

The Sixteenth Century

2. Northern Europe and Spain

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Northern Europe

Francis I, Charles V and Philip II preferred to commission works from Italian masters than patronise artists from their own realms. From 1562, France was riven by civil war and patronage declined. In the remainder of Northern Europe art was affected by the Reformation and developed differently to Italian art; landscape and genre scenes became strong new trends.

Hieronymus Bosch (c 1450 – 1516)

Hieronymus was born Jheronimus van Aken in s-Hertogenbosch (the town from which he took his name) between 1449 and 1456. The town, in the Duchy of Brabant, was a thriving commercial and agricultural centre and grew more prosperous during Bosch's lifetime. Bosch was a wealthy man and one of the elite officers of the very important confraternity of the Brotherhood of Our Lady, which had thousands of members (nobles, bishops, merchants and academics) across Europe. The Brotherhood continues today with a small membership made up of the elite of Dutch society.

Only 30 to 40 works are attributed to Bosch, and some of those are uncertain. He signed only seven paintings. Like leading thinkers of his time, Bosch's favourite theme was how man struggles weakly against earthly temptations, and needs much encouragement to stay on the path of righteousness.



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Haywain Triptych* (Interior central panel), c 1500 (Prado, Madrid)

The *Haywain* triptych shows how the virtuous road is made hard by the temptation of material riches. The central panel of the interior shows greedy folk in a frenzy to grasp hay. Hay was common in proverbs as representing the ephemeral things of the world; “to grab the long hay”, “stuff one’s cap with hay”. Bosch’s mob is guilty of the two sins condemned by Thomas a Kempis:

“Vanity, therefore it is, to seek after perishing riches and to trust in them. Vanity also it is to hunt after honours, and to climb to high degree. Vanity it is to follow the desires of the flesh ... Vanity it is to wish to live long and to be careless to live well.”

Bosch does not neglect the clergy. Gluttony and lust had long been monastic vices, and anti-clericalism grew during the 15th and 16th centuries. It was common for cardinals and popes to have concubines. Cellini in his entertaining autobiography wrote of bishops in Rome infecting young boys with French pox. Bosch shows only gluttony. The monk in the lower part oversees four nuns as they collect and store hay for his benefit. Rulers are no different. The Habsburg double eagle, the French *fleur de lis* and Pope Alexander VI all chase the hay. It is the bait which lures the sinful to the abyss. Naturally, the wagon is led by demons.

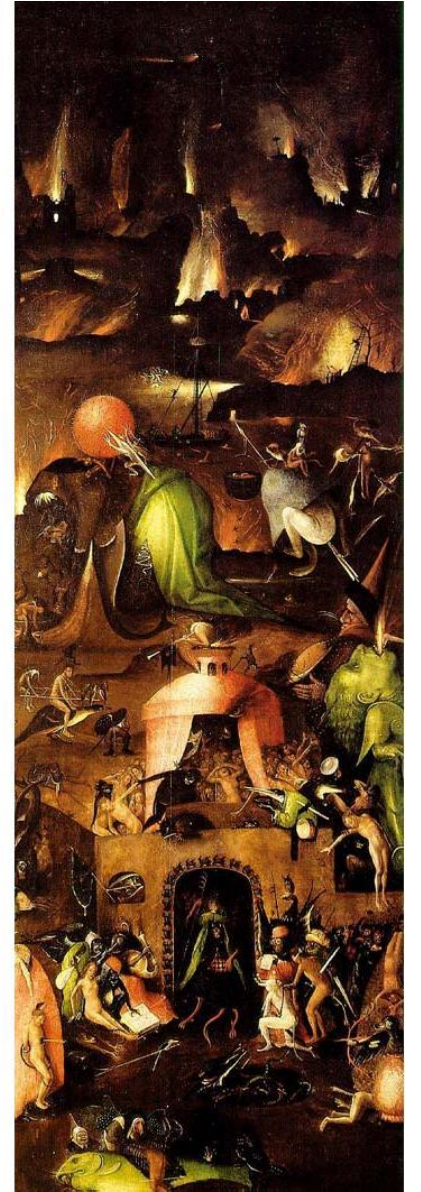
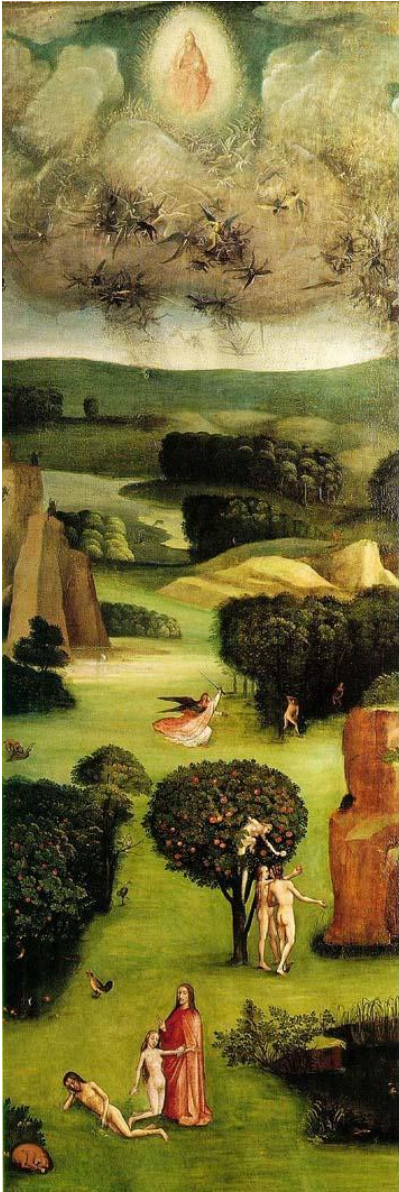
Remaining virtuous was encouraged by depicting the fate of sinners. From the 12th century the Last Judgement was carved above church portals and painted on the walls of cloisters and cemeteries, and (especially in Northern Europe) in town halls to spur on magistrates and judges. Unending torments of the damned in lurid detail appear in countless books and sermons of the times. These are the dominant themes of Bosch’s art.

His *Last Judgement* shows frightening scenes of eternal torment in the central and right panels. Hell was thought of as a “world turned upside down”. The image of the hunter being hunted appears, for example. In other Boschian Hells can be seen the figure of a stag leading his human prey into hell, and a nobleman ripped apart by his hunting dogs. A 14th century manuscript of the *Romance of Alexander* (1338-44) also illustrates this idea: a rabbit with a hunting horn hoists a human prey over its shoulder.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Last Judgement* (detail)

In this little vignette, as elsewhere in his art, it is evident Bosch shared with his contemporaries a fascination in the grotesque and the unnatural. Durer recorded in an engraving an eight-legged pig born in 1496 and Sebastian Brant published woodcuts of monstrous births. These were often interpreted as portents of impending disaster sent by God as punishment for sinful mankind.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Last Judgement Triptych*, c 1482

Folk didn't travel alone unless they had to in the late 15th century and early 16th century; brigands and highwaymen ruled the countryside. However, the sight of a lone, hungry man carrying his earthly belongings on his back was common in Bosch's time. He was used as a metaphor for the virtuous soul moving through a world fraught with temptation and danger. When the *Haywain Triptych* is closed Bosch's solitary traveller can be seen, surrounded by evil acts and temptations, and fending off a dog. The sermons of St Bernard, published in the Netherlands in 1495, could easily describe him;

"Blessed are those who can live as pilgrims in this wicked world, and remain untouched by it ... for the pilgrim travels the king's highway neither on the right nor the left. If he should come upon a place where there is fighting and quarrelling, he will not become involved. And if he should come to a place where there is dancing and leaping, or where there is a celebration ... these will not entice him."

Bosch painted another virtuous pilgrim (in grisaille) on the left door of the *Last Judgement*.

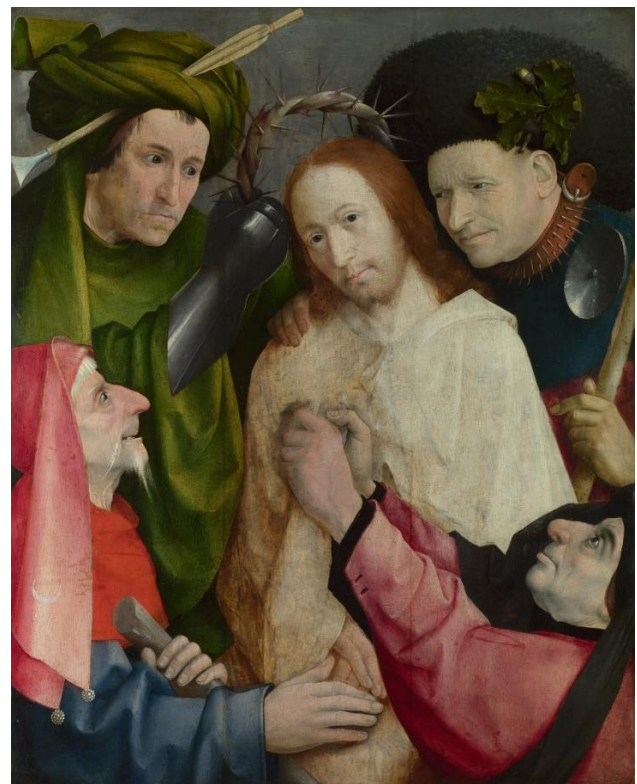


Hieronymus Bosch, *Traveller (Haywain Triptych exterior)*, c 1500

Art and literature began to represent the sufferings of Christ with great drama. "Passion Tracts" were published as early as the 13th century, filled with vivid detail of Christ's misery. The form appeared in paintings, usually in close-up.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, c1515



Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, c 1502

Christ Carrying the Cross has strongly delineated faces (the two thieves appear above and below the helmeted head on the right). Veronica appears with Christ, her placid face echoes Christ's calm. She is said to have wiped Christ's face with her veil and received a permanent imprint on the cloth, which she displays. The two are stark against the horrible heads – serenity and beauty equate to holiness; ugliness with sin.

The science of reading the face and body for signs of a person's character began with Aristotle – his treatise *Physiognomia* was reprinted several times in the early 16th century. In this painting many of Christ's tormentors are missing teeth: teeth "out of order" were signs of a "man of no worth who babbles and is arrogant, proud, pompous, inconstant." Deep-set eyes "hidden in the head" signified a person of suspicion, a malicious and cruel liar. Fat cheeks denoted a foolish and rude character. Large bulging eyes and thick lips revealed a lecherous nature. Noses receive much attention in physiognomic studies, and Bosch paints the cruel in profile to highlight the nose. Snubbed noses equate to stupidity, lust, anger and pride; prominent hooked noses to avarice and malice.

Durer employed a similar device in *Christ Among the Doctors* (1506) but Bosch's work is closer to late medieval German panels. The *Arrest of Christ* by the Master of the Karlsruhe Passion, for example, has a similarly packed surface and contrasts the serene sufferer against ugly tormentors.



Master of the Karlsruhe Passion, *Arrest of Christ*, c 1440

The suffering of Christ was echoed in the martyrdom of saints, and their lives were considered instructive. Bosch usually painted hermit saints, Anthony several times. The *Temptation* triptych shows scenes from Anthony's life. He spent most of it (c 251-356) in the Egyptian desert where his extraordinary piety drew the attention of Satan. St Anthony was praying in the shelter of an old tomb when was overwhelmed by a horde of devils who beat him relentlessly and left him for dead. Fellow hermits rescued and revived him, and were returning him to his tomb only to be caught by the devils again and tossed high into the air. This is on the left. Two men of the Antonite Order and a pale-faced man (thought to be a self-portrait of Bosch) carry St Anthony across the bridge. Above St Anthony is beset with monsters.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Temptations of St Anthony Triptych*, 1508 (Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon)

Satan appeared in the guise of a beautiful and saintly queen while Anthony was bathing in a river. Taking the hermit to her city, the Devil-Queen showed him all her supposed works of charity and it was only when she tried to seduce Anthony that he realised her true nature. This is on the right – the naked Devil-Queen surrounded by her infernal court. Anthony averts his eyes. In the background is the city of the Queen, a dragon swims in the lake.

