CAUGHT BETWEEN THE FOLDS: AN INTERTEXTUAL AND INTERVISUAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER'S RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

It has always been a challenge to categorize an artist as versatile as Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525–1569).[1] His works appealed to all strata of society immediately during his lifetime, from noblemen to merchants to people of more humble means. Bruegel is best known for his prints and paintings of landscapes and peasants, which have been described in diverse terms: satirical, comical, and critical, as moral allegories, and as so closely based on observation that he 'exceeded nature herself.' In his *Schilder-Boeck* (1604), Carel van Mander described Bruegel as 'Pier den Droll'[2] for provoking his audience to smile at his pictures, while noting of his skills in drawing nature that "he had swallowed all the mountains and cliffs, and, upon coming home, he had spit them forth upon his canvases and panels."[3] The humanist poet Dominicus Lampsonius referred to Bruegel as a new Hieronymus Bosch—perhaps through his prints as published and distributed by Hieronymus Cock—but with art showing such wit and humor that he even surpassed Bosch.[4] Abraham Ortelius, on the other hand, in the epitaph to Bruegel in his

[1] Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 13. Bruegel's date of birth is uncertain; it may be assumed to be between 1524–1530 based on an engraved portrait of 1572 where he appears to be between forty and forty-five.

[2] Carel van Mander, *Dutch and Flemish Painters: Translation from the Schilderboek*, trans. and intro. by Constant van de Wall (New York: McFarlane, Warde, McFarlane, 1936), 153.

[3]Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 157.

Album Amicorum (1574), compared Bruegel to the great ancient painter Apelles, and praised his friend's truth to nature in how he depicted landscapes and human figures.[5]

As shown in these comments, Bruegel's early admirers singled out for praise different aspects of the artist and his body of work. Nevertheless, their comments reveal a shared element of intense engagement as beholders of Bruegel's paintings and prints. I argue that Bruegel's strategy of enlisting the viewer is based not solely on the content or subject of the works, but on their very structure, as well. The formal structure provides the underlying strength of the engagement, demands close looking, and elicits an interpretive response from the contemporary sixteenth-century beholder. In this project, I will select an understudied group of paintings by Bruegel to test what the relationship is between Bruegel's works and the viewer and how the artist invokes the viewer to make meaning from the pictures. These paintings form a distinct but still representative aspect of Bruegel's oeuvre—namely his religious narratives—and include the *Procession to Calvary* (1564, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* (1566, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest), and the *Conversion of St. Paul* (1567, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

Bruegel has received much scholarly attention over the years, but surprisingly, very little of that has been devoted to his religious subjects. Instead, Bruegel's peasants, landscapes, and proverbs have been the focus in modern scholarship. In the realm of peasants, the lively debate about Bruegel's depictions, initiated by Svetlana Alpers and Hessel Miedema, continues with work by Margaret Sullivan and Ethan Matthew

[5] Fritz Grossmann, *Bruegel: Complete Edition of the Paintings*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1966), 26. Ortelius's *Album Amicorum* was published in 1574, after Bruegel's death in 1569.

Kavaler.[6] Sullivan views the peasants in paintings such as Vienna's *Peasant Dance* (ca. 1568) as strictly satire, in which the festive celebration exhibits folly and has the status of moral allegory.[7] Kavaler, on the other hand, sees Bruegel's peasants as evidence of the artist's tolerance of peasant festivity, in which every stratum held a role in the overall community. While I will include a discussion of peasants in this paper, I will do so only as it relates to the artist's representation of 'Everyman' in the vast composition of religious narratives—something that has not yet been fully explored in this other context. I will also elaborate on Kavaler's work on social order in the historical context of mid-sixteenth-century Flanders and specifically the city of Antwerp, home to Bruegel and the epicenter of European economic and cultural activities.

Other scholars such as Walter Gibson, in his pivotal 1977 book on Bruegel, discuss the artist's works as *Theatrum Mundi*,[8] while Charles de Tolnay refers to the artist's "topsy-turvy world" as the key to his paintings.[9] While I agree that these threads may appear within many of Bruegel's paintings, I will argue that the works connected with audiences beyond these themes of folly and carnivalesque reversals. In doing so, I will apply to Bruegel's religious paintings what other scholars have done with his range of secular works in order to evaluate the extent and role of audience absorption. For

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[6] For more on the discussion of Bruegel's peasant scenes, see Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Art Market* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 116; Ethan Matthew Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 184 – 211; Walter S. Gibson, "Bruegel and the Peasants: A Problem of Interpretation," in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Two Studies* (Franklin Murphy Lectures 11) (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum, 1991).

[7] Margaret Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[8] Gibson 1977, 123.

[9] Perez Zagorin, "Looking for Peter Bruegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64.1 (2003): 77.

example, Mark Meadow has analyzed *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559, Staatliche Museen, Berlin), comparing the painting and its juxtaposition of figural structures to the notebook system used by humanists in the sixteenth century.[10] Using Meadow's work on figural structures, I will shift the focus from proverbs to the anecdotal vignettes that Bruegel inserted into his paintings of religious narratives. I have chosen to examine a selection of Bruegel's religious pictures not only because they have been neglected and demand reassessment in light of the current scholarship, but also because it will help move the discourse forward beyond its focus on peasants, landscapes, and proverbs.

As part of my approach, I will discuss the audience for the paintings of religious subjects, and place them in a social, political, and religious context during the sixteenth century when Flanders went through a period of great turmoil and insecurity, especially with regard to the Reformation, rising mercantilism, and oppression from Spain. Using the paintings, I will investigate how in his religious works Bruegel sets up what John Shearman calls 'a slow fuse' to connect contemporary audiences to these most current events and related moral dilemmas, as well as to elements of a local and greater northern art historical canon.[11] With this project, I hope to contribute to Bruegel studies by focusing on a much-neglected subject—his religious material—and seek to broaden the implications for his oeuvre and for northern art by evaluating what claims Bruegel is making for himself and for art in society.

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[10] Mark A. Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric* (Zwolle, Overijssel, Netherlands: Waanders Publishers, 2002).

[11] John Shearman, *Only Connect… Art and Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (The AW Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1988) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Bruegel's three paintings *Procession to Calvary*, *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, and *Conversion of St. Paul* share a similar compositional structure and color palette. With the main subject in the background of a landscape, a recurring compositional feature of Bruegel's works, engaging the audience depended upon different factors that include the viewers' recognition of the religious narratives and familiarity with the very structure of the paintings.

In the *Procession to Calvary* (also known as *Christ Carrying the Cross*) (fig. 1), a large painting that measures 124 x 170 cm (48-3/4 x 66-7/8 in.), we see a landscape with a high horizon and human figures spread across its expanse. A monumental windmill sits on top of a rock formation in the distance, spinning ominously. Two black crows circle the right side of the landscape while one sits portentously on a gallows wheel that helps set the somber tone of the picture. The gallows wheel functioned as a device for torture and execution, and serves to remind viewers of the importance of the procession. Four figures at the lower right of the painting convey the Marian group of St. John and the Holy Women who appear as the event's sole mourners. The long procession in the middle ground leads to a circle formed by a crowd of onlookers anticipating the Crucifixion on the hill of Golgotha. The circular formation echoes the gallows wheel occupied by one of the black crows. And where is Christ? He appears in the middle of the painting but is almost imperceptible, surrounded by people. He is even less noticeable, as he has fallen to the ground because of the weight of the cross he is carrying. Christ occupies the center of the canvas, the figures and their actions circumnavigating him.

As observed by Walter Gibson, a central event in Christianity has been transformed into a public holiday, a *Theatrum Mundi*.[12] The crowd pays little attention to Christ and those that torment him. A man adds more weight onto the cross with his right leg, increasing the burden Christ is carrying, while another dressed as a fool taunts him with a gaping mouth. We also see Simon of Cyrene in the left foreground, as he is forced by soldiers to help Christ bear the cross. A crowd gathers around the fracas instigated by Simon's wife, who struggles to free her husband, an uncharitable action in the biblical history that belies the rosary at her waist.[13] This suggests that the external signs of a devoted Christian fail to hide the true nature of human weaknesses that exist in all men and women.

Another crowd scene appears in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* (fig. 2). However, in this picture unlike that of the *Procession*, the sea of figures turns its attention to the main attraction in the central area. In this sizable painting that measures 95 x 160 cm (37-3/8 x 63-1/4 in.), we see St. John and Christ within a dense forest surrounded by onlookers. The viewer's position remains in the foreground at the back of the crowd, just outside of the framework of trees. Various types of people are shown; Netherlandish peasants, merchants, and foreign visitors attend the sermon, forming a patchwork of the populace typical of sixteenth-century Antwerp. St. John preaches and points to Christ on his left, who again occupies the literal center of the painting's width, but not the actual center of the overall landscape. People climb and rest on trees to see and hear the saint's sermon. Greens, browns, and yellows of the clothing and accessories dance across the

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[12] Gibson 1977, 123.

[13] Ibid.

expanse while reds facilitate the roving of viewers' eyes as they travel across the painting. The significance of Bruegel's placement of the sermon in the countryside, as opposed to the city seen across the river, alludes to the open-air sermons of the Reformation and perhaps a return to nature.[14]

Lastly, in the *Conversion of St. Paul* (fig. 3), another large landscape religious narrative at 108 x 156 cm (42-1/2 x 61-3/8 in.), the crowd consists of soldiers on horseback. Like the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, the soldiers and their mounts face the direction of the figure of Saul in the central area of the middle distance. Saul is depicted lying on the ground, as he was thrown off his horse by God's blinding light just a moment before. In fact, we see the heavenly light stream in from the upper left of the canvas striking its target Saul, soon to become the holy figure St. Paul.

Bruegel's environs of craggy mountains, dense forest trees, and a rocky path lined by soldiers recall the landscape drawings from his Alpine experience and Italian journey in 1551–1553. But, as suggested by certain scholars, the picture's setting perhaps commemorates the passage of Duke Alva and his troops through the Alps in the spring of 1567, and the hope of Netherlanders that Alva, like Saul, would be deflected from his purpose of the Inquisition.[15] Gibson, however, contends that Bruegel must have also been aware of associations of high places with communicating with God, such as in the story of Moses speaking with the Lord on Mount Sinai and the disciples' witnessing of the

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[14] Perez Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers, 1500 – 1660: Volume II Provincial Rebellion Revolutionary Civil Wars, 1560–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 94; Silver 2006, 27. Town and country, as noted by Silver, are mutually defining opposites.

[15] Gibson 1977, 182.

Transfiguration of Christ on a mountain.[16] Perhaps Bruegel situated Saul's conversion in a mountainous setting to draw comparisons to other significant spiritual events in which the physical presence of the Almighty could be seen or heard, and traditionally depicted in art.

The three paintings with the narrative structure of the main religious subject in the middle ground or background work well in emphasizing my concern with audience engagement. The viewer, in effect, is captured—or caught—by the paintings' conceptual folds or seams formed by the vignettes and figural groups, or within places where something appears not quite 'right.' The *Procession*'s St. John and the Holy Women group, with literal folds created in the drapery of their robes characteristic of another period, seem to exist in another space and time. They are part of the painting's narrative, but at the same time, they stand apart compositionally and stylistically. Similarly, the chief religious subject in each picture, also coexisting in the biblical period and the sixteenth century, is fitted into the seams of the paintings. Remaining almost imperceptible within a sea of people, the main subject of the holy figure establishes its underlying meaning. The function and meaning of Bruegel's works is based on the audience's presumed knowledge of the Gospels and classical literature, as well as of the enduring Netherlandish painting tradition in which Bruegel claims his place. The sixteenth-century viewers' awareness and experience of current religious and political events are also presumed. In the following two chapters, I will examine Bruegel's audience and the period's social, religious, and political atmosphere to frame his viewers' connections with the paintings.

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[16] Ibid.

CHAPTER 2
AUDIENCE AND PATRONAGE

The three paintings of religious subjects worked to maintain audience engagement, and connected with this group of cultured elite. Who was part of this circle, and why would they find Bruegel's work so appealing? In the following discussion, I examine the artist's friends and patrons to lay the foundation of how Bruegel may have painted for a particular presumed audience and how he connected that audience to his paintings.

Antwerp with its rising wealth in the shipping and trading industries became the cultural center and commercial capital of Europe by the middle of the sixteenth century, usurping Bruges's prominence. Antwerp's population rose from forty thousand at the beginning of the century to one hundred thousand around 1560, making the city one of the largest in Europe at the time.[17] As the influx of businessmen continued to add to the increasing number, artists also followed. Lodovico Guicciardini recorded over three hundred artists working in Antwerp in his 1567 publication *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi*, which provided detailed descriptions of the cities and principalities of the Low Countries.[18]

In this environment of mercantilism, a chasm remained between the upper and lower classes. Twelve percent of the population formed the upper class, deemed wealthy enough to pay taxes, and consisted almost exclusively of merchants and specialty artisans. Another twelve percent made up the middle class, while the remaining three-

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[17] Silver 2006, 17.

[18] Ibid. Silver notes that the number of artists is twice the number of bakers, and as bread was the staple diet, this points to an overwhelming size for the profession.

quarters of the population—mostly artisans, day laborers, and the unemployed—were considered part of the impoverished lower stratum.[19]

The buying market for Bruegel's paintings tended to be the urban elite, and primarily amongst the merchant class and the nobility. Within these circles, interests ranged from intellectual pursuits and classical studies to spiritualism and nascent nationalism. This group of people appreciated common spiritual ideals and associated with the aforementioned endeavors, embracing humanist interests. Abraham Ortelius the cartographer of Philip II of Spain and friend of Bruegel was a part of the humanist circle. Evidence for Bruegel and Ortelius's close friendship is noted within the latter's *Album Amicorum*, in which the cartographer praised Bruegel's depictions as true to nature and compared him in his epitaph to the ancient painter Apelles. Their friendship was well known to others, as supported by two correspondences from Roman scholar Scipio Fabius to Ortelius. In the first letter of June 16, 1561, Fabius inquires about news on Marten de Vos and Pieter Bruegel.[20] In the second correspondence of April 14, 1565, Fabius again sends greetings to the artists through Ortelius, after meeting them in Italy.[21]

Ortelius, who commissioned Bruegel's *Death of the Virgin* (1564, Upton House, Banbury, Oxfordshire) (fig. 4), had it engraved by Philip Galle for distribution to several colleagues, including Dirck Coornhert, a scholar and playwright, and Benito Arias Montanus, a censor for the Inquisition.[22] Coornhert's reaction to the engraving speaks to

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[19] Kavaler 1999, 31.

[20] A.E. Popham, "Pieter Bruegel and Abraham Ortelius," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 59.343 (1931): 188.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Kavaler 1999, 37.

the power of the image and how it not only engaged one's vision, but other senses, as well. His correspondence to Ortelius, in gratitude for the picture, provides a glimmer of the emotional encounter with this image; "Methinks I heard moaning, groaning and screaming and the splashing of tears in this portrayal of sorrow. There no one can restrain himself from sadly wringing his hands, from grieving and mourning, from lamenting and from the tale of woe. The chamber appears deathlike yet all seems to me alive."[23] Like Coornhert, Montanus could not forget the image "of the departure of the virgin mother from this mortal life, painted both with great skill and great piety, an impression of it which I much wished to have," as expressed in an inquiry to Ortelius dated March 30, 1590, fifteen years after his initial viewing.[24]

The people associated with Ortelius, who comprised a significant portion of Bruegel's viewing audience, were learned men who nonetheless defied certain confessional and political labels. Ortelius seemed to get along with both Catholics and Calvinists, and was part of a group that appreciated common spiritual values regardless of differences in doctrine.[25] As noted previously, his many colleagues were cultivated men, and included artists, writers, philosophers, businessmen, and even clergy involved with the Spanish Inquisition. The reach of Ortelius expanded to societies made up of rhetoricians, or *rederijkers*, who performed dramas with classical teachings or moral allegories. Most of the members of these rhetorical societies were educated, professional men described as the cultivated elite, as well as artists. They included Willem van

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[23] Popham 1931, 187.

[24] Ibid., 184.

[25] Kavaler 1999, 42.

Haecht, a man of humanist leanings, Cornelis van Ghistele, a distinguished classicist, and Hubert Goltzius, noted for his writings on ancient coins and Roman iconography.[26] Goltzius was also connected to Bruegel by marriage; he was the brother-in-law of the artist Peter Coecke van Aelst, Bruegel's teacher and father-in-law.[27] A common thread shared amongst the group seems to have been an appreciation for multiple layers of meaning within literary and visual works to excite the intellect and spark dialogue. Ortelius and his friends were skilled in rhetorical exercises and studies of emblems that involved interpreting texts and images and engaging with "[designs] not so obvious or plain that anyone could understand them; nor were they so obscure and oblique that a man of understanding could not comprehend them through contemplation alone," as noted by the Dutch translator Marcus Antonius Gillis van Diest in describing the popularity of emblem books.[28] I consider how Bruegel's multivalent paintings also provided similar mental stimulation. Ethan Matthew Kavaler deftly examines the interests and humanist leanings of Ortelius and his friends, but what is not fully explored is the negotiation between spiritual and financial health faced by Antwerp's merchants in a changing world.

It is true that Bruegel's paintings contain numerous layers of meaning, as well as elements that connected with the learned group of the cultured elite. But what is the significance of this kind of engagement with religious paintings? Within Antwerp's social and economic culture, one can find expressions of the growing tension between

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[26] Ibid., 40.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Kavaler 1999, 41. Kavaler refers to a book of emblems by Johannes Sambucus, quoting translator Marcus Antonius Gillis van Diest's foreword.

spiritual well-being and financial wealth illustrated through its literary and visual arts. Taking into account the cresting wave of the merchant class, various cultural signs seem to suggest that the wealthier Antwerp became, the greater the outpouring for a return to older values of labor and spirituality. This 'return to the fold' is signified by an increase in moral invectives evident in rhetorical society dramas and satirical writings. Equated with deception, and associated with the manipulation of supply and prices for profit, merchants received the brunt of society's reproach by *rederijkers* and satirical authors.[29] Cornelis Everaert, in his 1530 play, *The Play of the Uneven Money*, lays blame on scheming merchants for the fluctuating value of money.[30] In the play *Heynken de Luyere* (ca. 1540), Cornelis Crul, a merchant and poet, portrays a foreign trader in Antwerp wanting to return home, now that God has granted him riches.[31] Yet, the rhetorical societies of various Brabant cities in the 1561 *Landjuweel*, a competitive arts festival held in Antwerp, promoted the theme of the usefulness of businessmen for society and praised merchants for providing markets for farmers, workers, and craftsmen.[32] This love-hate relationship with the merchant class puts the businessman at odds with himself. I argue that the discrepancy between the need to recognize the importance of the merchant to Antwerp's economic structure, conjoined with an emphasis on regaining a substantive form of spirituality and moral order, informed the reception and interpretive force of

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[29] Silver 2006, 20. Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494); Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (ca. 1511).

[30] Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 8, 12.

[31] Silver 2006, 20. As cited in Silver 20, note 37.

[32] Silver 2006, 20.

Bruegel's religious paintings. This created the basis for a self-reflexive connection to the work for his cultured elite audience.

I propose that the cultivation of a learned persona that included the visual arts was one strategy of the sixteenth-century Antwerp merchant's, in which he turned to what Stephen Greenblatt conceived as Renaissance self-fashioning, described as "the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, [and] the attempt to fashion other selves."[33] The businessman and merchant constructed a self-image to achieve and maintain prominence in society; the image of spiritual devotion was a part of this process. Patronage of art was, as well, as demonstrated by the example of Niclaes Jongelinck, a toll collector for Zeeland and noted patron of Bruegel. Jongelinck owned sixteen paintings by the artist, including the cycle of the *Months* (1565),[34] a *Tower of Babel* (1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) (fig. 5), and the *Procession to Calvary*.[35] Like the aristocratic patrons before him who owned manuscript illuminations with Labors of the Months cycles,[36] Jongelinck's display of the *Months* in his home suggests a self-fashioning, a need to identify with the aristocracy and to emulate their patronage of the arts, albeit in the medium of large-scale panel painting. Iain Buchanan has compared Bruegel's landscapes in the *Months* to specific calendar

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[33] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

[34] Iain Buchanan, "The Collection of Niclaes Jongelinck: II The 'Months' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder," *The Burlinton Magazine* 132.1049 (1990): 541.

[35] Mark A. Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*, Aemulatio and the Space of the Vernacular Style," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996): 184; Gibson 1977, 123; Kavaler 1999, 51. *Procession to Calvary* is likely one of the two paintings listed in 1566 Jongelinck's inventory, as cited in Meadow, 184, note 26. In the same collection resided twenty-two Frans Floris pictures and one by Albrecht Dürer, as cited in Kavaler, 51, note 93.

[36] Silver 2006, 123.

manuscript illustrations, citing examples from the Hennessy Book of Hours and the London Golf Book.[37] In this sense, Jongelinck fashions himself as the new Duc de Berry of the sixteenth century, commissioning calendar cycle scenes similar to the *Très Riches Heures* (ca. 1410) (fig. 6) by the Limbourg Brothers. Jongelinck used Bruegel's landscape and religious paintings to help construct an image of himself as a wealthy and pious nobleman, one who, like those in Ortelius's circle, is also learned and well-versed in deciphering the multivalent layers of a Bruegel painting.

Jongelinck's patronage makes a statement about painting's value. Along these lines, Bruegel's translation of scenes from illuminated manuscripts to large panel paintings confers certain ideas: painting has measurable value; and a painting with holy figures is now part of a gallery of art objects, rather than a singular devotional object. As such, viewing the painting in one's home, rather than in a place of worship, connected the spectator with common spiritual values shared by both Catholics and Protestants. The Reformation encouraged personal spiritualism, rather than devotion to or veneration of holy figures. Among the humanists like Ortelius and his circle, spiritual values were held in higher regard than theological doctrines of any particular faith. The *Procession to Calvary*, the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* and the *Conversion of St. Paul* convey the mandates of some of the tenets of personal spiritualism, such as the suffering of Christ, listening to God's words, and staying on the righteous and moral path of God, respectively.

[37] Buchanan 1990, 550. Buchanan includes a chart comparing different illustrations from various *Books of Hours*.

In the Reformation, when emerging Protestant sects and the Catholic Church battled for allegiances of faith, pursuing believers at every turn, the medium of painting appeared to be the most appropriate means to show one's spirituality demonstratively and visually. Sculptures could be seen as crossing the dangerous line between veneration and idolatry in the Reformation. Martin Luther tolerated only paintings and, to a lesser degree, sculptures.[38] Worried that too many Christians misunderstood how to use images appropriately, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam used the figure of Folly to denounce sculptures in his ca. 1511 publication *The Praise of Folly*, "I am not so foolish as to require stone statues decked out in gaudy colors. For sometimes these are a drawback to the worship of us gods—that is, when stupid numbskulls adore the figures instead of the divinities, and then we are left in the position of those who have been edged out of their jobs by substitutes."[39] John Calvin pronounced that sculptures, as well as all images referencing God, represented false idols, and advocated their destruction.

What does painting being the most suitable medium for showcasing spirituality in the Netherlands during the years of religious reform say about Bruegel and his work? I argue that since the artist's patrons were part of the cultured elite, and not part of the Church, Bruegel possessed more leeway in conveying the intended subject of the biblical events. In other words, his commissions were not altarpieces for church settings and did not need to serve a liturgical function. Freed from the constraints of church leaders in which art was made strictly for devotional purposes, Bruegel was able to exceed that

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[38] Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *German Sculpture of the Later Renaissance c. 1520 – 1580: Art in an Age of Uncertainty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 33.

[39] Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans., intro., and comment. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 75.

directive of religious art to comment on and critique the turmoil of the mid-century years, as seen in the 'topsy-turvy world' of the *Procession to Calvary*. As described previously, we see Christ fallen in the center middle ground, surrounded by a crowd of people wearing sixteenth-century contemporary Flemish costume who ignore his suffering, interested only in their own concerns. Like Erasmus, Bruegel observed and criticized the calamities of his time, suggesting moral pitfalls or dilemmas encountered by humankind.

Jongelinck and Ortelius remained prominent collectors of Bruegel's work, but his admirers extended to royalty, as well. King Philip II of Spain and Cardinal Granvelle, the powerful adviser to the regent Margaret of Parma, were known collectors of Bruegel's art.[40] Granvelle may have met Bruegel through Cock, who dedicated many engravings to him, or through Jongelinck, whose brother Jacob was a sculptor and a favorite artist of the Cardinal's.[41] Through his patronage, Granvelle acquired Bruegel's *Flight to Egypt* (1563, The Courtauld Gallery, London) and *Parable of the Blind*, among others.[42]

The audience for Bruegel's paintings included scholars, merchants, nobility, and royalty. Their knowledge of biblical and classical studies, as well as art from northern predecessors, informed their engagement with Bruegel's works. However, I suggest it is not only the textual or visual art references that worked to connect the contemporary

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[40] Irving L. Zupnick, "Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands," *Art Journal* 23.4 (1964): 283. Additionally, after Bruegel's death, Emperor Rudolf owned the *Tower of Babel* and the *Conversion of St. Paul*, as noted in Van Mander's *Schilderboek* (see Van Mander 1936, 155); and the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* was recorded in the inventory of the Infanta Isabella between 1633 and 1650 (see Grossmann 1966, 201).

[41] Gibson 1977, 122.

[42] Ibid. Gibson notes Granvelle had to abandon several paintings when he was forced to leave the Netherlands in 1564. Gibson also notes the *Parable of the Blind*, in Granvelle's collection, is not identical with the painting now in Naples.

viewer to the paintings, but also an atmosphere of a mercantilist society and its dwindling spiritualism and moral direction that helped to bind the audience to his works.

CHAPTER 3
SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS, AND POLITICAL CLIMATE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY NETHERLANDS

The sixteenth century in the Netherlands was a tumultuous period of change, from the splintering of the Church to Spanish oppression to outright revolt. Examining the social, religious, and political climate will help provide an idea of what Bruegel's contemporaries encountered daily. In turn, this will aid in examining the levels of audience engagement with the paintings.

Flemish critics of sixteenth-century society's spiritual downturn and moral failings blame the city's merchants for the displacement of old virtues with worldly values of the mercantile order. These sentiments appear time and again in satirical literature, applied histories, and print culture. By the mid-century, Sebastian Franck had already lambasted the idea of business in his 1534 *Weltbuch*; 'A company is a body whose members collect a sum of money, and then buy with it everything they can get their hands on, pins, mirrors, grain,… And what the workman has sold to them he cannot buy back at double the price.'[43] Johannes Aventinus, the Bavarian historian, criticized the need for private property as a form of institutional avarice: 'Businessmen corrupt all they touch and now they are teaching the rest of us how to be mean and grasping.'[44] A riot broke out in Antwerp in 1554 in reaction against the tax increase on beer and the monopoly on the beer industry.[45] Bruegel's engraving *Battle between the Piggy Banks*

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[43] Ethan Matthew Kavaler, "Pictorial Satire, Ironic Inversion, and Ideological Conflict: Bruegel's *Battle between the Piggy Banks and Strong Boxes*," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996): 166.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

and Strong Boxes (ca. 1570s) (fig. 7) condemns greed in a mock-heroic staging of warfare between inanimate objects. In the posthumous print, anthropomorphic piggy banks and moneyboxes, armed with spears and swords, wage war against one another. Coinage spills out of them like blood on the battlefield. As discussed by Kavaler, the features are characteristic of representations of warfare from scripture and ancient history.[46] Using comedic and anthropomorphic objects to illustrate avarice and corruption, Bruegel places a satirical lens on the greed of society. Yet, as noted by Kavaler, it can also be seen as a conservative critique of cultural change. Antwerp's economic position appeared to generate an atmosphere of shifting moral values, forming an inverse relationship between financial wealth and good deeds. The capitalist culture of Antwerp eclipsed its Christian values of charity, as demonstrated in Bruegel's satirical engraving of piggy banks fighting strong boxes. The design does not address abuse or agents of abuse in the form of dishonest merchants, but rather an entire system of behavior that legitimizes greed as a motivating value and hails metaphorical plunder as a justifiable action.[47]

The *Tower of Babel* (fig. 5) in Jongelinck's collection speaks to the concerns of the city's rising mercantilism and its consequences, namely greed and depressed morality. The painting seems straightforward in its interpretation, as the tower itself symbolizes hubris, a reach for heights of glory of man. As noted by Larry Silver, the *Tower of Babel* alludes to the cultural problems of Antwerp capitalism.[48] Two versions of

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[46] Ibid., 156.

[47] Ibid., 164.
[48] Silver 2006, 23.

Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* exist. The 1563 painting in Vienna includes King Nimrod, while the later smaller image of 1568 (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam) omits the king and all other figures. In both works, Bruegel sets the tower in a distinctly Netherlandish landscape.[49] In the larger version, the tower leans dangerously toward the viewer's left side, even with the high degree of technical difficulty in its construction and detailed work. The smaller tower spirals upward, with an almost imperceptible angle, but one that exists as a warning against overarching pride. In both images, we see ships docked on the tower's right side, linking it visually to Antwerp's busy port, as a city whose wealth was generated through trade and finance. Commercially and industrially, Antwerp reigned in shipping, manufacturing and exporting luxury goods such as cloth, and was the principle money market of Western Europe.[50]

With the onslaught of criticism, how does the merchant come to terms with positioning himself and his business in Antwerp's prosperity, while keeping his spiritual self intact? This was the time when the line between making money and the making of interest as a form of usury[51] was being negotiated. Like today's corporations, early modern businesses needed to appeal to the people with a philosophy of doing things for the greater good of society in order to justify their existence and actions. The idea of business for the common good continued to be used as a defense in mercantilist writings.[52] Apologists such as Lodovico Guicciardini defended profit-making as an

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Zagorin 1982, 88.

[51] Silver 2006, 20.

[52] Kavaler 1996, 167.

activity inextricably tied to society's welfare, and viewed the entrepreneur as the protector of Antwerp's liberties.[53] And, as previously mentioned, the rhetorical societies promoted the usefulness of merchants in society.

As we look at the *Procession to Calvary*, we note that it remains unique in Jongelinck's painting collection in that it straddles the landscape genre and the religious arena, and also calls upon viewers to consider their own past, present, and future when interpreting the work. Bruegel's audience would draw from their knowledge of biblical narratives and recognize the Flemish contemporary dress of the figures. In this sense, the contemporary audience of merchants, scholars, and other humanists may envision themselves as witness to the procession. Moreover, with the Netherlandish landscape and dress, the audience finds in the biblical story a shared cultural identity, which perhaps helped them contemplate their roles in society and their own means to personal salvation. The ebb and flow of audience engagement is stimulated by the intertextual and intervisual nature of the painting, and I will analyze this productive aspect of the work further in Chapter 4.

The moral failings of Flanders and its blindness to Christian values brought about satirical invectives. I consider *Procession to Calvary* a didactic piece that comments on the self-interest of society, and on the need to help others. With its placement in Jongelinck's home, it served to remind the merchant's family and friends that his role in business is useful to the overall economy and thus, to the people of Antwerp. Working to help others decreased the self-interested aspect of the merchant class, and hence, justified Jongelinck's business activities.

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[53] Ibid.

Bruegel's criticism of Antwerp's shifting values targeted not only the laity, but extended to the Church, as well. We see this prominently displayed in his 1559 *Netherlandish Proverbs* in the depiction of a monk putting a beard on Christ—a proverb denoting false piety (fig. 8).[54] Bruegel's commentary on the Church became even more critical in the somber tone of the *Procession to Calvary* as we see a monk in grey (representing a Pharisee?) sitting in the wagon and attending to one of the thieves with a crucifix. Decorated with external signs of piety, the monk in monastic attire holding a cross, like Simon of Cyrene and his wife, fails to recognize Christ and his suffering.

Church abuses met with condemnation beyond artistic circles. Erasmus had used satire to criticize the Catholic Church and society in general. Widespread abuses, such as the selling of indulgences, impelled many scholars and humanists to vent their frustration. Erasmus's criticism of the Church was clearly expressed in *The Praise of Folly*:

> Now what shall I say about those who find great comfort in soothing self-delusions about fictitious pardons for their sins, measuring out the times in purgatory down to the droplets of a waterclock, parceling out centuries, years, months, days, hours, as if they were using mathematical tables? They promise themselves anything and everything: wealth, honor, pleasure, an abundance of everything, perpetual health, a long life, flourishing old age, and finally a seat next to Christ among the saints.[55]

The Church remained a key target for northern artists and writers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ushering in religious dissidence and calls for religious reform. Hieronymus Bosch reproached monastic orders in *Ship of Fools* (ca. 1495, Musée du Louvre, Paris) (fig. 9), in which he depicted two nuns and a monk

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[54] Mark A. Meadow, "On the Structure of Knowledge in Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs," *Volkskundig bulletin* 18 (1992): 147. The proverb "putting a flaxen beard on Christ" denotes false piety.

[55] Erasmus 1979, 64.

frolicking in a boat with peasants. One of the nuns plays a lute, and sings alongside her monastic counterpart.[56] The lute and the act of singing signify lust and pre-empt lovemaking in medieval art.[57] The panel also provides commentary on man's role in the downturn of morality; a fool sits on the ship's rigging, naked swimmers amble up to the ship for more wine, a peasant cuts down a cooked goose from the ship's mast, and a giant ladle is used for an oar. Gluttony and lust—not just the growing commercial vice of avarice—seemingly prevail in the depiction of this changing society. Charges of these sins were leveled frequently against the religious orders in the late fifteenth century and through the sixteenth century.[58] Allusions to the vices include the plate of cherries and the metal wine jug suspended over the side of the boat, which Bosch had used for the same sin in *Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (ca. 1485–1500, Prado, Madrid).[59] Like Bosch and many other artists before him, Bruegel continued the tradition of commenting on the immorality of society that surrounded him. Sometimes his work targets a specific segment of society, such as merchants, monastic order, or clergy; sometimes the works find failings in all of society.

This environment, where believers questioned Church abuses and people sought other means to access God, remained a confusing and volatile period. Luther called for reform in *The Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* of 1517, which unintentionally instigated the splintering of the Church over the next decades. As

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[56] Walter Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch* (1973; repr., London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 41.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 44.

[59] Ibid.

expressed in Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, God's acceptance is not earned through priestly pardons nor through receiving indulgences; rather it is given in response to faith and true repentance. In this period of uncertainty, Lutheranism and other sects of Protestant denominations like Calvinism, Anabaptism, and Zwinglianism challenged the authority of Rome and had important implications on the nature of images and representation in society.[60] The Reformation ushered in a return to the primacy of the biblical text for the true Word of God, and an immediacy of religious experience that removed the papal hierarchy as the sole intercessor for the faithful. In this era, the quest for God became a personal and individual responsibility in which the Christian was encouraged to find his or her own relationship with the Almighty and the written Scriptures.[61]

Netherlandish Calvinism embraced open-air sermons and a return to the pure Word of God, distinctly distanced from the confines of an image-laden church. Calvin's most extreme followers considered God's second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image nor any likeness," [62] as a license to strike down and break images of holy figures displayed in churches. Condemnation of idolatry and false gods in the form of sculpture and paintings helped spurn the iconoclastic attacks in the

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[60] Smith 1994, 31.

[61] Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Derek Wilson, *Reformations: a radical interpretation of Christianity and the world, 1500–2000* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 9.

[62] Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill and trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 100–101. Calvin uses Acts 17:29, "not to judge the Deity to be like gold, silver, or a stone, carved by the art or devising of man," to proclaim that every image man erects to represent God displeases God.

Netherlands during the summer of 1566. These acts, in the mob-frenzy view of certain Calvinists, cleansed the Church of false idols.

The complexities of iconoclasm encompassed both religious dissidence and struggles for political freedoms. Faced with an environment of persecution led by King Philip II of Spain, Netherlanders struggled with Spanish oppression through most of the middle years in the century. Philip appointed his half-sister, Margaret Duchess of Parma, as regent of the Netherlands, allotting her the role of lead persecutor of heretics. Philip also formed bishoprics to guard against religious dissidence, selecting the new officials personally, including Cardinal Granvelle as the prelate,[63] and thereby alienating both the nobility and incumbent abbots.[64] This move united Church and State as oppressors under the Spanish Crown, and conjoined political dissenters with those who fought for religious freedom.[65] Needless to say, the nobility countered by mobilizing Calvinists, which in effect combined the efforts of both religious and political movements. The high nobility, including William of Nassau, prince of Orange, and counts Egmont and Horne and others, formed a league against Cardinal Granvelle and the government's policy on heresy,[66] resulting in his recall back to Spain to mollify the Netherlanders in 1564.[67]

In April 1566, Confederate noblemen delivered a petition to the regent Margaret of Parma, calling for an end to the edicts of the persecution and the Inquisition, and

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[63] Zagorin 1982, 91.

[64] Zupnick 1964, 283.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Zagorin 1982, 92.

[67] Zupnick 1964, 284.

inferred that open revolt and universal rebellion were imminent.[68] Faced with the threat of a rebellion, the regent ordered moderation in the heresy prosecutions. With the relaxation of persecution, Calvinist congregations emerged to hold open-air meetings, drawing thousands of listeners.[69] As discussed by Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Derek Wilson, Calvinist missions usually began in good weather, with open-air meetings, and seized Catholic Churches only when a congregation had been formed. In Antwerp during the summer of 1566, the town chronicler reported citizens' fears of Calvinist meetings, where thousands gathered, armed with weaponry.[70] This anxiety, directed towards *both* sides of the political and religious divide, is raised in Bruegel's paintings, opening the discourse for contemplating its complexity. The sense of irresolvable issues in the pictures themselves provokes thought, but no single or easy answer is achieved.

The lightning storm of religious and political unrest, sparked by Spanish oppression, rained on the Netherlands in a rash of iconoclastic acts. Emerging from years of political and religious unrest, with tensions heightened by preachers calling for reform, the crowd of listeners transformed into a mob demanding justice. The targets of their iconoclastic fury were almost exclusively religious, in that destruction transpired inside church buildings and against symbols of Catholic worship, which Calvinism accused as idolatrous.[71] Iconoclasm spread through the Netherlands in mid-August to September of

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[68] Zagorin 1982, 93. Confederate noblemen were made of lesser nobility; it was on this occasion the rebels of the Low Countries received their nickname les gueux, the Beggars, when one of the regent's councillors referred contemptuously to the petitioners by this term.

[69] Ibid., 94.

[70] Fernández-Armesto and Wilson 1996, 202.

[71] Ibid.

1566 in systemic destruction. Four hundred churches and convents were destroyed in Flanders alone.[72] Class was blind in the ferocity of iconoclasm, as both lower and higher orders took part in the acts of destruction.[73]

This overtly menacing attitude, I argue, did not find its way into the open-air environment of Bruegel's *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*. Instead, listeners and onlookers in the painting appear curious and interested in hearing St. John's words, without exhibiting outward signs of rage or destructive behavior. Though a fortune-teller and his client may be interpreted as detrimental to a viewer's spirituality as a distraction, most of the listeners appear courteous and engaged. This painting has yielded several interpretations with no single one emerging as predominant. Different scholars have proposed a range of interpretations of the painting and its relationship to messages of Reform. Some have argued that it is pro-Reform; others, such as Fritz Grossmann, have contended it is anti-Calvinist.[74] With the fortune-telling scene in the foreground, Grossmann has noted that having one's fortune read was condemned by Calvin and forbidden to his followers, and concludes that the attitude of the man participating in the palm reading is therefore meant to express a rejection of such meetings and of Calvinism.[75]

On the other hand, a more open interpretation exists with Gibson in which he has argued that the subject matter of St. John preaching was popular in Flemish altarpieces.

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[72] Zagorin 1982, 95.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Zupnick 1964, 283; Grossmann 1966, 201

[75] Grossmann 1966, 201.

This reading situates Bruegel's painting into a considerably more neutral zone than those in the pro-Calvinist camp would have it. Furthermore, Gibson has noted that one must keep in mind that many of Bruegel's patrons, such as Cardinal Granvelle and Niclaes Jongelinck, supported King Philip II and the Catholic Church.[76] Hence, Bruegel's paintings were considered acceptable to Catholics or at least ambiguous enough to warrant patronage. It is this ambiguity, I propose, that helped facilitate audience engagement.

I agree with Gibson's logic in that Catholic supporters would not commission Bruegel if his paintings were deemed too partisan in politics or religion. However, I also would argue that the open-air meetings of the Reformation are suggested in the work, though perhaps not for clear support of this activity. An undercurrent of criticism exists in the fortune-telling scene in which the man turns his back on the saint and Christ. Why would this element—a blatant disregard for the main event of St. John's sermon—be placed in the forefront, directly below Christ's standing position? The man in contemporary dress is openly ignoring the saint and Christ. We see his face as well as the visage of the fortune-teller, a position contrasting that of the surrounding figures, who are listening to the saint, with backs facing the viewer. Yet, at the same time, the painting illustrates a return to the origin of sermon. I consider the juxtaposition between those listening and the two figures ignoring the sermon an aid to the overall structure in creating an ambiguity that speaks to Bruegel's cultivated audience. Perhaps Bruegel set up this juxtaposition of figures to allude to models of good attention, which involves not

[76] Gibson 1977, 177. "Niclaes Jongelinck was a friend of Philip II and presumably a staunch Catholic, and Jongelinck's brother Jacob was later to make a large bronze monument commemorating Alva's victories in the Netherlands."

only seeing but hearing, as compared to inattention or distraction. If this is true, I suggest Bruegel makes a statement about how his painting provides access to spirituality. It is through undivided attention from both the eyes and the ears that the implied viewer can even begin to understand what is happening in the middle ground. When one finds the central event, the biblical story is revealed.

The momentum of 'religio-political' protest and looming repression together paved the way for turmoil and change.[77] Rebellion led by noblemen and Calvinist militants towards the end of 1566 ushered in the arrival of Duke Alva and the Spanish army in August 1567. Alva, known for his ruthlessness, soon took over as governor with the resignation of Margaret of Parma. He established the Council of Troubles to punish insurrection and heresy; the council became known as Council of Blood, as over twelve thousand people were tried before it, with one thousand condemned to death and another nine thousand to complete or partial property loss.[78]

As mentioned previously, Bruegel's *Conversion of St. Paul* perhaps alludes to Duke Alva's crossing of the Alps in the spring of 1567. However, as noted by Grossmann, the popularity of the subject is seen in both Italian and Flemish paintings before Bruegel.[79] I agree with Gibson's assessment of Bruegel's works in that he, "like Plantin and Ortelius, probably acted with considerable circumspection during these

[77] Zagorin 1982, 96.

[78] Ibid., 98. As cited by Zagorin, 98, note 29.

[79] Grossmann 1966, 201.

troubled years."[80] Overt anti-Spanish sentiment, I argue, is not apparent in the *Conversion of St. Paul* or in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*. Both paintings may be regarded by Catholics and Protestants alike as championing their respective beliefs. Again, the ambiguity of the pictures adds to their engagement with the audience.

For instance, the *Conversion of Saul* portrays a physical interaction with God. As Saul was on his way to Damascus with his army, he was struck down to the ground, blinded by God's natural light, and heard the Lord's voice.[81] Catholics and Protestants both strive to access the Almighty, but Catholics perhaps cling to His blinding light and the event of a miraculous conversion, while Protestants congregate around God's spoken Word and St. Paul as their primary figure. In either case, the same painting and subject matter engages both types of viewers for different reasons.

Similar results are seen with the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, as discussed previously. The painting can be viewed as a return to the purity of the true Word of God in the open-air environment of Calvinist congregations. But it can also be interpreted as seeing and hearing St. John as an intercessor to God, an element that remains part of the Catholic doctrine.

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[80] Gibson 1977, 178; Zagorin 2003, 78, 85. Christopher Plantin was a printer and publisher; both he and Ortelius, it has been suggested, were associated with heretical groups such as the Family of Love and libertines.

[81] Acts 9: 3-9 (*The New English Bible with Apocrypha*).

CHAPTER 4
BRUEGEL'S 'SLOW FUSE'

As noted in the previous section, both Catholics and Protestants may view the three paintings in this study agreeably. To this point, I add that Bruegel's engagement with his audience extends beyond doctrine; his works address common values upheld by the cultured elite across the religious divide. In this chapter, I will examine how Bruegel uses the structure, not simply the content or subject, of his religious paintings to maintain the audience's attention and absorption, and consider how the elements form a discourse with the canons of Netherlandish art.

All three paintings in this study implicate the viewer as a witness to the biblical events depicted. The *Procession to Calvary* treats one to a bird's eye view of a Netherlandish landscape, while the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* places the viewer inside the perspective of the crowd that sees and hears the saint. Finally, in the *Conversion of St. Paul*, the spectator finds himself or herself in the middle of a mountainside immediately behind soldiers and horses that have stopped suddenly to see what has happened to Saul. In each episode, the audience—the witness—faces a moral dilemma. I would argue, too, that each painting serves to heighten different senses in the act of witnessing. The overall composition and structural elements aid in this endeavor, as seen first in the *Procession to Calvary*.

The bird's eye perspective in this painting recalls the world landscapes of Joachim Patinir. Perhaps Bruegel invoked the world landscape viewpoint to call attention to the importance of his own cultural identity, as the landscape genre remains a Netherlandish tradition that emerged from Patinir himself. In this respect, Bruegel begins to lay down 'a

slow fuse.' John Shearman, in his work on the Italian Renaissance, frames the idea of the slow fuse, in which the spectator contributes to the success of artistic imitation and emulation by recognizing its elements in a painting or a sculpture.[82] Applying the concept to all three paintings, I consider the visual references significant in that they not only engaged the cultivated viewer, but they also spoke to the anxiety of the mid-sixteenth century, and the desire to return to the older values of spirituality and moral learning. At the same time, they pronounced Bruegel's role in upholding and contributing to Netherlandish art traditions.

As a part of Bruegel's 'slow fuse,' the structure of the composition and the figure groups, with their interactions and vignettes, appealed to the contemporary audience. Visual anchors, like the windmill and the Marian group, draw the eyes, but it is the cyclic composition that carries viewers across the landscape of the *Procession to Calvary*. Occupying the zenith, the windmill serves as one point of entry that captures the audience's interest and is the point around which Bruegel composes other elements of the picture. The figures in the procession, as well as those busy with their own activities, radiate around the structural element of the windmill like ripples in a pond. The perpetual turning of the windmill is echoed in the carrion wheel in the foreground, as well as in the circle formed by the dense crowd anticipating the Crucifixion.

Wheels and circles remain subsidiaries of the larger wheel-shape formed by the procession itself, as described by Mark Meadow.[83] Meadow points to Bruegel's use of the wheel to orchestrate the themes of punishment and suffering, linking the deaths of

[82] Shearman 1992, 232.

[83] Meadow 1996, 188.

Christ, of the thieves, of common criminals, and perhaps of the politically or religiously persecuted of the viewer's own day.[84] Working from Meadow's interpretation of the wheel, I consider the windmill and its ongoing rotation symbolic of the picture's complexities as, together, they allude to the continuity of historical events. As discussed previously, whether or not directly involved, Bruegel's contemporaries and audiences witnessed unrelenting religious persecution. As the observer and participant, the spectator perhaps connected with his or her own spirituality by looking at the image of Christ bearing the cross, but was also faced with a moral decision.

I consider the *Procession to Calvary* a didactic piece in which Christ's suffering generates an emotional response from the viewer, urging him or her to help others. The painting not only confers upon the audience the role of witness to the event, but it also demands that viewers decide between intervening in Christ's suffering or remaining part of the cause for it. With religious and political climates fraught with tension and threatening revolt, Netherlanders wrestled with questions of loyalty to the state or to personal principles and overriding universal morals. If this environment informed Bruegel's painting, then I consider the decision for action and the struggle to make the right choice for morality a self-reflexive engagement. Ortelius's words of 1567, in a letter to his nephew Emanuel van Meteren, voiced these frustrations, attributing the troubles evenly to "the Catholic evil, the Gueux fever, and the Huguenot dysentery, mixed with

[84] Ibid.

other vexations of black horsemen and soldiers."[85] But then, later in life, Ortelius would note, "a wise man must keep silent in these days."[86]

For the sheer detail and overwhelming number of figures in the *Procession to Calvary*, the viewer would not be able to digest the entire image in a single glance.[87] I consider Bruegel's application of this compositional structure, one used by Patinir and others, compelling in enticing the audience to look closely at the vignettes distributed throughout the landscape. Bruegel's technique helped strengthen audience engagement, as the viewer would need to spend time with the image in order to decipher and contemplate its details. Here, in the *Procession to Calvary*, one must search for the figure of Christ, almost imperceptible in the middle of the painting as he has fallen to the ground under the burden of the cross, and is depicted in the same scale as the figures surrounding him. I consider the search for Christ as another added dimension of meaning within the painting, in that it asks if the viewer can see Christ, physically and spiritually. With Bruegel's awareness of his audience's capacity for multivalent layers, this interpretation opens up the painting to present the viewer with a path to regain one's spirituality.

Ethan Matthew Kavaler suggests that the potential meaning of Bruegel's pictures surface through an understanding of the structural relationships within the elements of the

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[85] Kavaler 1999, 42. As cited in Kavaler, 42, note 62.

[86] Ibid., 43. As cited in Kavaler 43, note 63.

[87] Reindert L. Falkenburg, "Antithetical Iconography in Early Netherlandish Landscape Painting," in *Brueghel and Netherlandish Landscape Painting*, ed. A. Kofuku and T. Nakamura (Tokyo: National Museum of Western Art, 1990), 27. Falkenburg refers to Joachim Patinir's Landscape with Saint Jerome; I show this technique used in a similar way to engage Bruegel's audience.

painting.[88] I find his argument applicable to the *Procession to Calvary*, as Christ remains in the center (a privileged site)[89] and is encircled by those who seem indifferent to his suffering, and thus, blind to their own spirituality and the historical importance of the event. This blindness radiates from Christ towards the boundaries of the painting.

The figural group of Simon of Cyrene and his wife demonstrates how the external image of a good Christian belies inner blindness (fig. 10). Simon, forced by soldiers to help Christ bear his cross, exhibits outright resistance as his heels dig into the ground, his body pulling back with all its might. One soldier grabs his right hand and collar to drag him forward, another pushes him from behind, and a figure from the crowd grabs his left arm to tug him towards Christ. In this vignette, we see Simon's wife struggling to fight off soldiers, yet she wears the rosary, a contemporary Catholic sign of spiritual devotion.

Structurally a visual anchor, St. John and the Holy Women in the group of mourners at the lower right of the composition represent in contrast the true spirit of Christian faith and empathy, and counteract those who remain blind to God (fig. 11). They are the only ones who recognize and mourn the event of Christ's Passion. Moreover, with their monumentality and high position demarcated by the ridge they occupy, they transcend the worldly landscape below them. This demarcation fits into what Reindert Falkenburg describes as an antithetical structure of the landscape, in which worldly order is contrasted with divine order, one path full of hardships leading to virtue

[88] Kavaler 1999, 5.

[89] Ibid. The center of Bruegel's paintings are read as holding the key to the rest of the composition. Kavaler notes that the "acculturated observer would have glanced intuitively to the middle of the crowded stage to discover the figure of Christ."

and eternal life, and the other, a broad easy road leading to vice and Hell.[90] The antithetical structure of the picture also physically adds to the viewer's role as a witness and active participant in the moral decision between expressing empathy and intervening in Christ's suffering, or following the crowd who watch impassively and remain blind to him.

Furthermore, Bruegel's evocation of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting in his depiction of the Marian group is no mere coincidence. With their graceful, elongated forms, emotional gestures, and heavy, angular folds of drapery cascading around them, the figures are visually unlike all others in the image. They are monumental, as they occupy one-sixth of the entire painting. As discussed by both Gibson and Meadow, this group's slender, elongated forms allude to fifteenth-century Flemish altarpieces, and in particular, to Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (ca. 1435, Museo del Prado, Madrid) (fig. 12).[91] The two women flanking St. John and the Virgin echo the figures of St. John and Mary Magdalen in Rogier's Madrid panel, forming a similar visual parenthesis to the action they frame.

Bruegel's citation of Rogier indicates something about his own self-fashioning and the role of painting itself. Rogier's skills in depicting emotion were described by Van Mander as having "improved our art of painting greatly by depicting the inner desires or emotions of his subjects whether sorrow, anger, or gladness were exhibited."[92] Rogier's

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[90] Falkenburg 1990, 26.

[91] Gibson 1977, 132; Meadow 1996, 189. Gibson notes *Descent from the Cross* was in Spain by 1556 but Bruegel could have known its composition from a copy by Michael Coxie or from a preliminary drawing for Cornelis Cort's engraving after this work, published by Hieronymous Cock in 1565.

[92] Van Mander 1936, 31.

Deposition, copied by Netherlandish painters in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries probably more than any other,[93] likely functioned as a devotional image. A widespread interest in the Virgin's suffering at the foot of the cross arose in the fifteenth century. With Rogier's picture, the Virgin's imitative response to Christ provided the viewer with his or her own model of *imitatio Christi*.[94] For sixteenth-century audiences, Rogier perhaps represented the one artist who encapsulated the empathy and emotion of holy figures in his pictures, and in that sense, was considered truly pious. Hence, not only does the Rogierian group in the *Procession to Calvary* evoke the timeless quality of fifteenth-century style painting, it also makes a claim about Bruegel's own spiritual health expressed in an identifiably and self-consciously pious manner of painting.

But what might be claimed of painting in Bruegel's invocation of Rogier and other predecessors? As noted by Erwin Panofsky, in discussing the "[a]rchaism of around 1500," the works of great masters such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden came to be looked upon as "monuments of a past worthy of study and admired with a feeling akin to nostalgia."[95] Moreover, artists looked to the generation of 1420 for examples of authority and visionary power.[96] This revisiting of the Netherlandish masters, also witnessed in Bruegel's picture, draws upon the power of painting as a

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[93] Amy Powell, "A "Point Ceaselessly Pushed Back": The Origin of Netherlandish Painting," *Art Bulletin* 88.4 (2006): 720.

[94] Powell 2006, 716–717. Powell notes Otto von Simson's study of fifteenth-century interest in the Virgin's suffering and his conclusion of the imitative response as a model of *imitatio Christi*. As cited in Powell, 717, note 75, note 76.

[95] Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953) Vol 1, 356, 351.

[96] Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 122.

means to gain spiritual knowledge. This was especially important during the Reformation when iconoclasts treated sculptures and paintings of holy figures with disdain, destroying many of them for what Calvinists deemed as inciting idolatry. Bruegel's painting of the Procession, a biblical narrative familiar to the faithful regardless of specific church doctrines, provided viewers with examples of moral behavior and a general sense of spirituality. The painting, owned by the merchant Jongelinck, is not an altarpiece for devotion, but it does ask the viewer to connect with universal values of empathy and compassion for the suffering of others as part of the effort to regain one's spiritual health. Painting, and not sculpture, as claimed by Bruegel in the age of turmoil and change during the Reformation, is the medium to which one returns for timeless values of spirituality.

Bruegel's placement of his audience in the role of a witness underscores this search for the spiritual self. In this sense, Bruegel's pictorial narrative of a single, albeit expansive, episode rather than a sequence of events, advances the idea of providing the viewer with a moral decision. A pictorial narrative is defined as an image that intends to illustrate or relate a story.[97] One way to create a pictorial narrative is by illustrating a single episode or event, which unifies time and place.[98] Bruegel's use of the single event method in all three paintings in this study helps create a pictorial narrative to integrate the viewer into the scene as a witness and participant. It is as if the viewer has walked up

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[97] Peter Parshall, "Lucas van Leyden's narrative style," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 29 (1978): 187.

[98] Ibid. Methods of pictorial narratives also include the simultaneous method in which several episodes take place at different times, and the cyclic method in which a series of single images illustrate a single story. Parshall credits Kurt Weitzmann's study on book illustration in its articulation of pictorial narrative.

upon such an event, an experience that is enhanced by the large dimensions of all three paintings. I will also add that Bruegel subverted the single scene method by conflating the biblical period with the mid-sixteenth century, creating a back-and-forth oscillation in time, which informed the way contemporary audiences engaged with the paintings.

With *Procession to Calvary*, I consider the single event narrative a strategic vehicle that helps establish the audience as witness to the event. The viewer's vantage point rests slightly above the horizon line, in between the carrion wheel and the circular crowd at Golgotha on the right side of the picture.[99] This high bird's eye perspective allows the audience to see the entire procession as it unfolds in vignettes before them: Christ's suffering, the Virgin's compassion, the impassive peasants, the unwillingness of Simon of Cyrene and his wife to help Christ, the curious and dispassionate onlookers, the eagerness of the crowd to see the Crucifixion. Why would Bruegel use the single event strategy instead of another, such as the continuous narrative? I contend Bruegel's employment of the single narrative places the spectator effectively in a position to make a decision as a witness; this narrative strategy is opposed to the continuous narrative, which may work better in positioning the viewer as a virtual pilgrim, as the beholder might identify with the holy figure protagonist.[100] Continuing with this hypothesis, I suggest that Bruegel considered his viewer's role to be a witness, not a pilgrim, significant in the religious turmoil of the Reformation when access to God depended upon one's own interpretation of Scripture. The painting is likely not meant to be devotional; the

[99] Meadow 1996, 188.

[100] Falkenburg 1990, 27–28. Falkenburg describes Patinir's *Landscape with St. