan reaches back to his grandfather, Pieter the Elder, as he reaches back to Hieronymus Bosch: the demons and tortured souls recall the tumbling figures of *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1490), which reach for Bosch's depiction of the horrors of *Hell in The Garden of Earthly Delights*. These layered collaborations and typologies inspire our composer.

Nigel's first 'Aeneas' miniature evokes the mysterious descent, the rustle of the 'Golden Bough' Aeneas cut from the grove of Diana Nemorensis to gain admission to Hell. He asks for intricate filigree extended techniques: delicate tremolos recall Berlioz's 'idée fixe' from the *Symphonie Fantastique*, plus three-part chords, while simultaneous left-hand pizzicato plays a countermelody behind the fingers. Then the music explodes into the horrors of Hades. The second miniature continues to descend from violin to viola, and the screams of the damned are heard, as they depart. There is one identifiable shade in both paintings – Dido, wearing a yellow dress. This is the first time that Aneas learns her fate after abandoning her in Carthage. Virgile writes; 'dulcique adfatus amore est' (he spoke to her tenderly and lovingly)[10]. And then she is led away with the other suicides – as the end of Nigel's second piece is whisked off to the horizon.

Nigel's setting and Pieter Brueghel the Younger's depiction of the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Snow recall Lancelot Andrewes's line, which T.S. Eliot used to begin 'The Journey of the Magi': 'A cold coming we had of it, /Just the worst time of the year /For a journey, and such a long journey.' This encapsulates much of what Nigel evokes, and requests - 'sofferenza' (suffering). Nigel notes the child joyfully skating in a cow's jawbone; marked 'con innocenza' in the score. But there is a cartload of armoured soldiers just visible, under crenelated castle walls: the Wise Men's angel-advised decision not to bring news of the Messiah to Herod, Roman client-king of Masada, results in the murder of all the children. The sorrowing chorales of *Massacre of the Innocents* now morph into tortured

9. Virgil, *Aeneid* (Book 6, lines 282–283).
10. Virgil, *Aeneid* (Book 6, line 455).

glacial dissonances, and any memory of playing children evaporates. It is a story told too many times in recent history.

Landscape itself, offers respite, rural balm. The bow set aside, the viola becomes a lute, a harp, or even a plucked viola da gamba, reflecting on the painting's celebration of the beauty, of the simple life in the accompanying painting on copper. A river flows towards us, graced with Yellow Iris (Iris pseudacorus) or 'Water Flag'. This is the historic symbol of the city and region of Brussel, celebrated on 'Iris Day', May 8th. A man and woman go about their daily chores by the water: she's washing laundry, he's fishing. The clean sheets are carried over a bridge to bleach on the tenter-grounds of the village. A Dog plays happily, and a cock crows on the roof next to a tavern. It's a beautiful May morning and all is well in the peaceable Kingdom of Brabant.

Collaboration is vital to Clarke's work as a composer. He finds a counterpoint between his long-term partnerships with performers and the over layering work amongst the Bruegel family, and later, between Jan Brueghel and Rubens in Antwerp. When I was spending a lot of time in Den Haag in 1989-1990, I fell in love with their 'The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man' at the Mauritshuis. This *Virgin with the Periwinkle* feels as if it was set in their Garden of Eden. The beauty of the work that Rubens and Jan Brueghel did together has always moved me deeply.

Here are two kinds of flowers for the Virgin Mary: White and pink roses, symbolise her identity as the 'Mystic Rose'. In Bruegel's time this is linked with the hymn 'Es ist ein Ros entsprungen'. The five-petalled Blue Periwinkle (Vinca Major) was planted in 'Mary Gardens' as a meditation on the Virgin's purity and grace. Nigel's music points out the tragedy here. We meditated on a mother's pain in the *Massacre of the Innocents*. The descending dissonances from that movement return: yet again, the Christ Child is on his mother's lap, morphing into another 'Pietà'.

Looking at Jan Brueghel the Elder's 'River Landscape', Nigel points out his subtle depiction of reflections. The great water and maritime painters of the ensuing centuries did not give so much attention to this: it took Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia the early 1870s to systemise what we see – the challenge of photography made reality impossible to ignore. Jan the Elder and Nigel both toy with the 'not-quite-the-sameness' of the watery 'upside-down-world'. His rising octatonic rills are offset by cascades of C# minor arpeggios. Talking with Andrezj Panufnik about his *3rd String Quartet* in 1990,

he noted, that to hear or see a reflection, the brain needed it to be just 'not-quite-the-same'. Stand in front of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* at the Courtauld Gallery, and you will see the same game that Nigel and Jan Brueghel are playing. Refraction, displacement, offset – be it phrase or pattern.

Between two landscapes, Nigel offers the exact opposite - *Still Life with Flower Garland and Tazza*. Here is fascinating contrast, between the transient beauty of nature and the apparently solid human creation of precious objects: jewellery, draped over an open box, filled with gold coins. Jan Breughel painted this subject, using the same ornamental stemmed dish, the 'tazza' and the same jewellery box, a number of times. The flowers are very much summer blooms, and in the centre of the draped garland is a black-centred red carnation: the flower which Philip II confirmed as the floral symbol of Spain. When he married Elisabeth de Valois, daughter of Catherine de Medici in 1559, a violin was sent with her, made by Andrea Amati (father of the maker of the instrument heard on this recording). It was decorated with Philip's escutcheon, bordered with the same red-black carnations.

Roughly at the same time that this painting was made, Jan Brueghel's friend and collaborator, Peter Paul Rubens, made a family portrait of Jan with his children, Pieter and Elisabeth, and his wife Catharina. Young Pieter points to the bracelet that she is wearing, the same one in the jewellery box in Jan's still life.

Undergrowth with Figures is the last landscape in the cycle. Nigel pointed out a deliberate obscurity in the painting, something hidden. What appears to be undergrowth in a glade of massive Oak trees, is actually dozens of figures: a cluster of mounted soldiers with foliage in their helmets, an early representation of a Native American, a character in a Chinese hat, and, in the distance there's a religious procession, leading oxen to sacrifice. But the people are not the story – rather they fade into, are the landscape. Two centuries later Turner would bring this conceit, of gatherings of humans morphing into fog or foliage, to its apogee. What Brueghel has done, and Nigel evokes so delicately is to draw a golden chain between that, and his father's *Landscape with Bird Trap*.

In his tiny Kermis fragment (No. 7), Nigel conjured up the in-the-distance impression of pilgrims to St Cornelius shrine, waving their red-and-white festival banners. The St Martin's Day festivities, eight miniatures (two months later), offered the ribald reality







Clockwise from top:

1. Jan Brueghel the Elder – *The Good Shepherd*

2. Jan Brueghel the Elder – *Still Life with Flower Crown and Tazza*

3. Jan Brueghel the Younger – *Aeneas in Hell*

of such religious get-togethers! *Return of the Pilgrims* seems to show the devotees of St Cornelius on the road home, their banners rolled up and stowed. Most of them are dancing home, to the playing of the (dagger-wearing) bagpiper from *Wedding Dance in the Open Air*. In the background there are ballgames, a church festival and a round dance in the village square. It is (as Nigel instructs the player) 'buccolico'.

Nigel finishes his cycle with with the unashamedly profane *The Marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne* by Jan Brueghel the Elder (with Hendrick van Balen). This shows the nuptials of Ariadne (abandoned on Naxos by perfidious Theseus). It is a riot of miniature imagery. Breughel clearly knew of Titian's celebrated painting of the subject, hanging in the Palazzo d'Este, Ferrara, when his father visited Italy (It is now in the National Gallery, London). Breughel's painting is loosely based on it, with Ariadne and the sea/sky to the left, Bacchus and the forest to the right. Breughel casts Titian's restraint to the winds, with a bacchanale of contradictions: Ariadne emerges from the sea with Tritons trumpeting. A weed-covered river-god rises from the water at the bottom of the picture. Up on the right, Titian's gorgeous Bacchus has been replaced by a dissipated, age-ing *putto* … is it possible that there is a hint of the punishment of Theseus with his black sails on the horizon? Even the viewer feels too drunk to tell.

Nigel evokes all this with a whirl of violinist-ic carousing, back to the peasant wedding where we began. Listen out for the yawning man, the garlands of flowers, Icarus falling into the ocean and more. These riotous revels, bring us and the Bruegels, back home.

The extended article can be viewed online by scanning the QR code or visiting peter-sheppard-skaerved.com

Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his sons at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

Dr Sabine van Sprang

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525/30-1569) married and lived for about six or seven years not far from the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, in the Brussels parish of Notre-Dame de la Chapelle, where he also died. Although the museum did not inherit a historical collection, it is no coincidence that it now houses the world's second-largest group of works by the master: three signed paintings, one drawing, *Prudence*, and two paintings attributed to him. This is an all the more precious treasure given that there are only around 40 of Bruegel's paintings remaining worldwide. The Museums' exceptional collection is remarkable not only for its size, but also for the way it encompasses the full complexity of the Bruegelian universe: from the hellish scenes inherited from Bosch (with whom Bruegel was compared during his lifetime) to biblical stories transposed into a rural setting of deceptive realism, via mythology and villages buried beneath snow where time seems suspended, held captive by ice and frost.

Writers were not mistaken; first W. H. Auden, of course, whose verses on indifference in the face of tragedy in *The Fall of Icarus* (now attributed to Bruegel[1][1]) resonate with extraordinary relevance today[2]. Then, Marguerite Yourcenar, Belgian by origin, whose incisive prose describes *The Census at Bethlehem* and "its docile peasants scattered across the snow", or *The Fall of Icarus*, "falling from the sky while a ploughman, indifferent to the very first air crash, continues sowing"[3]. The human condition, human foibles, humour, the peasant world, but also the eternal struggle between good and evil, embodied by these "evil angels with subhuman faces" (Yourcenar), and the beauty of landscapes, pristine snow and the frozen pond where children skate "at the edge of the wood" (Auden)[4], as an escape from life's hardships (John Burnside)[5]. The Brueghels in the Brussels museum tell us of

1. The invention is undoubtedly Bruegelian, but the execution raises questions.
2. W. H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (1938).
3. See Sandrine Vézilier-Dussart, "Marguerite Yourcenar et la peinture flamande : un puzzle iconographique", in A. Halley and S. Vézilier-Dussart (eds.), *Marguerite Yourcenar et la peinture flamande,* exhibition catalogue, Cassel, Musée Départemental de Flandre, 2012–2013, p. 43.
4. "Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood"; W. H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts* (1938)
5. "The day is bright and this is their escape from hardship", J. Burnside, *Pieter Bruegel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap 1565,* from *Black Cat Bone* (2011)

a world that swings back and forth between the old and the new, faith and knowledge, extreme weather conditions, war and peace. Medieval armour and weapons, native American feathers, precious objects, wild beasts, exotic fruit and animals from distant lands thus form the hybrid, bewildering bodies of the demons that mingle with the monster of the Apocalypse. All these creatures are fought by a chivalrous Saint Michael and his angels in *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562), which was almost certainly painted for a knowledgeable collector. Following the clamour of this eternal battle comes, chronologically speaking, the silence of *Winter Landscape with Bird Trap* (1565). This painting, which was both intimate and revolutionary for its time, marks a break with convention due to its naturalistic and secular approach. It was to become Bruegel's most frequently copied work, with more than 130 known versions to date, mainly produced in the studio of his eldest son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger. Rather than depicting the dramatic consequences of the harsh winter of 1565 for the population, Bruegel masterfully evokes here the misty atmosphere of the freezing cold, the opacity of the snow, the frosted reflections on the ice and the sombre tones of the carefully rendered vegetation. But danger lurks nearby, both for the birds gathering round a trap that could slam shut at any moment, and for the skaters whose carefree attitude seems to defy the fragility of the ice. "In all his works, what is conveyed always goes beyond what is represented," wrote his friend, the cartographer Abraham Ortelius, of Bruegel[6]. An air of menace is almost never absent, as in *The Census at Bethlehem*, painted the following year (1566), in which a snow-covered Brabant village this time serves as the setting for a biblical scene. In the centre of the village stands a tavern, as improbable as it is symbolic, housed in a dead tree, the symbol of perdition. Recent research has revealed that the painting was commissioned by a wealthy Antwerp businessman, whose farm in the painting stands beside the cursed tree... And what of Icarus, of whom only a hand and legs floundering in the water remind us of his tragic fate? Set against the indifference of the onlookers is the beauty of an unchanging landscape with an ambiguous geography, yet all the more evocative for it. Even in *Adoration of the Magi*, painted in tempera on fine linen, armed soldiers in the foreground gaze menacingly at the scene, as if already heralding Herod's impending judgement against the Child. Bruegel's painting reveals itself scene by scene to those who take the time to look and raises more questions than it answers.

In a world undergoing profound change, it is therefore unsurprising that Bruegel's works quickly attracted both bourgeois patrons and princes (particularly the Habsburgs). Unable to acquire a painting by the Master, many turned after his death to the workshop of his

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6. "In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur" this is a phrase borrowed from Pliny the Elder; *Album amicorum,* c. 1574, Pemroke College Library, Cambridge

eldest son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638), who specialised in copying his father's compositions. Thus the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium came to hold a second version of *The Census at Bethlehem* (1610), as well as a very fine copy of *Battle of Carnival and Lent,* which entered the collection at the very end of the 20th century.[7] The latter bears witness to Bruegel's keen powers of observation as well as his humour, sometimes biting, in this parody of a medieval tournament in which the emaciated figure of Lent, seated on a stiff and uncomfortable chair, confronts the pot-bellied figure of Carnival, perched on a barrel like a drunken Bacchus. Each is accompanied by a procession of small scenes depicting customs associated with each period. The same spirit animates *The Wine of Saint Martin's Day Kermis,* possibly attributable to Pieter the Younger's workshop and which faithfully reproduces Bruegel the Elder's tempera on canvas. The latter was rediscovered around fifteen years ago and is now held at the Prado Museum in Madrid. While in one corner of the painting, the saint offers his cloak to two disabled men, a gathering of peasants, vagrants and beggars crowd chaotically around a barrel placed at the centre of the composition, hoping to collect some of the wine. Quenching another's thirst is an act of charity, but it is clear that the crowd here is driven by greed and gluttony. The copyist was also careful to faithfully reproduce their eager expressions – expressive faces being one of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's trademarks. This is why numerous small stand-alone paintings of "mugs" in the paternal style are found under his son's name, such as the *Yawning Man,* whose expression is so convincing that one cannot help but imitate it. Equally humorous, but in a more bawdy vein (note the bagpipes, the dancer's codpiece on the right, or the hand of another dancer resting on his partner's bottom!), *Wedding Dance in the Open Air* (1607) is one of the many versions produced after a work by the father in Pieter the Younger's workshop, much to the delight of an audience seeking entertainment. The contrast could not be more striking with *The Massacre of the Innocents*, whose numerous copies and variants produced by Pieter the Younger, may seem surprising in view of the cruelty of the subject matter. Yet this overlooks the fact that "affects" occupied a central place in the artistic theory of the period. Thus, Karel van Mander, in his famous *Schilder-boeck* (1604), emphasises that in the original version – which he had been able to admire in the imperial collection in Prague – Bruegel the Elder had succeeded in expressing with moving accuracy a mother's distress in the presence of the heralding army.

While Pieter the Younger devoted his entire life to reproducing his father's compositions as faithfully as possible, his younger brother Jan (1568–1625) preferred to take a different path: that of creative emulation. Continuing the admirable naturalistic path carved out by

7. The original, dated 1559, is kept at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Bruegel the Elder, he devoted himself to rustic genre scenes and "infernal" paintings, still life and landscapes, particularly flower painting. These are most often small paintings with vivid colours, striking for their virtuosity and almost miniature-like execution. His compositions met with immense success not only among bourgeois but also aristocratic patrons, even as far away as Italy, where he stayed at the beginning of his career, as his father had once done. The quality of his painting earned him work for both the Brussels court and the opportunity to see his son, Jan the Younger, in turn take up the profession of copying his compositions. *Still Life with Flower Crown and Tazza* (1618) illustrates the refinement of Jan the Elder's painting particularly well: the objects and flowers, with luminous enamel-like colours, stand out against a dark background with remarkable precision. The spring and summer flowers in the garland can readily be identified as carnations, roses, anemones, periwinkles, ... as well as a few tulips and marigolds, that had been recently introduced into the Netherlands. His virtuosity, which was undoubtedly one of the principal attractions of his painting for his patrons, still allows for a symbolic dimension: the long gold hairpin ending in a pearl was an ornament worn by the bride on her wedding day. It is therefore to this happy event – marriage – that the painting alludes. Jan Brueghel the Elder's fame and expertise led him to collaborate with several of his contemporaries, foremost among them Peter Paul Rubens, who was also a court painter to the archdukes. Together they produced around twenty-five paintings according to a division of labour that became emblematic: Rubens painted figures, while Jan Brueghel the Elder was responsible for landscapes, flora and fauna, and objects. This complementarity is perfectly illustrated in *Virgin with the Periwinkle*, where the extreme delicacy of the roses, achieved through the superimposition of thin layers of opaque paint, echoes the gentle features of the young Virgin, who proudly and tenderly presents the Christ Child to us.

Great masters tend to hold each other in high regard. Rubens had a profound admiration for Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and by the end of his life owned several of Bruegel's works, including *The Death of the Virgin* (c. 1564, National Trust, Upton House, Banbury) and a *Flight into Egypt* (perhaps the one painted in 1563 and now held at the Courtauld Gallery in London). His esteem for Bruegel had already found expression as early as 1613-1615 when, at the request of his friend Jan Brueghel the Elder, he painted *Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), destined to adorn Pieter the Elder's epitaph in the Notre-Dame de la Chapelle church in Brussels.

Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien et ses fils aux Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique

Dr Sabine van Sprang

Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien (1525/30-1569) se maria et vécut pendant quelque six à sept ans non loin des Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, dans la paroisse bruxelloise de Notre-Dame de la Chapelle, où il mourut en 1569. Bien que le musée n'ait pas hérité d'une collection historique, ce n'est donc pas un hasard s'il abrite aujourd'hui le deuxième ensemble mondial d'œuvres de la main du maître : trois tableaux signés, un dessin, *La Prudence*, et deux toiles qui lui sont attribuées. Un trésor d'autant plus précieux que l'on ne recense qu'une petite quarantaine de peintures de Bruegel à travers le monde. Cet ensemble exceptionnel ne se distingue pas seulement par son ampleur, mais aussi par la manière dont il embrasse toute la complexité de l'univers bruegélien : de la scène infernale héritée de Bosch (auquel Bruegel fut comparé de son vivant) à l'épisode biblique transposé dans un cadre rural d'un réalisme trompeur, en passant par le mythe et le village enseveli sous la neige, où le temps semble suspendu, prisonnier de la glace et du gel.

Les écrivains ne s'y sont pas trompés. W. H. Auden, bien sûr, dont les vers sur l'indifférence face au drame dans *La Chute d'Icare* (attribuée aujourd'hui à Bruegel[1]) résonnent avec une étrange actualité[2]. Ou encore Marguerite Yourcenar, Belge d'origine, dont la plume acérée décrit *Le Dénombrement de Bethléem* et « ses manants dociles éparpillés sur la neige », ou *La Chute d'Icare*, « tombant du ciel pendant qu'un rustre, que ce premier accident d'avion n'intéresse pas, continue ses semailles »[3]. Condition humaine, travers, humour, monde paysan, mais aussi combat éternel entre le bien et le mal, incarné par ces « mauvais anges aux gueules subhumaines » (Yourcenar), et beauté des paysages, de la neige immaculée, de l'étang gelé où des enfants glissent « à l'orée du bois » (Auden)[4] , comme une échappatoire

1. L'invention est sans aucun doute bruegélienne, mais l'exécution pose question.
2. W. H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (1938).
3. Voir Sandrine Vézilier-Dussart, « Marguerite Yourcenar et la peinture flamande : un puzzle iconographique », in A. Halley et S. Vézilier-Dussart (éd.), *Marguerite Yourcenar et la peinture flamande,* cat. exp., Cassel, musée départemental de Flandre, 2012-2013, p. 43.
4. « Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood"; W. H. Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts* (1938)

aux difficultés de la vie (John Burnside)[5]. Les Bruegel du musée de Bruxelles nous parlent d'un monde en bascule entre ancien et nouveau, foi et savoirs, extrêmes climatiques, guerre et paix. Armures et armes médiévales, plumes d'Amérique, objets précieux, bêtes sauvages, fruits exotiques et faune lointaine composent ainsi les corps hybrides et déconcertants des démons qui s'entremêlent au monstre de l'Apocalypse, tous combattus par un saint Michel archaïque et ses anges dans *Le Chute des anges rebelles* (1562), peint très certainement pour un collectionneur érudit. Au tumulte de ce combat éternel succède, dans le temps, le silence du *Paysage d'hiver avec patineurs et trappe aux oiseau* (1565). Ce tableau, à la fois intimiste et révolutionnaire pour son époque, marque une rupture par son approche naturaliste et profane. Il deviendra l'œuvre la plus copiée de Bruegel, avec plus de cent trente versions recensées à ce jour, principalement réalisées dans l'atelier de son fils aîné, Pierre le Jeune. Plutôt que de dépeindre les conséquences dramatiques de l'hiver rigoureux de 1565 pour la population, Bruegel y capture de façon magistrale l'atmosphère brumeuse du givre, l'opacité de la neige, les reflets givrés de la glace, les tons sombres d'une végétation savamment disposée. Mais le danger rôde : il guette les oiseaux entourant une trappe sur le point de se refermer, tout comme les patineurs dont l'insouciance semble défier la fragilité de la glace. « Dans toutes ses œuvres, ce qui est transmis dépasse toujours ce qui est représenté » écrivit son ami, le cartographe Abraham Ortelius, à propos de Bruegel[6]. L'avertissement y manque rarement à l'appel, comme dans le *Dénombrement de Bethléem*, peint l'année suivante (1566), où un village brabançon enneigé sert cette fois de décor à l'épisode biblique. Au cœur de la bourgade, une taverne aussi improbable que symbolique s'est nichée dans un arbre mort, emblème de perdition. De récentes recherches ont révélé que l'œuvre était destinée à un riche entrepreneur anversois, dont l'une des fermes jouxte dans le tableau l'arbre maudit… Et que dire de cet Icare, dont seules une main et les jambes agitées dans l'eau nous renvoient à son destin tragique ? A l'indifférence des témoins répond la beauté d'un paysage immuable, à la géographie incertaine, mais ô combien évocatrice. Même dans l'*Adoration des mages,* peinte à la détrempe sur une fine toile de lin, des soldats armés, postés au premier plan, observent la scène avec une présence menaçante, annonçant la sentence à venir d'Hérode contre l'Enfant. La peinture de Bruegel se dévoile, scène après scène, à ceux qui prennent le temps de la regarder, et questionne plus qu'elle ne proclame.

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5. "The day is bright and this is their escape from hardship", J. Burnside, *Pieter Bruegel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap 1565,* from *Black Cat Bone* (2011)
6. "In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur " (In all his works more is always imparted than is depicted); il s'agit d'une formule empruntée à Pline l'Ancien ; *Album amicorum,* c. 1574, Pemroke College Library, Cambridge

Dans un monde en pleine mutation, il n'est donc pas étonnant que les œuvres de Bruegel aient vite séduits les bourgeois comme les princes (en particulier Habsbourg). Faute de pouvoir acquérir un tableau du maître, beaucoup se tournèrent après sa mort vers l'atelier de son fils aîné, Pierre Brueghel le Jeune (1564-1638), qui s'était spécialisé dans la copie des compositions paternelles. C'est ainsi que les Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique possèdent une deuxième version du *Dénombrement de Bethléem* (1610) ainsi qu'une très belle copie du *Combat de Carnaval et Carême,* entrée dans les collections à la toute fin du XXe siècle[7]. Cette dernière témoigne du sens aigu de l'observation de Bruegel mais aussi de son humour, parfois mordant, dans cette parodie de tournoi médiéval où s'affrontent la silhouette famélique de Carême, assise sur une chaise droite et inconfortable, et le bedonnant Mardi gras, juché sur un tonneau à la manière d'un Bacchus ivre. Chacun est accompagné d'un cortège de petites scènes représentant autant de coutumes qui leur sont propres. Un même esprit anime *Le Vin de la saint Martin,* dont l'attribution à l'atelier de Pierre le Jeune reste incertaine, mais qui reproduit avec fidélité la détrempe sur toile de Bruegel l'Ancien, redécouverte il y a une quinzaine d'années et aujourd'hui conservée au musée du Prado à Madrid. Alors que, dans un coin du tableau, le saint tend son manteau à deux estropiés, paysans, indigents et mendiants se pressent en désordre autour d'un tonneau placé au centre de la composition, dans l'espoir de recueillir un peu du vin. Si étancher la soif d'autrui relève de la charité, il est clair que la foule succombe ici à la cupidité et à la gloutonnerie. Le copiste a d'ailleurs veillé à reproduire scrupuleusement leurs mines avides – les visages expressifs étant l'une des marques de fabrique de Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien. C'est pourquoi l'on retrouve sous le nom de son fils de nombreux petits tableaux indépendants de « trognes » dans le style paternel, comme ce *Bâilleur,* dont la mimique est si convaincante que l'on ne peut s'empêcher de l'imiter… Tout aussi humoristique, mais dans un registre plus grivois (notez la cornemuse, la braguette du danseur à droite ou encore la main d'un autre danseur posée sur les fesses de sa partenaire !), *La Danse de noces en plein air* (1607) compte parmi les nombreuses versions exécutées d'après une œuvre du père dans l'atelier de Pierre le Jeune, pour le plus grand plaisir d'un public en quête de divertissement. Le contraste est saisissant avec le *Massacre des Innocents,* dont le nombre de copies et de variantes réalisées par Pierre le Jeune peut surprendre au regard de la cruauté du sujet. Mais c'est oublier que les « affects » occupaient une place centrale dans la théorie artistique de l'époque. Ainsi, Karel van Mander, dans son célèbre *Schilderboeck* (1604), souligne que dans la version originale - qu'il avait pu admirer dans la collection impériale à Prague - Bruegel l'Ancien était parvenu à exprimer avec une justesse bouleversante la détresse d'une mère face au héraut.

7. L'original, daté 1559, est conservé au Kunsthistorisches Museum de Vienne.

Tandis que Pierre le Jeune s'attacha toute sa vie à reproduire le plus fidèlement possible les compositions de son père, son frère cadet Jan (1568-1625) préféra emprunter un chemin différent : celui de l'émulation créatrice. Poursuivant l'admirable sillon naturaliste creusé par Bruegel l'Ancien, il se consacra aux scènes de genre rustiques et aux tableaux « infernaux », au paysage et à la nature morte, en particulier la peinture de fleurs. Il s'agit le plus souvent de tableaux de petites tailles aux couleurs chatoyantes, qui frappent par la virtuosité et l'approche quasi-miniaturiste de l'exécution. Ses compositions rencontrèrent un immense succès non seulement auprès d'une clientèle bourgeoise mais aussi aristocratique, et ce jusqu'en Italie où il séjourna au début de sa carrière, à l'instar de son père jadis. La qualité de sa peinture lui valut de travailler au service et de la cour de Bruxelles et de voir son fils, Jan le Jeune, embrasser à son tour le métier de copiste de ses compositions. La *Nature morte avec guirlande de fleurs et coupe* (1618) illustre bien le raffinement de la peinture de Jan l'Ancien : les objets et les fleurs, aux coloris lumineux évoquant l'émail, se détachent sur un fond sombre avec une remarquable précision. On reconnaît ainsi aisément dans la couronne de fleurs printanières et estivales des œillets, des roses, des anémones, des pervenches, … ainsi que quelques tulipes et tagètes, récemment introduites aux Pays-Bas. Cette virtuosité, qui constituait sans doute l'un des principaux attraits de sa peinture auprès de sa clientèle, n'exclut pas pour autant une dimension symbolique : la longue épingle à cheveux en or terminée d'une perle était un ornement porté par la mariée le jour de ses noces. C'est donc à cet événement heureux – le mariage – que la peinture fait ici allusion. La renommée et le savoir-faire de Jan Brueghel l'Ancien lui valurent de collaborer avec plusieurs de ses contemporains, au premier rang desquels Pierre-Paul Rubens, lui aussi peintre de cour des archiducs. Ensemble, ils réalisèrent plus d'une vingtaine de tableaux selon une répartition des tâches devenue emblématique : Rubens peignait les figures, tandis que Jan Brueghel l'Ancien se chargeait des paysages, de la flore et de la faune ainsi que des objets. Cette complémentarité s'illustre parfaitement dans *La Vierge à la pervenche*, où l'extrême délicatesse des roses, obtenue par la superposition de fines couches de peinture opaque, fait écho à la douceur des traits de la jeune Vierge, qui nous présente avec fierté et tendresse l'Enfant Jésus.

Les grands maîtres se reconnaissent entre eux. Rubens vouait une profonde admiration à Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien, dont il possédait à la fin de sa vie plusieurs œuvres parmi lesquelles *La Mort de la Vierge* (vers 1564, National Trust, Upton House, Banbury) et une *Fuite en Égypte* (peut-être celle peinte en 1563 et aujourd'hui conservée à la Courtauld Gallery à Londres). Une estime qu'il avait exprimée dès 1613-1615 lorsqu'à la demande de son ami Jan Brueghel l'Ancien, il exécuta *Le Christ donnant les clés à saint Pierre* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), destiné à orner l'épitaphe de Pieter Bruegel dans l'église Notre-Dame de la Chapelle à Bruxelles.

Pieter Bruegel de Oude en zonen in de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België

Dr Sabine van Sprang

Na zijn huwelijk woonde Pieter Bruegel de Oude (1525/30-1569) zo'n zes à zeven jaar in de buurt van de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, in de Brusselse parochie Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ter Kapelle, waar hij in 1569 stierf. Hoewel het museum geen historische collectie heeft geërfd, is het dus geen toeval dat het vandaag de op één na grootste verzameling werken ter wereld van de meester herbergt: drie gesigneerde schilderijen, één tekening (*De Voorzichtigheid*) en twee doeken die aan hem worden toegeschreven. Dit is een kostbaar bezit, zeker omdat er wereldwijd maar zo'n kleine veertig schilderijen van Bruegel bekend zijn. Deze uitzonderlijke collectie valt niet alleen op door haar omvang, maar ook door de manier waarop ze de volle complexiteit van Bruegels wereld omvat: van de helse taferelen die hij ontleende aan Bosch, met wie Bruegel tijdens zijn leven al werd vergeleken, tot bijbelse verhalen die hij verplaatste naar een landelijk decor met een bedrieglijk realistische uitstraling. Ook de mythologische scènes en het met sneeuw bedekte dorp maken deel uit van die wereld, gevangen in ijs en vorst, waarin de tijd lijkt stil te staan.

De schrijvers hebben dat maar al te goed begrepen. Er is natuurlijk W. H. Auden, wiens verzen over de onverschilligheid tegenover het drama in *De val van Icarus* (vandaag aan Bruegel toegeschreven[1]) nog steeds vreemd actueel klinken.[2] Of nog de van oorsprong Belgische Marguerite Yourcenar, die met haar vlijmscherpe pen *De volkstelling te Betlehem* beschrijft en "zijn volgzame boeren, versnipperd over de sneeuw". Of *De val van Icarus*: "die uit de lucht komt gevallen terwijl een simpele boer, die niets geeft om dit eerste vliegtuigongeluk, gewoon doorgaat met zaaien."[3] Het menselijk bestaan, menselijke tekortkomingen, humor en het boerenleven, maar ook de eeuwige strijd tussen goed en kwaad, belichaamd door die "slechte engelen met ondermenselijke tronies" (Yourcenar), staan naast de schoonheid van de landschappen: de ongerepte sneeuw en de bevroren

1. Het ontwerp is zonder twijfel Bruegeliaans, maar de uitvoering roept vragen op.
2. W. H. Auden, *Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (1938).
3. Zie Sandrine Vézilier-Dussart, "Marguerite Yourcenar et la peinture flamande: un puzzle iconographique", in A. Halley et S. Vézilier-Dussart (eds.), *Marguerite Yourcenar et la peinture flamande,* cat. exp., Cassel, musée départemental de Flandre, 2012-2013, p. 43.

vijver, waar kinderen glijden “aan de rand van het bos” (Auden)[4], om even te ontsnappen aan hun harde bestaan (John Burnside)[5]. De Bruegels in het Brusselse museum vertellen ons over een wereld die op een keerpunt staat, tussen oud en nieuw, geloof en kennis, extreme weersomstandigheden, oorlog en vrede. Middeleeuwse harnassen en wapens, Amerikaanse veren, kostbare voorwerpen, wilde beesten, exotisch fruit en dieren uit verre oorden vormen zo de hybride, raadselachtige lichamen van de demonen die zich vermengen met het monster van de Apocalyps. Al deze wezens worden bestreden door een archaïsche Sint-Michiel en zijn engelen in *De val van de opstandige engelen* (1562), dat vrijwel zeker is geschilderd voor een erudiete verzamelaar. Na het rumoer van dit eeuwige gevecht volgt, chronologisch gezien, de stilte van de *Winterlandschap met schaatsers en vogelknip* (1565). Dit schilderij, dat voor zijn tijd zowel intiem als revolutionair was, betekent een breuk door zijn naturalistische en wereldlijke benadering. Het zou Bruegels meest gekopieerde werk worden, met op heden meer dan honderddertig bekende versies, voornamelijk gemaakt in het atelier van zijn oudste zoon, Pieter Bruegel de Jonge. In plaats van de dramatische gevolgen van de strenge winter van 1565 voor de bevolking weer te geven, evoceert Bruegel hier op meesterlijke wijze de mistige atmosfeer van de vrieskou, de ondoorzichtigheid van de sneeuw, de ijzige weerspiegelingen op het ijs en de sombere tinten van de zorgvuldig aangebrachte begroeiing. Maar het gevaar is vlakbij: zowel de vogels die zich rond een luik scharen dat elk moment kan dichtklappen, als de schaatsers, die in hun onbekommerheid de broosheid van het ijs lijken te tarten. “In al zijn werken gaat wat wordt uitgedrukt altijd verder dan wat wordt afgebeeld”, schreef zijn vriend, de cartograaf Abraham Ortelius, over Bruegel[6]. De waarschuwing ontbreekt bijna nooit, zoals in de *De volkstelling te Betlehem*, geschilderd het jaar daarop (1566), waarin een besneeuwd Brabants dorpje ditmaal als decor dient voor een bijbels tafereel. Midden in het dorpje bevindt zich een even onwaarschijnlijke als symbolische taverne, gevestigd in een dode boom, het symbool van de ondergang. Uit recent onderzoek is gebleken dat het schilderij bedoeld was voor een rijke Antwerpse ondernemer, wiens boerderij in het schilderij grenst aan de vervloekte boom... En wat te zeggen van Icarus, van wie alleen een hand en de in het water spartelende benen ons aan zijn tragische lot herinneren? Tegenover de onverschilligheid van de getuigen staat de schoonheid van een onveranderlijk landschap,

4. "Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood”; W. H. Auden, *Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (1938)
5. "The day is bright and this is their escape from hardship", J. Burnside, *Pieter Bruegel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap 1565,* from *Black Cat Bone* (2011)

6. "In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur". Het gaat om een uitdrukking ontleend aan Plinius de Oudere; *Album amicorum,* c. 1574, Pembroke College Library, Cambridge

met een onduidelijke geografie, maar des te suggestiever. Zelfs in *De aanbidding der Wijzen*, geschilderd met tempera op een dun linnen doek, kijken gewapende soldaten op de voorgrond dreigend naar het tafereel, alsof ze het komende vonnis van Herodes tegen het Kind al aankondigen. Het schilderij van Bruegel onthult zich voor wie de tijd neemt om te kijken, scène na scène, en roept meer vragen op dan dat het uitlegt.

In een wereld volop in verandering, is het dan ook niet verwonderlijk dat Bruegels werken al snel in de smaak vielen bij zowel de burgerij als de prinsen, in het bijzonder de Habsburgers. Aangezien het niet meer mogelijk was om bij de meester zelf een schilderij te kopen, wendden velen zich na zijn dood tot het atelier van zijn oudste zoon, Pieter Bruegel de Jonge (1564-1638), die zich had gespecialiseerd in het kopiëren van de composities van zijn vader. Zo hebben de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België een tweede versie van *De volkstelling te Betlehem* (1610) en ook een heel mooie kopie van *Het Gevecht tussen Carnaval en Vasten,* die deel werd van de collecties helemaal aan het einde van de 20e eeuw.[7] Dit laatste werk getuigt niet alleen van Bruegels scherpe observatievermogen, maar ook van zijn soms bijtende humor. Het is een parodie op een middeleeuws toernooi, waarin de uitgemergelde gestalte van Vasten, gezeten op een rechte, oncomfortabele stoel, het opneemt tegen de dikbuikige Vastenavond, die als een dronken Bacchus op een vat zit. Elk van hen wordt vergezeld door een reeks kleine scènes die evenzoveel voor hen typische gebruiken voorstellen. Diezelfde geest zit ook in *De Sint-Maartenswijn,* waarvan het nog onzeker is of het uit het atelier van Pieter de Jonge komt, maar dat een getrouwe kopie is van het temperaschilderij op doek van Bruegel de Oude, dat zo'n vijftien jaar geleden werd herontdekt en nu in het Prado in Madrid hangt. Terwijl de heilige in een hoek van het schilderij zijn mantel uitreikt aan twee kreupelen, verdringen boeren, behoeftigen en bedelaars zich wanordelijk rond een vat dat centraal in de compositie staat, in de hoop iets van de wijn te kunnen bemachtigen. Hoewel het laven van andermans dorst getuigt van naastenliefde, is het duidelijk dat de menigte hier bezwijkt voor hebzucht en gulzigheid. De kopiist heeft bovendien nauwlettend toegezien op het nabootsen van hun gretige gezichten: die expressieve gezichten behoren immers tot de kenmerkende eigenschappen van Pieter Bruegel de Oude. Daarom vind je onder de naam van zijn zoon heel wat losse schilderijtjes van 'tronies' in de stijl van zijn vader, zoals deze *Gaper,* waarvan de uitdrukking zo overtuigend is dat je het niet kunt laten om hem na te doen... Net zo geestig, maar dan wat schunniger (let op de doedelzak en de gulp van de danser aan de rechterkant of op de hand van een andere danser op de billen van zijn partner!) is *Bruiloftsdans in openlucht* (1607). Het gaat om een van de vele versies die in het atelier van Pieter de Jonge zijn

7. Het origineel, uit 1559, wordt bewaard in het Kunsthistorisches Museum in Wenen.

gemaakt naar een werk van zijn vader, tot groot genoegen van een publiek dat op zoek was naar vermaak. Het vormt een sterk contrast met *De Kindermoord te Betlehem,* waarvan het aantal kopieën en varianten dat Pieter de Jonge heeft gemaakt, misschien kan verbazen, gezien de wreedheid van het onderwerp. Maar daarbij wordt vergeten dat de 'affecten', een centrale rol speelden in de kunsttheorie van die tijd. Zo benadrukt Karel van Mander in zijn beroemde *Schilderboeck* (1604) dat Bruegel de Oude er in het origineel – dat hij in de keizerlijke collectie in Praag had kunnen bewonderen – in geslaagd was om op ontroerend en treffende wijze de wanhoop van een moeder tegenover de heraut weer te geven.

Terwijl Pieter de Jonge er zijn hele leven naar streefde om de composities van zijn vader zo getrouw mogelijk te reproduceren, koos zijn jongere broer Jan (1568-1625) voor een andere weg: die van creatieve emulatie. In navolging van het voorstreffelijk naturalistische spoor dat Bruegel de Oude had getrokken, legde hij zich toe op rustieke genrescènes en 'helse' schilderijen, op landschappen en stillevens, vooral bloemschilderijen. Meestal gaat het om kleine werken met schitterende kleuren, die opvallen door hun virtuositeit en hun bijna miniaturistische uitvoering. Zijn composities waren niet alleen bij de burgerij, maar ook bij de adel bijzonder populair, zelfs tot in Italië, waar hij aan het begin van zijn carrière verbleef, net als zijn vader voor hem. Dankzij de kwaliteit van zijn schilderwerk mocht hij werken in dienst van het hof in Brussel, en zal zijn zoon, Jan de Jonge, op zijn beurt zijn werken kopiëren. Het *Stilleven met bloemenkrans en schaal* (1618) illustreert treffend de verfijning van het schilderwerk van Jan de Oude: de voorwerpen en bloemen, met hun heldere, emailachtige kleuren, steken met opmerkelijke precisie af tegen de donkere achtergrond. Zo herken je in de krans van lente- en zomerbloemen moeiteloos anjers, rozen, anemonen, maagdenpalm... en ook een paar tulpen en afrikaantjes, die pas sinds kort in de Lage Landen te vinden waren. Deze virtuositeit, die voor zijn klanten ongetwijfeld een van de grootste kwaliteiten van zijn schilderijen vormde, sluit een symbolische betekenis echter niet uit: de lange gouden haarspeld met een parel aan het uiteinde was een sieraad dat door de bruid werd gedragen op haar trouwdag. Het schilderij verwijst hier dus naar deze heuglijke gebeurtenis: het huwelijk. Dankzij zijn faam en vakmanschap kon Jan Bruegel de Oude samenwerken met verschillende van zijn tijdgenoten, onder wie Pieter Paul Rubens, die eveneens als hofschilder van de aartshertogen werkzaam was. Samen vervaardigden zij zo'n vijfentwintig schilderijen, volgens een vaste taakverdeling: Rubens schilderde de figuren, terwijl Jan Bruegel de Oude de landschappen voor zijn rekening nam, naast fauna, flora en voorwerpen. Deze complementariteit komt perfect tot uiting in *De Madonna met de maagdenpalm*, waar de uiterst verfijnde details van de rozen, opgebouwd uit dunne laagjes dekkende verf, fraai aansluiten bij de zachte gelaatstrekken van de jonge Maagd, die ons met trots en tederheid het Kindje Jezus toont.

Grote meesters erkennen elkaar. Rubens had een diepe bewondering voor Pieter Bruegel de Oude, van wie hij aan het eind van zijn leven verschillende werken bezat, waaronder *De Ontslaping van Maria* (circa 1564, National Trust, Upton House, Banbury) en een *Vlucht naar Egypte* (mogelijk het schilderij uit 1563 dat nu in de Courtauld Gallery in Londen hangt). Die waardering had hij al laten blijken in 1613-1615, toen hij op verzoek van zijn vriend Jan Bruegel de Oude *Christus geeft de sleutels aan de heilige Petrus* (Berlijn, Gemäldegalerie) schilderde, bestemd om het grafmonument van Pieter Bruegel in de Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Kapellekerk in Brussel te versieren.



Peter Paul Rubens -
Virgin with the Periwinkle - with landscape painted by Jan Brueghel the Elder

NIGEL CLARKE

The British/Belgian composer Nigel Clarke grew up in the seaside town of Margate, UK and though not from a musical background, he developed a lifelong love of music at an early age while learning a brass instrument at school. At 16 he joined the Royal Marines as a junior military bandsman and went on to serve in the Band of the Royal Army Medical Corps and ultimately the Band of the Irish Guards. His desire to write music was encouraged at the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall. This led to him studying composition at the Royal Academy of Music, London with Paul Patterson. During his professional career Clarke has held posts as Composition and Contemporary Music Tutor at the Royal Academy of Music and Head of Composition at the London College of Music & Media. His many national and international residencies and associations include positions with the Young Concert Artist Trust, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, The Black Dyke Band, Brassband Buizingen, the Grimethorpe Colliery Band, and Middle Tennessee State University. Clarke's longest musical collaboration has been with violinist Peter Sheppard Skærved, and conductor Luc Vertommen.

Clarke is renowned for his virtuosic writing using an uncompromisingly contemporary language which speaks to audiences. He has a penchant for story-telling and his work brims with rhythmic drive and bravura orchestration. It is this language of contrasts and colour, juxtaposing savage musical outbursts with moments of sheer transcendental beauty, that draws audiences into his sound world.

Clarke's scores include works for symphony orchestra, brass, wind and chamber combinations, and he has also been nominated for his work in film. His compositions are recorded on many prestigious labels and are performed worldwide. Recently Clarke's *The Prophecies of Merlin* (symphony for violin and orchestra) was recorded by the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony orchestra with Peter Sheppard Skærved as soloist. He lives with his family in Brussels, Belgium and when not composing he is a keen runner.

nigel-clarke.com



Nigel Clarke holding an early Brescian violin dated between 1560 and c.1570

PETER SHEPPARD SKÆRVED

Peter Sheppard Skærved is acclaimed internationally for performances of a vast range of solo repertoire. His repertoire stretches from the late 16th century to hundreds of works written for him: these include major works by composers by established 'greats' such as Hans Werner Henze and George Rochberg, to the many young composers with whom he collaborates worldwide.

Peter is a Grammy-nominated recording artist, with over one hundred critically acclaimed albums to his name. These range from concerto discs with orchestras including the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, to the complete Tartini Solo Sonatas, 24 Telemann Fantasies, cycles of Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert Sonatas, eight discs of solo works from the 1600s and many recordings of the works dedicated to him. Peter is currently performing, filming, and recording on great instruments in the collections of the Library of Congress, Washington DC, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, and the Paganini violins kept at the City of Genoa.

Peter's wide ranging 'Knowledge Exchange Violin' Project brings together institutions ranging from the National Gallery of Art Washington DC through to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK, with a linked series of concerts, recordings, residencies, films, recordings, podcasts and much more.

peter-sheppard-skaerved.com

Youtube Channel (over 600 films, recordings and talks):
youtube.com/@PeterSheppardSkaervedviolin



Peter Sheppard Skærved performing in front of
The Census at Bethlehem by Pieter Brueghel the Younger

DR. SABINE VAN SPRANG

Dr. Sabine van Sprang is Senior Curator of Flemish Painting (1550–1650) at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Brussels) and a member of the Classe des Arts of the Académie royale de Belgique. From 2019 to 2023, she served as Director of the *Academia Belgica*, the Belgian Centre for the History, Arts, and Sciences in Rome.

Dr. van Sprang has curated or co-curated several international exhibitions, including *Rubens, a genius at work* (Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2007–2008); *Rubens, Van Dyck, Jordaens et les autres, Peintures baroques flamandes aux Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* (Paris, Musée Marmottan Monet, 2012–2013); *Theodoor van Loon: A Caravaggist Painter between Rome and Brussels* (Brussels, BOZAR / Luxembourg, Musée national d'archéologie, d'histoire et d'art 2018–2019); and *Fêtes et célébrations flamandes, Brueghel, Rubens, Jordaens,…* (Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2025, a collaboration with the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium and the Louvre Museum).



Dr Sabine van Sprang talking about the Bruegel family legacy

She is the author of the monograph *Denijs van Alsloot (vers 1568 ? -1625/26), peintre paysagiste au service de la cour des archiducs Albert et Isabelle* (Pictura Nova: Studies in 16th and 17th Century Flemish Painting and Drawing, vol. XV, 2014) and has co-edited numerous publications, including *Bruegel's Winter Scenes: Historians and Art Historians in Dialogue* (Brussels, Mercatorfonds, 2018) and *Bruegel & L'Italia / Bruegel and Italy* (Studia Academiae Belgicae 3, Leuven, 2023).

She is currently preparing, in collaboration with Dr. Prof. Tine Meganck, an international exhibition on Bruegel's visual language, titled *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Between Reality and Imagination*, scheduled for autumn 2028 at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.

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Engineer & Editor – Adaq Khan
Violin – Girolamo Amati (1629) Viola – Geradine Grandidier (1995)
Artwork - James Cardell-Oliver

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder - *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562)