Satan continues his torments in the central panel. The fiends gathered around Anthony in this scene are not physically attacking him. They are incarnations of the sinful urges with which Anthony wrestled. He must by now be wondering why God has not come to the rescue. He perseveres, his steady gaze is turned towards the spectator and one can imagine him speaking the words attributed to him in Psalms (27:3); *“though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear”*.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Temptations of St Anthony* (centre-panel detail)

St Anthony greatly increased in popularity in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries due in part to the resurgence of ergotism, a dreaded disease called holy fire. Epidemics were numerous and severe; 50,000 people died in a month in Paris in 1418. France and the Netherlands were the most severely affected but outbreaks occurred as far away as Russia. Gangrene of the extremities led to withering or loss of limbs. Victims suffered hallucinations, convulsions and agonising burning pain. Ergotism was caused by mouldy rye. Heated in the oven in bread the mould transforms into an alkaloid drug.

Antonite monasteries served as charity hospices caring for victims of holy fire. Monasteries had large distilleries to make cooling elixirs. The “holy vintage” was offered on the Feast of Ascension to suffering pilgrims. Mandrake was often used as an ingredient, but this exacerbated mental suffering as it induced terrible dreams. Bosch’s images reflect not only the tortures of the saint but the hallucinations of people suffering from the disease and its cure.

Distillation devices were used in alchemy, which was popular among kings, bishops, cardinals and popes. Pope John XXII wrote *The Art of Transmutation* and Charles VI wrote an alchemical treatise. Most kings' support came from the lust for gold or to make cheaper money, but there was a connection between religion and alchemy which explains why clerics were involved. Transmutation is at the heart of alchemy, changing substances from the mundane to the marvellous (base to precious, sick to healed). Thus, the link to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.



Hieronymus Bosch, *St Gregory's Mass* (exterior of *Adoration of the Magi Triptych*), c 1495

Transubstantiation was once doubted by an assistant attending a mass conducted by St Gregory. Christ immediately appeared before the group, bleeding into the chalice. Bosch shows scenes from the Passion around Christ's figure. The upper part has the mountain from which the cross ascends into the cloudy night sky. An angel descends in a shaft of light on the left to receive the soul of the good thief. The bad thief is replaced by the suicide of Judas. His body hangs limply from a tree on the right slope while his soul is borne away by a black devil lit by the fire of hell.

The *Garden of Earthly Delights* is regarded as Bosch's best-known and most ambitious work. The triptych remained in the Brussels palace of Hendrick III until 1568 when the Duke of Alba took possession of it during the occupation of the Netherlands. By 1593 it was in the Escorial because Philip II loved Bosch's works. Queen Isabella, one of the Catholic Monarchs, had been a collector too. The work is considered to be a warning of life's temptations, but the central panel has generated many theories.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490-1510 (Prado, Madrid)

The left panel shows creation. Adam sits before the dragon palm, native to the Iberian Peninsula, which exuded a medicinal red sap known as “dragon’s blood”, prized for its power to improve strength. The tree was pictured in prints by Schongauer and Durer. Bosch uses it to remind viewers of the healing power of Christ’s blood. Grape vines entwine the trunk (a reminder of Eucharist wine) and, instead of the usual pointed shape, the leaves (in lighter green) appear in the form of communion wafers.



Garden of Earthly Delights, detail from left panel

Fantastic creatures inhabit the muddy pool and its banks. They are not solely Bosch’s imagination. They abound in the popular *Garden of Health* (*Hortus sanitatis*) (1491) a pharmaceutical bestiary printed and translated several times.

The intricate central panel variously has been considered to be a warning against sin, a rebirth of the joyous world, a false paradise or a scene beloved to alchemists where their ingredients joyfully multiply. The false paradise theme explains the late 16th century title for the work: *Lust or Strawberry Painting*, transient beauty leads men to ruin and damnation.

The right panel contains Bosch’s scenes of hell. Beneath the chair the glutton is forced to vomit for eternity the rich food he loved during life, a miser must defecate his gold coins into a cesspool and a woman guilty of vanity endures demons fondling her while having to look at her pained face in a mirror. At the top left people are tortured by the musical instruments they partied to in life. The Prince of Hell feeds on the souls of the corrupt and lecherous clergy.



An alchemical egg forms the body of a human-headed monster on hollow tree legs which blaze within like furnaces. The bagpipe atop the head has musical and chemical connotations. The giant knife has a curious letter on the blade; probably the Greek letter omega, which alchemists assigned to death, violence and putrefaction.

Perhaps Bosch had Isaiah in his mind when painting his Hell scene:

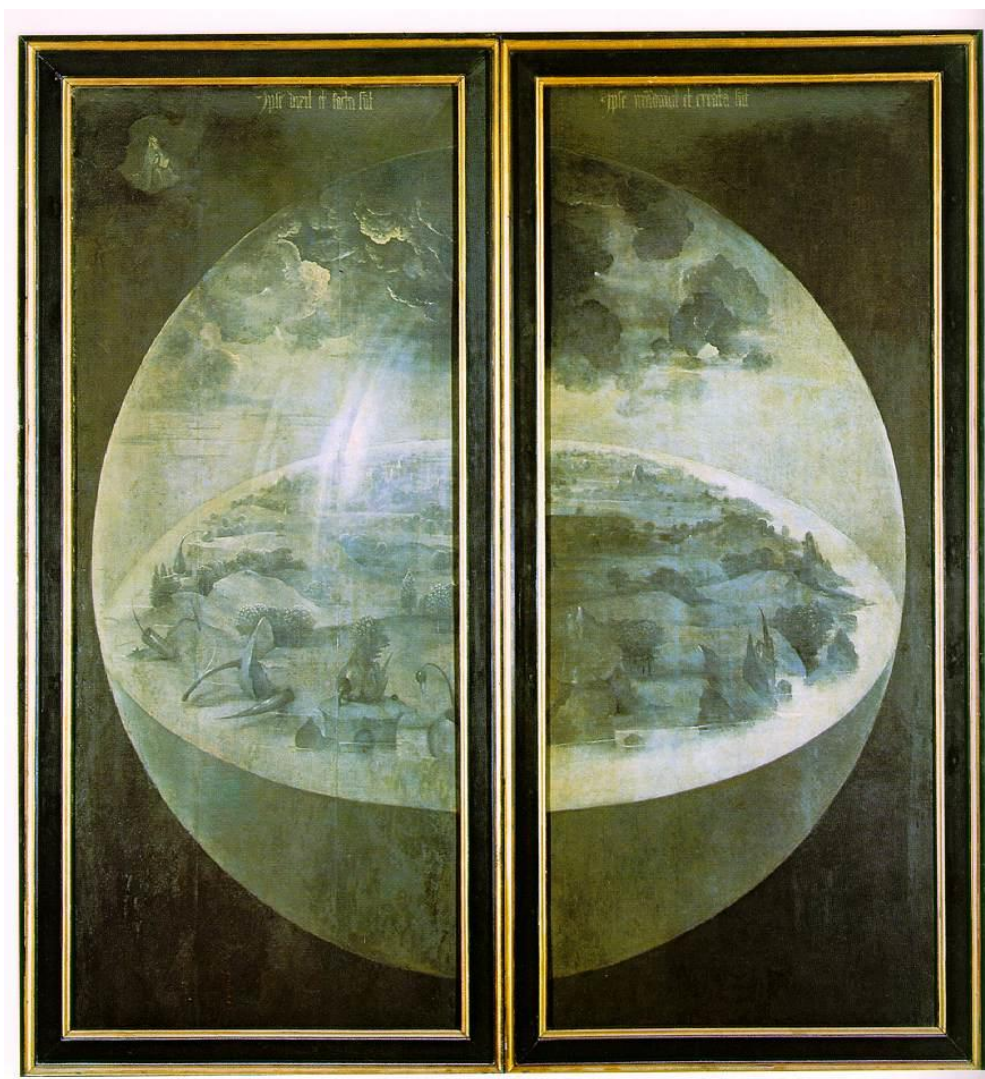
"Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflames them! And the harp, and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the Lord ... Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory and their multitude and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth shall descend into it."



Garden of Earthly Delights, detail from right panel

The outer panels show the world under flood. Bosch puts God above with two Latin inscriptions: *Ipse dixit et facta sut* (*For He spoke, and it was*) and *Ipse madavit et creat sut* (*By his command, they were created*). Bosch might have painted the scene from the description of creation written by Sir George Ripley, England's most famous alchemist who served King Edward IV of England:

"the floods shall dry up, thou shalt see a mist upon the face of the water and dry land or earth shall appear as in the first creation ... paradise lose and paradise regained after the flood".



Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights (Exterior)*, c 1505

Bosch depicted his figures, demons and strange objects with delicate precision and a sense of form that make even the weirdest seem real: *"He endeavoured to find for his fantastic pictures the most out-of-way things, but they were always true to nature."* Bosch intended to teach the viewer moral and spiritual truths. His images had precise significance, often visual translations of verbal puns and metaphors.

Details of Bosch's life are scant. The accounts of the Brotherhood of Our Lady are an important source. They record his death in 1516; on 9 August his friends in the Brotherhood attended a funeral mass in his memory in the church of St John. Fray Jose de Siguenza (Philip II's secretary) insisted Bosch's pictures were not absurdities;

"but rather, as it were, books of great wisdom and artistic value. If there are any absurdities here, they are ours, not his; and to say it at once, they are a painted satire on the sins and ravings of man."

Joachim Patinir (c 1480 – 1524)

The detailed backgrounds of Bosch and panoramic vistas were elaborated by Joachim Patinir in his “cosmic landscapes”. Joachim worked with Quentin Matsys and they must have been close for Quentin became guardian of Joachim’s children after Joachim died. They painted the *Temptation of St Anthony* together – Quentin placing his figures in the foreground of Joachim’s dramatic landscape. The saint is beset by three small-eyed and delectable maidens: the one on the left drawing her yellowish-green dress behind her like the clawed tail of a salamander; a sign of her infernal origin. The old crone represents the end of earthly things.



Quentin Matsys and Joachim Patinir, *Temptation of St Anthony*, 1520-24

Patinir painted quieter landscapes on his own. Unusually, in his triptychs, the landscape (the real subject) is spread across the panels. In *The Penitence of Saint Jerome*, the viewer is invited to travel through the landscape, much as a pilgrim, starting with Christ’s baptism, then Jerome’s penitence and the overcoming of evil achieved by Saint Anthony. Joachim’s landscapes recede in transitions from warm green to cool blue. The clear line of the horizon sets off the mountains and precipices. Joachim also introduced a new shape of rock, with a horizontal top, which usually appears in the middle of his pictures. He rarely used red – restricting it to the fringes of evening clouds and the figures.



Joachim Patinir, *The Penitence of Saint Jerome*, c 1518



Joachim Patinir, *Saint Christopher carrying Jesus*, c 1520

Albrecht Durer was a good friend of Joachim: in 1521 attending his second wedding, painting his portrait and calling him “a good painter of landscapes”. From Albrecht that probably is the highest praise possible.



Joachim Patinir, *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, c 1520

Joachim produced a Bosch-like representation of Hell in his *Passage to the Infernal Regions*. Charon transports a soul through the underworld. On the left bank of the Styx angels escort souls through verdant heaven. Hell, guarded by Cerberus the three-headed dog, is represented by scenes of fire, similar to those in Bosch’s backgrounds, with demonic vignettes scattered.



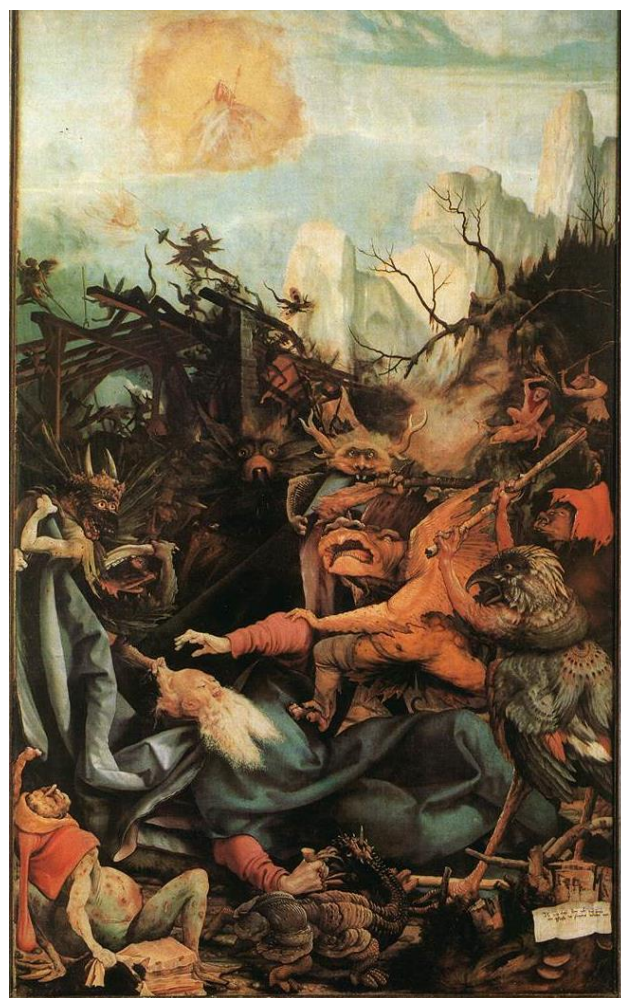
Joachim Patinir, *Passage to the Infernal Regions*, 1524

This new landscape with a high viewpoint was dominant in Northern Europe until the rise of Dutch landscape painters in the 17th century, who preferred a low view point. As we shall see, Pieter Bruegel the Elder would paint examples of both forms.

Matthias Grunewald (c 1470 – 1528)

Grunewald's great work is the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, a complicated structure with four layers of painted surfaces. Two outer panels show *Saint Anthony meeting Saint Paul* and the *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Both scenes have fairy-tale landscapes, though here the stuff of nightmares. Ragged fingers of moss drip from lifeless twigs and impose a ghastly stillness. Over 400 hundred years later, *Walt Disney* would appropriate these symbols of decay.

Very little is known about Matthias, unusual for such a prominent artist in his time. He left no letters or diaries and many of his works were lost. He superintended the rebuilding of the castle of Aschaffenburg in the service of the Archbishop of Mainz in 1511 and later was employed as artistic adviser and clerk of works for Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg. Thus, for many years, Matthias was connected with the most highly cultivated courts in the German states.



Matthias Grunewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece* (left and right panels), c 1510-15

The *Mocking of Christ* is Grunewald's earliest preserved painting. Two tormentors dominate one diagonal, conveying a sense of movement by the windmill-like configuration of the arms of the upper figure and the twisted trouser leg of the foreground torturer, straining against the flaying action of the body. Grunewald uses contrasting areas of dark and light, and unusually stark colour; features which reach their height in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

Nothing is known of Grunewald's training. Aside from ten paintings which survive, there remain thirty studies, mostly in chalk. Matthias painted altar wings in grisaille for the Dominican church in Frankfurt, *St Lawrence and St Cyriacus* above *St Elizabeth of Thuringia and St Lucy of Frankfurt*. The fig-tree shown beside St Cyriacus yielded a soothing remedy for plague and epilepsy. Beside him St Lawrence holds the grid to which he was bound and roasted to death.



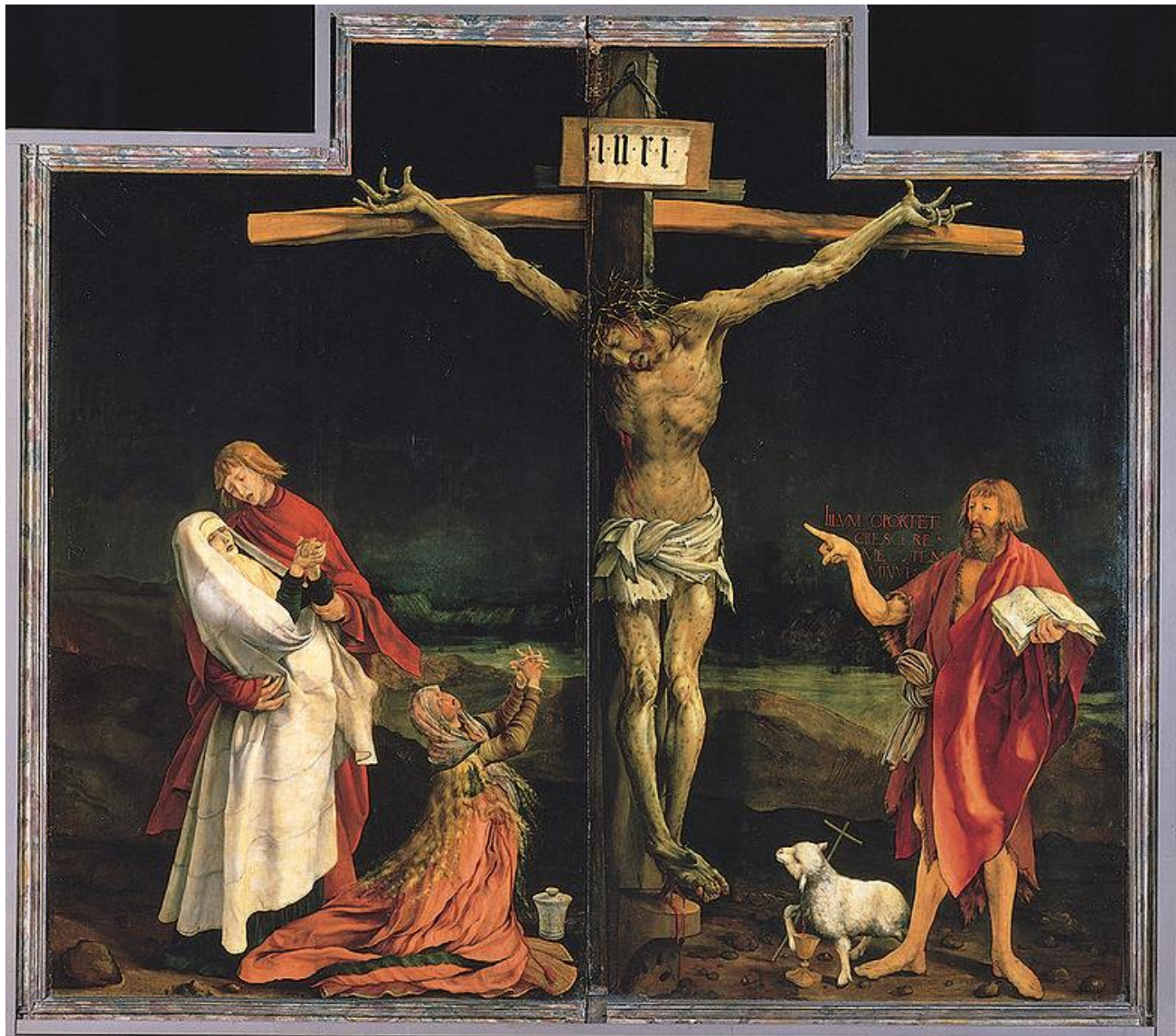
Matthias Grunewald, *Mocking of Christ*, 1503



Matthias Grunewald, *St Lawrence and St Cyriacus*, 1509-10

When open, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* has several views but it is the crucifixion painted on the doors which is most famous. A violent portrayal of Christ with scourged flesh, sores and gangrene. This haunting image would inspire Albert Birkle's horrific images of the crucifixion in the Weimar Republic, which also repeat Matthias' acid tones.

The arms are elongated to suggest the weight of the body. The stark contrasts and angular lines combine with the desolate landscape and dark sky. The altarpiece was painted for the Monastery of St Anthony which treated sufferers of ergotism. The doors would normally be closed and this would be the scene presented to patients whose flesh probably shared the same characteristics.



Matthias Grunewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, outer doors (closed), c 1510-15

Grunewald's three other surviving crucifixion scenes repeat the excruciating pain of the *Isenheim* doors. This was a common feature of the Reformation, and the strong anti-clerical feelings underlying it. The Roman Curia was thought to be secular, full of greedy Cardinals who kept concubines, practised nepotism and conducted ostentatious ceremonies. Similar abuses were common among heads of monasteries. Ordinary religious folk, steadfast priests and monks, humanists and artists protested by focussing on the poverty and suffering of Christ. Such anguished scenes became the norm in the Protestant states of Germany and in the Netherlands.

Grunewald adopted Lutheran ideas and during the Peasants Revolt served on the peasant's side. That may be the reason he fled to Frankfurt in 1526-7 and later to Halle where he died in 1528, listed as an employee in the salt-works.

Protestant Art

Lucas Cranach the Elder (c1472 – 1553)

Lucas was court painter to Frederick and other Electors in Saxony for most of his career. They were powerful supporters of Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation. Naturally, for a court painter Lucas produced lots of portraits, including many of Luther which catch the austere simplicity and intellectual force of the man.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Martin Luther*, 1525

Luther had been shocked by the behaviour of the papal court when he visited Rome in 1510. He nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg in protest on 31 October 1517. Luther and Cranach were close friends. Lutheran artists in Wittenberg and Nuremberg produced dozens of broadsheets and pamphlets satirizing the pope, clergy and many Catholic beliefs. In 1519 Luther believed the Pope to be misguided, but when a Bull of Excommunication was issued against him in 1520, Luther knew the chasm was great and the great beast had to be destroyed. From this date the Pope was described as the Antichrist.

Cranach illustrated a Lutheran Bible and made many prints for Luther, including thirteen pairs of woodcuts for a small picture book contrasting the passion of Christ with the Antichrist. In one, Cranach shows Christ driving the money-changers from the temple while the Pope sells dispensations, indulgences, bishoprics and other church offices. The engraving is accompanied by text comparing virtues with a list of papal offenses, but Cranach's illustration conveys the point immediately.

Passional Christi und

Die Wucherer Christus ustreibt vom Tempel sein —



Er hat funden im Tempel Verkäufer, Schaf, Ochsen und Tauben und Wechsler sitzen, und hat gleich ein Geißel gemacht von Stricken, alle Schaf, Ochsen, Tauben und Wechsler aus dem Tempel trieben, das Geld verschütt, die Zahlbrett umbfahret und zu den,¹ die Tauben verkaufte, gesprochen: Setzt euch hin mit diesen, aus meins Vatern Haus sollte ihr nicht ein Kaufhaus machen, Joh. 2. (V. 14. 15. 16.) Ihr habts umbsunst, darumb gebes umbsunst, Matth. 10. (V. 8.) dein Geld sei mit dir in Vorderdamnuß. Act. 8. (V. 20.)

¹ 16.

Antichristi.

Mit Bullen, Bannbriefen zwingt sy der Papst wied — hinein.



Sie sitzt der Antichrist im Tempel Gottes, und erzeigt sich als Gott, wie Paulus verkundet 2. Thessal. 2. (V. 4), vorandert alle göttlich Ordnung, wie Daniel sagt, und unterdrückt die heilig Schrift, verkauft Dispensation, Ablass, Pallia, Bisthum, Lehen, erhebt die Schatz der Erden, löst uf die Ehe, beschwert die Gewissen mit seinen Gesetzen, macht Recht, und umb Geld zureißt er das. Erhebt Heiligen, benedeict und maledieit ins vierde Geschlecht, und gebeut sein Stimm zu horen, gleich wie Gottes Stimm. c. sic omnis Dist. 19. und Niemand's fall ihm einreden. 17. q. 4. c. Nemini.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, Twelfth Illustration from *Passional Christi und Antichristi*, Wittenberg, 1521

The Reformation altered religious painting. Old Testament stories, the Passion and morality scenes remained acceptable. However, images of saints who served as intermediaries for prayer undermined the central tenet of Protestantism, that man had a direct relationship with God. Sculptures and paintings of the Virgin Mary (regarded by Catholics as the prime intercessor), of saints, and of miracles were proscribed. They were removed from churches in Protestant German states and the United Provinces.

That left an artistic gap for private patrons which led to a spate of mythological scenes. Venus was popular, often nude or wearing only a necklace, veil or a huge cartwheel hat. Mythological paintings were immensely popular all over the North as evidence of culture and learning. Cranach had a huge workshop, in which his sons were employed. Over thirty scenes of Venus and Cupid were produced by Cranach. Lucas died, aged 81, on 16 October 1553 at Weimar, where the house in which he lived still stands in the marketplace.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Judgement of Paris*, 1530



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Cupid complaining to Venus*, c 1525

Albrecht Durer had emerged from a spiritual crisis in 1519 as a fervent admirer of Luther: *“the Christian man who has helped me out of great anxieties”*. In 1521 Durer, receiving (false) news that Luther was dead, wrote in his diary:

“And if we should lose this man, who has written more clearly than anyone in one hundred and forty years, and to whom Thou has given such an evangelical spirit, we pray Thee, O Heavenly Father, that Thou give again Thy Holy Spirit to another, that he may gather anew from all parts The holy Christian Church, so that we may all live in Christian unity”

Durer’s association with the Protestant movement weakened from 1525 when the Peasants War had begun to collapse. In 1525, Nuremberg adopted Protestantism. Radical elements emerged and their extremism was directed not only against Catholics but also sought revenge against those who had supported the peasants. This was why Matthias Grunewald fled. “Godless painters” were prosecuted; including a servant in Durer’s house, two of his pupils and later his best form-cutter, who had supported the peasants. Art was destroyed despite Luther being against the destruction of images.

Against this background Durer painted his famous *Four Apostles* which he asked to be hung in the Town Hall in his memory: it remained there until 1627. The figures are like stone statues, motionless in their impressive draperies. This is Durer’s last work, and he commented on it to Luther’s collaborator, the German reformer Phillip Melanchthon:

“When I was young I sought for variety and novelty; now, in my old age, I have begun to see the native countenance of nature and to understand that this simplicity is the ultimate goal of art.”

Originally intended as an altarpiece, there were to be several scenes; the Adoration of the Holy Family, the Betrothal of St Catherine, as well as Saints Barbara and Apollonia. Durer began work in 1521. But because of the Nuremberg Reformation of 1525 pictures of the Virgin Mary and the saints were dropped. Only the *Four Apostles* was painted.

St John, Luther's favourite evangelist, overshadows St Peter, the founder of the Roman See who is holding the key. Intentionally, Durer shows St John as much younger and more vibrant than the withered figurehead of the Roman Catholic Church, who looks tired and unable to offer any solace. On the right, St Paul, regarded as the spiritual father of Protestantism, dominates.



Albrecht Durer, *The Four Apostles*, 1526

Despite this strong message of the new faith overtaking the old, there is a warning. Written underneath the saints, and drawn from Luther's *September Bible*, is a caution against false prophecy and abominable heresy. The extreme forms of Protestantism which emerged from the Peasants War and radical Protestant groups like the Anabaptists were denounced by Luther. Durer pleads for balance and sanity in a world riven by dissent.

Hans Holbein the Younger (c1497 – 1543)

Protestant policies, the destruction of paintings and the Peasants War drastically reduced demand for art. German artists suffered and many emigrated, the most famous being Hans Holbein the Younger. Hans was born in Augsburg and trained in his father's shop. The shop broke up while Hans was in his teens. His father went to Isenheim, but sent the two sons to Basle, where Hans met Erasmus.

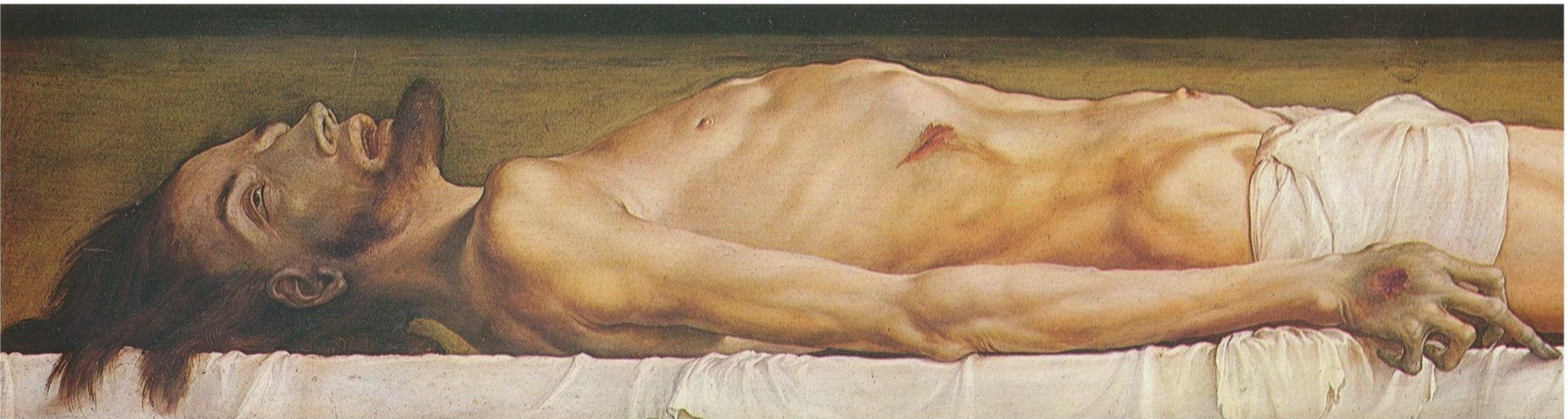


Hans Holbein the Younger, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, c 1523

Holbein drew illustrations in Erasmus's sharp attack on the abuses of the church, *In Praise of Folly* and painted many portraits. Here, Erasmus rests his hands on a book, "*The Herculean Labours*" (in Greek) "*of Erasmus of Rotterdam*" (in Latin) is inscribed. The purity and truth of his humanism is depicted by the clear water in the decanter. It is an image of an assured intellectual man.

By 1523 Hans had established his reputation as a portrait painter. He decided to seek work in England and sent two of his portraits of Erasmus there in 1524. They drew attention, and Hans made a first trip to England in 1526 with letters of introduction from Erasmus to More and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Before he left on this first trip for England Holbein painted some religious works. His father had taken him to see Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Hans' *Body of the Dead Christ* seeks to evoke the same piety and empathy in the viewer. The disfigurement is horrible. The lips are the same colour as the decaying body; the bruised flesh round the wounds greenish-grey. These realistic depictions of the putrefaction of the body are based on observations Holbein made of a body fished out of the Rhine. The painting shocks because it is life size. Russian writer Dostoyevsky was captivated by the work when he saw it in 1867 – his wife had to drag him away. In his novel, *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin exclaims; "*a man's faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!*" This is quite the opposite of Holbein's intention.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ* (and detail, lower), 1520-22

Before leaving for this first trip to England, Holbein painted the *Darmstadt Madonna* for Burgomaster Meyer in Basle, showing the Meyer family as donors. It would be his last devotional religious work, but it hints at Holbein's future brilliance in depicting stuff. What other reason can there be for the ruck in the carpet, if not to give Hans a complication to relish?

During his first trip to England from 1526 to 1528, Holbein painted Thomas More's family, but only the drawing survives. Erasmus wrote to More expressing his delight:

"the painter Holbein gave me the picture of your whole family, which is so completely successful that I should scarcely be able to see you better if I were with you."



Hans Holbein the Younger, Darmstadt *Madonna*, before 1526



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Study for the Family Portrait of Thomas More*, 1527

Holbein returned to Basle to find the religious troubles had become worse. Pictures were being torn from churches and there were iconoclast riots. Basle council attempted to retain him, but once civil war broke out in 1531 Holbein was determined to return to England.

He painted few portraits in this brief stay in Basle. The one of his wife and children, a family which he was soon to abandon, seems pitiless.

Returning to England in 1532, Holbein found that Thomas More was falling from power, so he created a market for portraits among German merchants. *Georg Gisze*, a portrait of the merchant, was a display sample; the still-life surpasses that in *Nicholas Kratzer*, Astronomer to Henry VII, whose portrait Holbein had painted during his first visit to England in a bravura display of details in the mathematical instruments.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Artist's Family*, 1528-29



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Georg Gisze*, 1532

Despite these samples of Hans' brilliance, Henry VIII paid no attention to the artist until he saw *The Ambassadors*, a painting which has drawn much comment over the skull perhaps to the neglect of Holbein's genius across the rest of the canvas (including another ruck). King Hal's analysis was that patronising Holbein could put him on par with Francis I, then a bitter enemy. Henry VIII was besotted with his standing and craved to be Europe's premier prince, although he had no chance of rivaling Charles V.



Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533

The king's patronage ran continuously from 1536, but Holbein was used largely as a portrait painter. Perhaps King Hal saw himself in the figure of the ambassador on the left? Holbein produced numerous renditions of Henry VIII, mostly to accompany marriage embassies abroad. Henry VIII also sent Holbein on diplomatic missions to portray prospective wives.

Holbein was a wonderful painter of portraits, never losing sight of the character of his sitter. Jane Seymour, Henry's third wife, is shown mercilessly, "*narrow, pinched, hypocritical face, her mean, sharp eyes, her pursed mouth and hard thrusting chin.*" After Jane Seymour's death, Thomas Cromwell believed England needed a continental ally to avoid costly war and suggested Christina of Denmark or Anne of Cleves. Henry dispatched Holbein. Christina was a woman of great intelligence. Her slight turn away makes her gaze more arresting. Perhaps Christina has seen one of Holbein's portraits of Henry: "*even his royal master's unamiable character is not in any way glossed over.*" At any rate she was not charmed by Henry's reputation as a husband, and she rebuffed him.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Jane Seymour*, c 1537



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Christina of Denmark*, c 1538

In a decision which speaks of his simple taste, Henry was very taken with Holbein's portrait of Anne of Cleves. She is sweet, her gaze is patient and compliant and her hands meek. The trappings flatter Anne; the robe, head-dress and jewels differ from the subdued elegance of Christina. Henry rushed to wed her. Marry in haste ...



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Anne of Cleves*, c 1538

... find another. When Henry first met Anne at Rochester on New Year's Day 1540, he was greatly disappointed, and though they wed on 6th January he was ill content. On the 10th June, Cromwell was arrested, on the 12th July parliament annulled the marriage, Cromwell was beheaded on the 28th July and a fortnight later Henry produced Queen Catherine Howard who he had privately married on the day Cromwell was beheaded. Anne of Cleves went cheerfully into retirement, promised £4000 a year, enough to "wear new dresses every day". Holbein caught Cromwell's cruel, pig-like features.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Thomas Cromwell*, 1532-33

Hans died of plague in 1543, aged only 46. Murray laments:

"he found himself constrained by the accidents of politics to work for patrons who had no use for any form of art other than portraiture; while this made of him one of the great portrait painters of all time, it was, nevertheless, a crippling limitation of his genius."

The importation of talent by European princes was marked in this period. Henry VIII employed a German to paint portraits. Philip II, apart from collecting Bosch's works, hired a Netherlandish painter from Utrecht, Anthonis Mor van Dashorst (also known as Antonio Moro). Mor was sent to England in 1554 by Philip to paint the marriage portrait of Mary Tudor (Henry VIII's eldest legitimate child). The work was much-admired in England. Mor captures Queen Mary's tenacity and bravery – sorely tested as she attempted to steer the English ship back to papal shores – as well as hinting at her intolerance. It is an enormously sympathetic work. Philip made very few trips from Spain to stay with his wife, who died barren.

Mor's ability to portray the character of his sitter rivals Holbein's, but he has an Italian economy of gesture and accessories. His compositions are elegantly simple but they allow character to shine through. Mor shows the Duke of Alba menacing and merciless – quite clearly the man to choose to rid the Netherlands of heretics.



Anthony van Dyck, *Queen Mary*, 1685



Anthony van Dyck, *Duke of Alba*, 1635

Romanists

Marten van Heemskerck, named after the village where he was born, close to Haarlem, contrived arguments with his father to escape a life on the family farm. He trained under Jan van Scorel at Haarlem from whom he received impressions of the Italian style. Marten was the first of the Romanists, who introduced the Italian style into the Northern Netherlands. Van Heemskerck spent 1532-36 in Rome, where he was moved deeply by Michelangelo. This influence is clear in the *Procession of Bacchus*, one of the first paintings produced after Marten's visit to Rome. The nudes in various attitudes show he had seen Mannerist works.



Marten van Heemskerck, *The Triumphal Procession of Bacchus*, 1536-37

Frans Floris was born in Antwerp to a prominent artistic family of stone-cutters. His entry in Karel van Mander's biographies of artist is one of the most detailed. He began training as a sculptor but gave that up for painting, apprenticing in Liege where his teacher encouraged him to study art in Italy. Floris went to Rome in 1541 and became fascinated with Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* and Raphael's works. He also developed a taste for the soft colours and tone of Venice, which can be seen in *The Awakening of the Arts*, one of his most engaging paintings.



Frans Floris, *The Awakening of the Arts*, c 1560

Genre Scenes

Jan Sanders van Hemessen, who lived in Antwerp from the 1520s to 1550, was one of the first Netherlandish artists to specialise in scenes depicting vanity or greed in taverns or brothels, often set against a biblical story. *The Prodigal Son* shows a young man wasting his inheritance in debauchery, surrounded by women of easy morals and abandoning himself to lechery, gluttony and laziness. The small figures in the background show the prodigal son being driven out of town, having lost all his money, reduced to tending pigs, and finally returning to his father. *The Surgeon* - a quack doctor pretending to remove a stone which is causing a man's madness (a common Flemish scene) denounces greed which exploits gullibility.



Jan Sanders van Hemessen, *The Prodigal Son*, 1536



Jan Sanders van Hemessen, *The Surgeon*, 1550-55

Pieter Aertsen produced paintings of peasant scenes. *The Egg Dance* shows a popular tavern pastime where the dancer attempts to move an egg round a circle without breaking it before tipping a bowl over it, using only the feet.



Pieter Aertsen, *The Egg Dance*, 1552

But it was Aertsen's pictures of kitchens and market-stalls that laid the foundation of Flemish still-life painting. He developed the theme further by placing an important religious scene in the background – a reversal of the normal hierarchy.



Pieter Aertsen, *Butcher's Stall with the Flight into Egypt*, 1551



Pieter Aertsen, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, 1553



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Still-Life with Flowers*, 1617

Pieter Aertsen's lilies in the vase in *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* inspired the first great Dutch still-life flower painter, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder. Much of his work was painted in the early 17th century, but his origins lie with Aertsen with whom he shared a delight in ornate vases. The flower piece became a popular picture at the end of the 16th century.

Ambrosius started painting flower-pieces in 1593 and was the first notable painter to specialise in still-life. He started the tradition of painting detailed flower bouquets, typically of roses and tulips. The detail was enhanced by painting in oil on copper.



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Flower Still-Life*, 1614 (oil on copper)

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c 1525 – 1569)

The greatest artistic genius of the age in the Netherlands was Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In his own time his reputation was comparatively low compared to his modern-day standing. Like Bosch, he was interested in the fragility of man, and some of his early work shows that influence.

In the 16th century every Netherlandish town had a *rederijkers kamers*, a Chamber of Rhetoric. Antwerp, where Bruegel began his artistic career had three. The chambers were well supported – local civic leaders were members, as were artists – and had an important social role. They performed dramas frequently. Some were farces about country peasants which either mocked their folly or celebrated their simple pleasures. The other type of drama was much more serious, originated from Medieval Morality plays, in which personifications of Virtue and Vice abounded. These *rederijker kamers* plays, mirroring people's ideals, hopes and fears, were intended to be instruct and edify. They are the dramatic equivalent of Bruegel's art.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Seven Deadly Sins – Anger*, 1557 (Engraving)

When Bruegel returned to Antwerp after his travels in Italy in 1551- 1554 he worked for Hieronymous Cock, an engraver and print-seller who had been very successful with prints of Bosch's design. Between 1555 and 1563 Bruegel produced almost 40 drawings for Cock's engravers. His *Seven Deadly Sins* feature some Boschian figures – *Lust* is most obviously influenced by Bosch. Bruegel produced *Virtues* too.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Seven Deadly Sins – Lust*, 1557 (Engraving)

Contemporaries recognised a connection between the two artists. In 1572 Bruegel is referred to as “*this new Hieronymous Bosch.*” Bruegel’s first large paintings were allegories of human folly, just like Bosch’s *The Haywain Triptych*.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Fight between Carnival and Lent*, 1559

Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* was a hugely popular work and important for the Reformation. Folly looks down on earth from the realms of the gods and says: "There is no show like it. Good God, what a theatre! How strange are the actions of fools." Two of Bruegel's works depict the shows Erasmus wrote about: *Netherlandish Proverbs* illustrated more than 85 popular sayings about human foolishness, and *Childish Games* showed more than 80 pastimes. Both are scenes of great variety and detail seen from above.

His *Carnival and Lent* repeats the formula. A traditional carnival takes place in Flemish towns and villages in the week before Lent. Bruegel shows the conflict at the bottom of the picture. An obese Carnival astride a barrel and holding a spit as a lance jousting with the thin pinched figure of Lent, in a cart using a baker's shovel. The Blue Boat on the inn sign was the emblem of societies who arranged carnival activities and also refers to drunkards and gamblers who squandered time and money on carousing. The right half shows images in the church draped with white cloth in preparation for Lent. Among the scenes there are warnings about pious practices put on only for show. Erasmus remarked that false piety was no better than dissolute living.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel*, 1563 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

Genesis tells the story of Noah's descendants assembling to build a tower in an attempt to reach Heaven. Later versions have King Nimrod as the instigator. He is the figure on the bottom left supervising construction in Bruegel's work. God punished the folly by condemning men to speak in unintelligible tongues and scattered them over the earth. Bruegel's *Tower* looks a little like the Colosseum in Rome which Bruegel would have seen during his stay in Italy 10 years before he painted the picture. Rome was the Eternal City intended by Imperial rulers to last forever, but its decay and ruins were taken to symbolize the vanity and transience of earthly efforts.

The background landscape of *Tower of Babel* is a feature which Bruegel repeats. Rich landscapes were much admired in the Netherlands in the 1540s when Bruegel was growing up. The chief features (as described earlier) were a high viewpoint, great areas of land and sea depicted with microscopic precision, and a distant horizon.

There was a demand in the Netherlands for pictures and prints that stressed the diversity of nature and foreign lands. Travel was hard, slow, limited to a few, and dangerous besides. Traveller's tales were in great demand. *Hunters in the Snow* shows a path of a great journey; across lakes, bridges, fields, ice-locked sea to distant mountains. Bruegel recalls his travels across the Alps to and from Italy. By the 16th century a fear of the Alps had been replaced by admiration and awe. Many Alpine peaks were scaled for the first time in the early 1500s.



Pieter Bruegel, *Hunters in the Snow* (*Months: January*), 1565

Hunters in the Snow is one of the paintings of *Months* (only five remain) commissioned by Nicolaes Jonghelinck, a wealthy Antwerp financier and merchant: a new type of patron who bought art as interior decoration and as an investment. Easel paintings replaced tapestry and became very popular with art patrons.

The *Months* were large-scale versions of the Limbourg Brothers' illuminations. Instead of simply showing the labours of the months, Bruegel's works are landscapes depicting the abundance and cycle of nature, ever-changing but dominant, dictating human existence. *Corn Harvest* shows human activity in harmony with the earth working against a background of nature and faith (the church on the right).



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Corn Harvest (Months: August)*, 1565



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Peasant Dance*, 1567

There was great interest among city-dwellers in Netherlands in peasant pleasures and recreation, stimulated partly by the farces of *rederijkers kamers*. Shepherd dances were a common subject in 15th century French and Flemish tapestries. Cock started printing scenes of country life from 1561 because of the growing popularity of peasant subjects. Well-dressed townfolk used to make excursions to see village festivals. Demand for bucolic rustic scenes was met also by Bruegel.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Peasant Wedding*, 1567

Peasant Dance and *Peasant Wedding* reflect the influence of Italian Renaissance. Monumentality appealed to Bruegel. The figures are now larger and closer to the spectator, and the viewpoint is lower. The human form is rendered more convincingly, and with properly foreshortened limbs.

Bruegel was much misunderstood. One biographer claimed few of his paintings could be contemplated "with a straight face" and dubbed him "*Peasant Bruegel*" and "*Bruegel the Jester*." In Antwerp Bruegel was a valued member of an intellectual circle. Abraham Ortelius, one of the circle and then working on the first modern atlas of the world, praised Bruegel's fidelity to nature (they seemed not so much works of art as "*works of nature*") and added "*in all his works more is always implied than is depicted*."

Bruegel painted *Peasant Dance* and *Peasant Wedding* when he was in Brussels, whence he moved in 1563 after his marriage to Mayken, the daughter of Pieter Coeck van Aelst, an artist to whom Bruegel was apprenticed in his youth. During Bruegel's six years in Brussels, he painted biblical stories set in contemporary times which reflected life in the Netherlands. The *Blind leading the Blind*, based on a parable in Matthew, referred to the various Protestant sects which developed in the Netherlands. The fine distinction between them made religion bewildering. At bottom man was meant to avoid sin. This personal responsibility is difficult. Following others blindly is easy, but can lead to damnation. The church behind the line of staggering humanity stands strong and upright; faith gives true vision.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Blind leading the Blind*, 1568

Opposition in the Netherlands to Spanish rule provoked Philip II to a harder line. In October 1565 he wrote to Margaret of Parma, his Regent in charge of government in the Netherlands, ordering the Inquisition to punish thoroughly offenders against the Catholic faith. Margaret was so distressed and worried she took a week to summon up the courage to reveal his instructions. Her fears were justified. Indignation and anger swept through the Netherlands. The Inquisition was harsher than in Spain: heretics who recanted were still executed. 1566 also saw famine, inflation and unemployment. The riots of that year forced Philip to send 20,000 troops under the Duke of Alba and war began. *Massacre of the Innocents* is based on the biblical story of Herod killing baby boys but shows the sacking and plundering of a Flemish village. The soldiers wear the distinctive clothing of the Spanish army and its German mercenaries.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1566

The painting soon came into the possession of Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor and the slaughtered babies were painted out or over (as can be seen on close inspection) to show bundles of food, animals and birds: plunder rather than massacre.

Dissent was met with harsh punishment. The Duke of Alba's regime was sensitive to any criticism, and the plays of the Chambers of Rhetoric were often suppressed. Philip was dependent on the Netherlands, a rich trading region, for money. Alba attempted to impose a compulsory personal tax. Bruegel painted this and hinted at the hardship it caused under the guise of the *Numbering at Bethlehem*, when Herod ordered everyone to be taxed. Joseph and Mary (who was with child) went to Bethlehem to be taxed. They are included in the painting, but lost among the obsession with lucre.

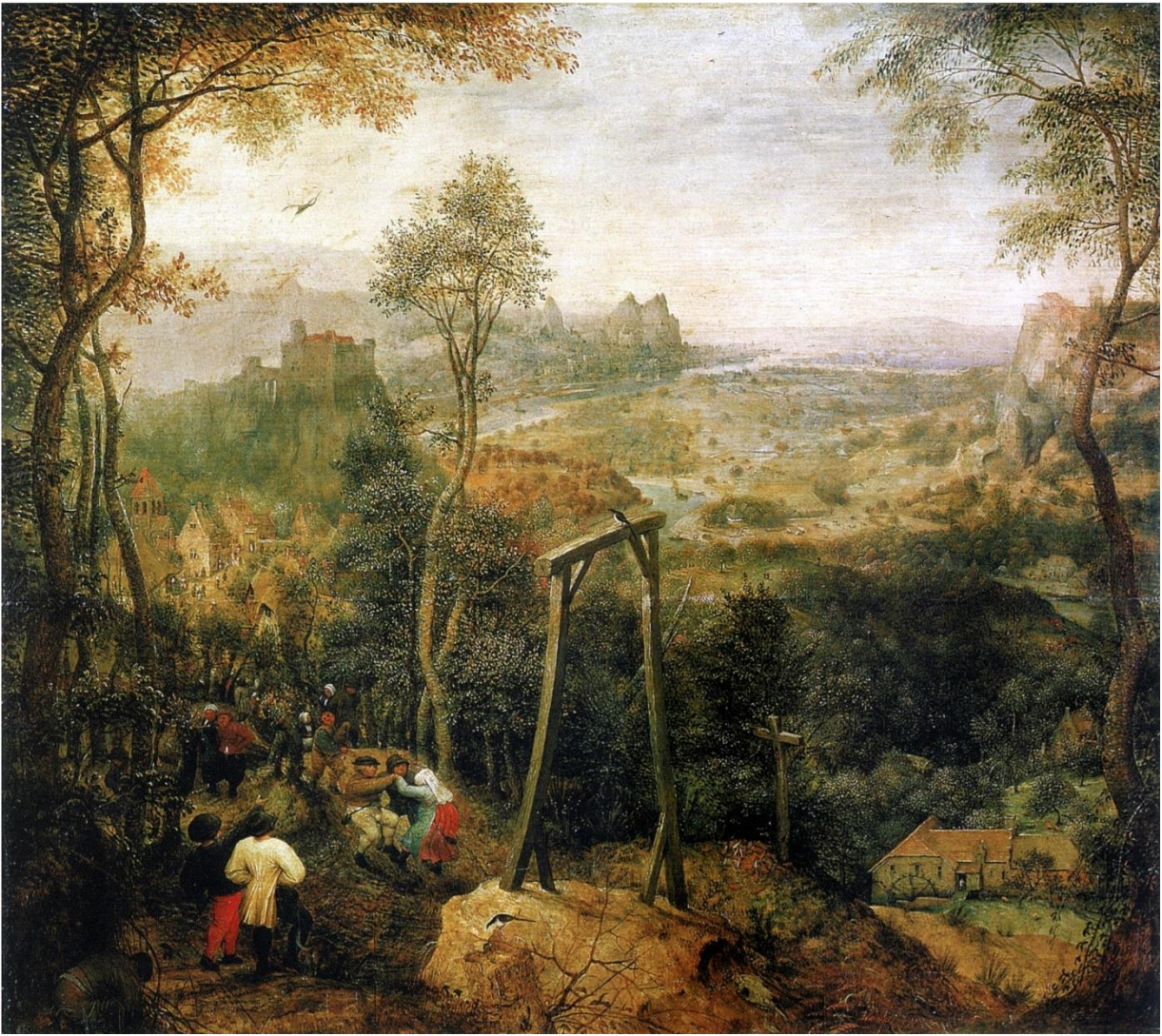


Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Numbering at Bethlehem*, 1566

Both these paintings see a return to Bruegel's large-scale scenes, but here the composition is much better. Strong diagonals (the cart handles, barrels and folk crossing the river, for example) appear and there is a less casual scattering of figures across the scene.

Philip attempted to wipe out every Calvinist, Anabaptist and Lutheran in the Netherlands and insisted on the strict enforcement of the Inquisition. The Council of Troubles was set up to hear cases. Between 1567 and 1573 the Council heard over 12000 cases; 9000 were convicted and just over 1000 executed. In 1568, Alba hanged 18 nobles on the scaffold and followed that by executing two national leaders, Count Egmont and Count Horn, in the market-place of Brussels. In that year Bruegel painted *Magpie on the Gallows*. The work was mentioned by Carel van Mander in his life of Bruegel: "*In his will he bequeathed to his wife a painting of a magpie on the gallows. By the magpie he meant the gossips whom he would deliver to the gallows.*" Harmful gossip, spiteful accusations of heresy, often condemned people to death.

The gallows cast a long shadow over life. Yet in the sweeping landscape, nature once again dominates and compared to her everything is insignificant. Perhaps Bruegel was reminding his audience that God was everywhere; of what consequence are disputes over religion?



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Magpie on the Gallows*, 1568

Bruegel did not live to see the worst effects of the Spanish repression of Protestantism in the Netherlands, and remained a Catholic, yet he had his wife burn some engravings whose inscriptions he thought *“too biting and too sharp”*, fearing, *“most disagreeable consequences might grow out of them.”* Bruegel died in Brussels in September 1569. He left two children, Pieter and Jan, who both became artists. Pieter Bruegel the Younger (born 1564) produced mainly inexpensive copies of his father’s scenes for local sale and export. He was nevertheless often in financial difficulties. Jan Bruegel the Elder (born 1568) was the much better artist, nicknamed “Velvet Brueghel” for his exquisite miniature-like style.

Later landscapes

In the second half of the 16th century, landscapes without narrative began to appear in the Netherlands. Durer had painted them in watercolour decades earlier, but artists used landscape scenes largely to tell stories. Landscape as a subject in its own right was painted by Cornelis van Dalem of Antwerp. Gillis van Coninxloo didn’t quite abandon narrative but reduced it minor proportions compared to the view, much as Aerten had emphasised still-life over the depicted religious scene. Coninxloo introduced a dense group of trees in the foreground to narrow the panoramic view (a device Claude Lorraine would use). Coninxloo started a new speciality in forest pictures. His subject matter was not the earth, but its vegetation, woods and leafy labyrinths. He reduced figures in his compositions almost to the point of disappearance and cleverly used light.



Cornelis van Dalem, *The Farmstead*, 1564



Gillis van Coninxloo, *Landscape with the Judgement of Paris*, 1590s



Gillis van Coninxloo, *Forest Landscape*, 1598

At the very end of the century seascapes began to be a Dutch speciality. In the long conflict with Spanish occupying forces, Netherlands' ships were a powerful force. The Dutch Sea Beggars captured the port of Brill in 1572. The Duke of Alba reacted calmly; "*no es nada*" ("it is nothing"), but from this base the United Provinces would eventually rid themselves of Spanish rule. The capture of Brill meant the Dutch Sea Beggars could dominate the sea routes from the Netherlands and the North. Spain was heavily dependent on Dutch trade and Baltic grain to feed its population, so the Beggars could effectively blockade Castile. Alba's inability to control the seas proved fatal.



Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom, *Battle between Dutch and Spanish ships on the Haarlemmermeer*, 26 May 1573, 1621

Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom was an important founder of seascapes, although it was not until 1621 that he painted a picture in celebration of the Sea Beggars defeating their Catholic oppressors off Haarlem. Inevitably the first Dutch seascapes celebrated victories over Spain.



Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom, *Dutch ships ramming Spanish galleys off the Flemish coast in Oct 1602*, 1617

These celebratory pictures continued into the 17th century as Dutch sea power grew to its zenith.



Hendrick van Steenwijk the Elder, *Interior of Aachen Cathedral*, 1575

Another type of “scape” – architectural paintings – received its first great impetus in the last quarter of the 16th century. Hendrick van Steenwijk the Elder was the outstanding master of the time and he executed the first memorable church interiors. He began a genre which would continue with Saenredam and De Witte, among others.

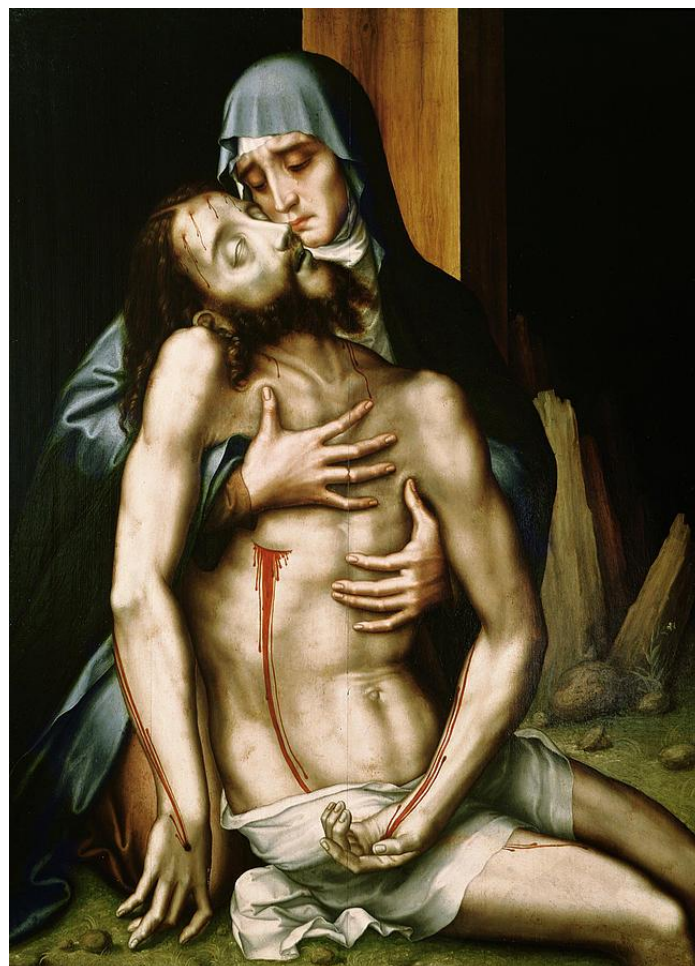
These new landscapes, seascapes and interiors, along with still-life paintings were new seeds barely planted in the 16th century, but which would germinate and blossom into wonderful fruits in the Golden Age of Dutch art in the 17th century.

Spain

The growth of arts in Spain in the 16th century was determined by the power of the Catholic monarchs which diminished the nobility and reduced the middle class to an insignificant status. Virtually the only patronage was for religious paintings for the crown. Luis Morales and El Greco expressed the Spanish ideal and the deeply devout nature of the country. Their intense religious emotion fitted in with the prevailing religious climate of St Ignatius Loyola. Yet neither was patronised much by Phillip II, who preferred Titian.

Luis de Morales (1512 – 1586)

Luis de Morales was trained by Dutchmen and his style is based on followers of Leonardo; hence his soft forms melting into dark shadows.



Luis de Morales “El Divino”, *Pieta*, 1560s

Almost all his works were religious and his paintings were celebrated for their spirituality despite their shocking realism, for which he earned the “El Divino” – The Divine. His Depositions and Pietas were highly wrought. El Divino’s *Ecce Homo* conveys a deep expression through face and hands, and the contrast between the green of the thorns and the red of the drops of blood.



Luis de Morales "El Divino", *Ecce Homo*, 1570



Luis de Morales "El Divino", *The Virgin of the Milk*, 1565

Morales also painted very tender Madonna and Child groups. He was born in Badajoz, a Spanish town on the Portuguese border. Luis made only a few trips from Badajoz, usually for the occasional commission. Summoned by King Philip II of Spain to help in the decoration of the Escorial, Morales painted a *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Establishing a distaste for Spanish artists which would soon disappoint El Greco, Philip was not pleased with the work. However, the king showed his generous nature in 1581 by granting a pension to Luis, who had become destitute in his old age: a largesse El Greco would have appreciated in his waning years.

Domenikos Theotokopoulos - El Greco (1541 – 1614)

El Greco was born in Candia, the capital of Crete, and was brought up in the Byzantine tradition of art. He retained the fundamental idea that the beauty of materials gives art its splendour and its power to arouse emotions. El Greco was the first European painter to reject the classical tradition and the developments of the Renaissance. He thought surface was more important than depth and colour more important than anatomically-correct drawing.

El Greco took some time to develop his characteristic style. He arrived in Venice in the summer of 1566 and studied with Titian. *Christ Cleansing the Temple* was an early work and shows El Greco had learned his lessons from Titian and Venice: foreshortening, classical architecture, perspective and nudes. The group of semi-naked men and women look more like refugees from one of Titian's Bacchanals than peaceful vendors of caged pigeons, rabbits and chickens.



El Greco, *Christ Cleansing the Temple*, 1570-1575

Christ cleansing the Temple was a popular allegory of the Counter-Reformation. The Council of Trent, convened mid-century was considered to have rid the Catholic Church of the worst abuses and corruption, just as Christ had cleared the rot.

The four portraits in the foreground are (from left to right) Titian, Michelangelo, Giorgio Giulio Clovio and an unknown younger man, variously thought to be Correggio, Sebastiano del Piombo, Raphael or a self-portrait.

Giulio Clovio, a great illuminator of manuscripts who lived in Cardinal Farnese's palace in Rome from 1561 to 1578, recommended El Greco to the cardinal; "a young Cretan pupil of Titian's has arrived in Rome, a really excellent painter in my opinion ... he has astonished all the painters in Rome." As a result, El Greco was provided accommodation in the Palazzo Farnese. He painted a portrait showing Giorgio pointing to one of his most famous works, the book of the *Blessed Virgin* which he illuminated in 1560 for Cardinal Farnese. This painting was the first among many fine portraits by El Greco.



El Greco, *Giorgio Giulio Clovio*, 1570

Despite this support, El Greco made enemies during his time in Rome. Giulio Mancini, physician, art collector and biographer of Caravaggio wrote in his *Thoughts on Painting* (1617-21):

"During the pontificate of Pius V [(1568-1572), there arrived in Rome a man commonly known as El Greco. This man, who had studied in Venice ... had attained a high degree of excellence in his profession ... At that time there was some talk of covering up some of the figures in Michelangelo's Last Judgement, which Pope Pius considered indecent, and El Greco suddenly declared that if the whole work were destroyed he could paint it again chastely and decently and just as well as the original as regards good pictorial execution. Such was the indignation of all the painters and lovers of art that he found it expedient to remove to Spain ..."

Among enemies in Rome, El Greco found a life-long friend in Luis de Castilla. Luis and his brother Diego, Dean of the Chapter at Toledo Cathedral, arranged for two important commissions for El Greco. During the 16th century Toledo served as capital of Castile and housed the royal court. However, by the time El Greco arrived in 1575-76 the court had left, first for Valladolid then Madrid. The first of the two Spanish commissions obtained for El Greco arose from Diego being executor of the will of Dona Maria de Silva. She was a Portuguese lady in the household of the wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V who married the emperor's Auditor General. After her husband's death, Maria retired to the convent of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo and when she died in 1575 her wealth was left to build a new church to house her tomb.

Diego oversaw the construction of the church, completed in 1579, and in August 1577 contracted El Greco, to produce nine paintings. El Greco was certainly busy, completing the paintings and designing the models for carved images in 20 months. Seven paintings adorn the high altar. The two side altars have an *Adoration of the Shepherds* and a *Resurrection*.



Church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo



El Greco, *The Trinity*, 1577 (Santo Domingo el Antiguo)

The Trinity is a derivation of Durer's 1511 print. The majestic figure of God supports the body of Jesus, watched over by the dove. The angels at the sides help to bring the Trinity forward almost like a relief. There is some distortion in the secondary figures, a foretaste of the future.

The Assumption of the Virgin is much larger. The composition has similarities to Titian's famous work (as most paintings of this theme did by then), but the emotion is quieter and more in keeping with Counter-Reformation ideas of contemplating a mystery rather than the excited witnessing of a miracle.

The division between earthly and heavenly domains recurred in El Greco's art. Here we see his repertoire of gestures and attitudes developing: the old man on the right with his hand on his breast conveys a sense of wonder, and the arms are used with great effect. The angels boast a rich variety of attitudes and foreshortenings but serve the same purpose as in *The Trinity*, pushing the main figure forward.

The second commission originated from Diego's position at Toledo Cathedral. He induced the Chapter to contract the artist in July 1577 to paint an altarpiece for the Sacristy of the Cathedral. The result is one of El Greco's finest paintings. *Espolio (Disrobing of Christ)* shows the moment when Jesus is stripped of the red robe, forced on him as a mockery, by one of the executioners. He is shown serene even though surrounded by evil gesticulating characters shouting insults.

Christ's foot is painted with delicacy and catches the light. The Marys are looking fixedly at the nail which will shortly pierce it. Christ pardons with his left hand the executioner who is inserting the nail into the base of the cross. The figure in armour is thought to be St Longinus who later pierced Christ's side with his lance, and then exclaimed, "*Truly this man was the son of God.*"



El Greco, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1577-79 (Santo Domingo el Antiguo)

The painting started a catalogue of legal issues which dogged El Greco for the rest of his life. Christ's face is divinely lit and further emphasised by the contrast of the surrounding dark and blue tones. The Chapter of the Cathedral didn't see it that way. Counter-Reformation strictures about art maintained that no head should be placed above Christ's. Moreover, only those people present at the event should be depicted, and the three Marys were not.

There had already arisen a conflict over the fee. Appraisers appointed by the Cathedral estimated the work's value at 227 ducats; those appointed by El Greco suggested a much higher figure. The arbitrator ruled a fee of 317 ducats. The Cathedral refused to pay the balance owing from this ruling, insisting that El Greco should change the picture or return the deposit. El Greco was threatened with prison and gave in, accepting whatever the Chapter would pay him, saying; "*I am ready to remove what they wish me to remove*". The painting was hung without modification but El Greco was not paid until December 1581.



El Greco, *Espolio*, 1577-79 (Sacristy, Toledo Cathedral)

These two commissions in Toledo established El Greco's reputation. He aspired, however, to become a court painter to Philip II in Madrid, and may have painted *The Adoration in the Name of Jesus*, to attract the King's attention. To his delight, El Greco received in autumn 1579 a royal order from Philip II to paint a picture of St Maurice and his fellow martyrs for the altar of the chapel of the Escorial.

Towards the end of the 3rd century at Gaul St Maurice and his legionaries were commanded to swear allegiance to Roman gods. After deliberating with his men, Christians as he, Maurice refused. The legion was decimated and Maurice executed. El Greco depicts two scenes. The first, and more prominent, shows the discussion between St Maurice (with his back to us) and two of his officers. El Greco depicts the sublime indifference with which they obeyed the dictates of their faith without fear of their ultimate fate. The second, to the left, with the two officers repeated shows St Maurice beheaded. Above angels bear laurel wreaths of triumph. The earthly lower part of the composition is stressed by the realistic depiction of flowers and dead tree-stump besides which the painter's signature is written on piece of paper held in a snake's mouth. The head over the left shoulder of the officer in the red and blue robe in the foreground scene is considered to be a self-portrait.



El Greco, *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice*, 1580-82 (Escorial)

The work alarmed Philip II, who ordered it to be put in a chapter house rather than in the Escorial Chapel. Father Siguenza wrote in his *History of the Order of Saint Jerome* (1605);

“A certain Dominico Greco, who is now living and producing excellent work in Toledo, left here, in the Chapter Room of the Escorial, a picture of St Maurice ... His Majesty did not like it ... not many people like it, indeed, though it is said to be very artistic and we are told that its painter is very proficient, and that many excellent things by him are to be seen.”

Saint Maurice marks a crucial moment in El Greco's life, the death of his dream to become an official painter of Philip II. He received no more royal commissions and decided there was no more promising place for him than Toledo. Indeed, no commission was forthcoming for another four years. Apart from *Saint Maurice*, El Greco spent 1579 to 1586 painting pictures for sale from the window of his workshop. Spain was a backward country, despite the silver coming from the Americas, and had not developed the Italian taste for nudes and mythological subjects. Thus, the many works El Greco produced in these years for the market were mainly portraits of Christ, female saints and the Virgin Mary, which were serenely beautiful.

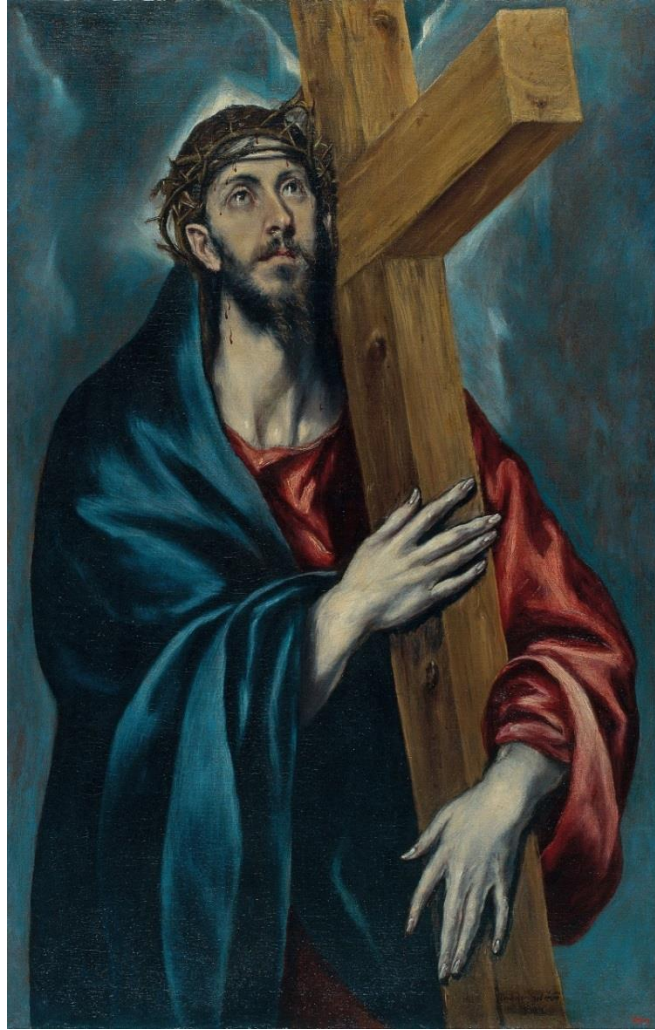


El Greco, *The Penitent Magdalen*, 1579-86 (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City)



El Greco, *The Holy Family* (detail), 1579-86 (Hispanic Society, New York)

His many versions of *Christ carrying the Cross* show the Saviour gently embracing the cross and gazing towards heaven; a willing sacrifice for mankind. The Barcelona painting, although later, is typical of the series and shows Christ with the same liquid luminosity in the eyes as Mary Magdalen.



El Greco, *Christ carrying the Cross*, 1590-95 (Barcelona)

In March 1586 El Greco signed a contract to provide the commemorative picture, the *Burial of the Conde de Orgaz* for the church of Santo Tome in Toledo. The building of church was paid for by the Lord (Conde) of the town of Orgaz in the 14th century. When he died in 1323 he was buried in one of the chapels. The inscription on his tomb describes the miracle of his burial and the nature of his will:

"When the priests were preparing to bury him, to the wonderment of everybody St Stephen and St Augustine came down from heaven [in gratitude for the charity of Conde de Orgaz in providing the church dedicated to St Stephen and lodging for the Augustinian monks] and placed his body here with their own hands!"

In his will he left to the parish priest and minister of this church as also to the poor of the parish, two sheep, 16 chickens, two full wineskins, two wagonloads of firewood and 800 of the coins we call maravedis, which they are to receive annually from the townsfolk of Orgaz."

Over time the Orgaz town authorities refused to make this annual contribution to the parish of Santo Tome. The priest, Andres Nunes de Madrid, sued them and won his case in 1570. It was for this victory that the painting was commissioned.



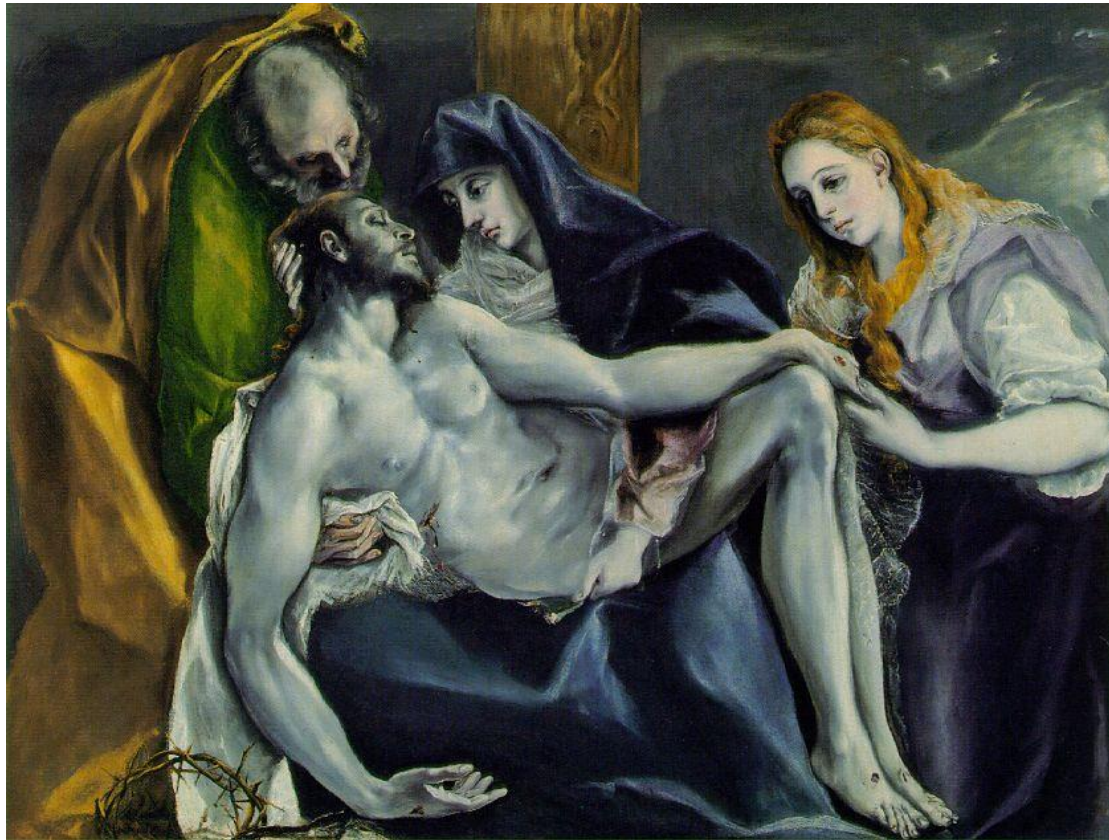
El Greco, *Burial of the Conde de Orgaz*, 1586 (Santo Tome, Toledo)

El Greco divides the work between earth and heaven; the angel carrying the Conde's soul links the two. The earthly scene is rendered realistically, with wonderful expressions, and with great precision. The upper half is more expressionist – the distortions in the figures are greater as they penetrate heaven – and the colours are more intense and more luminous. The heavenly part has a visionary quality. Mary's restrained attitude balances the pleading posture of St John, as they intercede on behalf of the Conde's soul.

There are more figures on the right in heaven (among them Philip II), but they are balanced by the larger figure of St Peter (with the keys) and below him the group of David, Moses and Noah. The transparent surplus of the priest, Andres Nunes, mirrors the white robe of Christ. The small boy is El Greco's son. The painting remains one of El Greco's most famous. The *Description of the Imperial City of Toledo* (1612) mentioned the work:

"it is one of the best pictures in Spain; foreigners come to see it and are filled with admiration, while people of the city never tire of admiring it, constantly discovering new things in it."

Despite the marvellous reception, trouble arose once more over the fee. Eventually in July 1588 El Greco was paid but the money quickly passed into the hands of his creditors. His works had not been selling well, and he was obliged to move into smaller quarters. The next few years were difficult and, with no commissions, El Greco reverted to painting stocks of devotional pictures. The more remarkable works of this period are *Pieta*, and *Agony in the Garden*.



El Greco, *Pieta*, 1587-97 (Paris, Niarchos Collection)

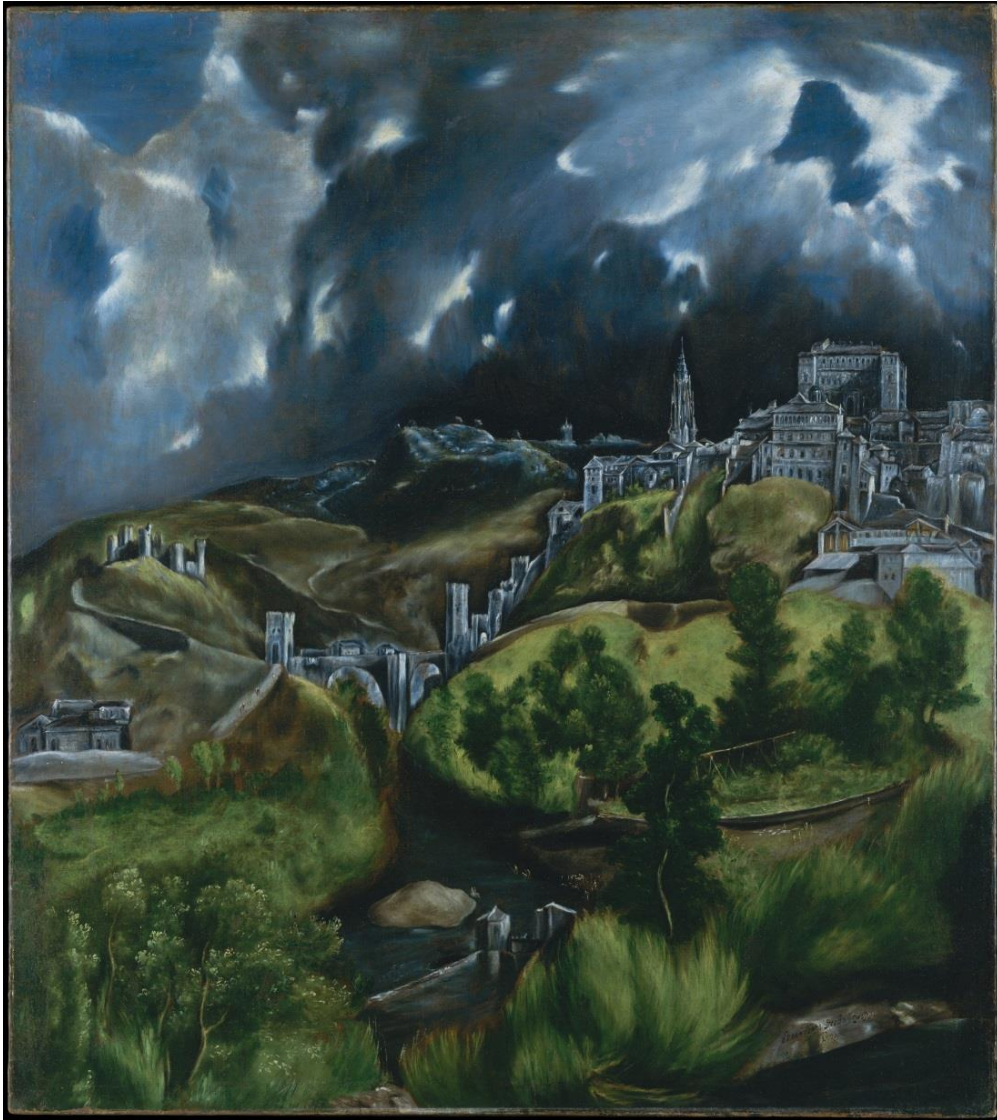
The four figures and the cross fill the canvas. Christ's body unifies the work: his right arm leading to the crown of thorns; his left hand held by Mary Magdalene. The wound from the lance highlights the warm hand of Joseph of Arimathea against the dead flesh.



El Greco, *Agony in the Garden*, 1597-1603 (Toledo, Ohio)

There are three versions of *Agony*, but only the one in Ohio is entirely by the master. Christ lifts his eyes to the angel. The rock behind Christ looks like His shadow, suddenly huge and turned to stone.

The decade from 1597 marked a period of intense activity. In November 1597 El Greco signed a contract to provide altarpieces for the Chapel of San Jose. In the background of one of them Toledo appears for the first time. El Greco's views of the city would become famous, permeated with emotion and allegory. The Cathedral and the Alcazar (which El Greco places together), symbols of religious and secular power, stand forthright against the storm and protect the lush Spanish countryside. In reality (as Diego Rivera was to paint in 1912) the city is dun-coloured rising on dry, barren hills.



El Greco, *View of Toledo*, 1596-99 (The Met, New York)

In December 1596 El Greco was commissioned to produce paintings and carvings for the Colegio de Dona Maria de Aragon, an Augustinian seminary in Madrid. These were the only works by the artist to be hung in the capital. The altarpieces were dismantled in 1810 after the suppression of religious orders in Spain under Joseph Bonaparte. In these works, El Greco realised his late style; elongated forms, attenuation of faces, deformed foreshortenings, flickering flame-like rhythms, bold colour combinations and a strong sense of upward flight.

The centre of the altarpiece was the *Annunciation*. The traditional scene is augmented by angels playing instruments in heaven in celebration. Light descends to the Virgin through the dove from the centre of heaven. The earthly world is indicated at the bottom by steps, a sewing basket (a recurring motif in El Greco's Annunciations) and a rose bush in flames.



El Greco, *Annunciation*, 1597-1600 (Dona Maria de Aragon, now Balageur Museum)

Bracketing *Annunciation* were *Adoration of the Shepherds* and *Baptism of Christ*. In the former earth and heaven are separated by the vaults of the building. The light from the Child Jesus enables El Greco to produce flickering effects. In *Baptism*, God appears, his white robe completing the upward flight of light. Christ is cleverly emphasised by the mantle held up by a row of angels, who also slow down the vertical ascent.



El Greco, *Baptism of Christ*, 1597-1600 (Prado)



El Greco, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1597-1600 (Bucharest)

This late style of El Greco did not affect his many portraits. Since moving to Spain he had continued this genre with success. Although now in poor condition, *Knight taking an oath*, also known as *Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest* in the Prado has been regarded by generations as the personification of the Spanish knight of the Golden Age; resolute and bold, for God and King.



El Greco, *The Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest*, c 1580

In 1603 El Greco was commissioned to produce altarpieces, paintings and sculptures for the church of the Hospital of Charity in Illescas. The tax collector of Illescas sued El Greco for the payment of sales-tax on his art. El Greco argued successfully before the judges that the work of artists benefits and honours the nation and should not be subject to tax. Velazquez and Goya thus had El Greco to thank for part of their wealth.

Among the works produced for the Hospital, El Greco painted a portrait of *Saint Ildefonso*, scholar and theologian who served as the Bishop of Toledo in the last decade of his life, ending in 667. The red, black and white areas are nicely disposed. Like Raphael in *Pope Julius*, El Greco highlights the cleric's head against a plain background, but has him hiding the chair's finial rather than moving it.

A few years before this, El Greco painted his celebrated portrait of *Cardinal Nino de Guevara*, on the occasion of the Cardinal's appointment as Inquisitor General. El Greco evokes the awful power and character of the sitter and his office. The Cardinal is dressed in pale purple with a froth of cool lace (modelled partly by scorings made with the handle of the brush) echoing his beard and pallid face. The effect is of frigid majesty; a man at once frank and perverse.



El Greco, *Saint Ildefonso*, 1603



El Greco, *Cardinal Nino de Guevara*, c. 1600

El Greco died on the 7th April 1614. He bore considerable reverses and at his death, his worldly possessions fitted into a good-sized trunk. The debts would bedevilled his son. El Greco had “*no light or guide other than that burning in the heart*”. A letter from his guide and friend in Rome, Giulio Clovio described a visit to the painter's studio. Some have dismissed it as apocryphal but the judgement his accurate:

“Yesterday I paid a visit to El Greco in order to take him out for a walk in the town. The weather was beautiful, with a delicious spring sun that seemed to fill everybody with joy. The whole town had a holiday air. But when I reached El Greco's studio I was astonished to see the curtains of all the windows so closely drawn that it was hardly possible to see anything. El Greco was sitting in an armchair, neither working nor sleeping. He refused to come out with me, for the light of the day disturbed his inner light.”

El Greco was buried in the Church of Santo Domingo, a crypt of which had been granted to the artist as a family tomb in 1612. An *Adoration of the Shepherds* was the central composition of the altarpiece of the church. There is some uncertainty over when the work was painted, but it is known to have been executed entirely by El Greco's hand, with no assistance from his son. The style of his last period is captured in the work. Robes and mantles are treated less as articles of clothing than as accents of colour and light. The transcendence of the scene is clearly expressed.



El Greco, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1603-1607 (Prado, Madrid)

This work is now in the Prado and is best seen at a distance from across two galleries. After all, it is an altarpiece designed to be seen from afar. The work dominates, just as an altarpiece should. The impression gained is that if Madrid suffered an electrical blackout, the light emanating from El Greco's *Adoration* would blaze in the Prado.

El Greco's art seems to have been inspired by the belief that if the human mind could abandon itself to the "harmony and radiance" of true terrestrial beauty it would be guided upwards to God. El Greco was the last European painter to express such transcendental ideals and his work brings a great age of Christian art to a close.

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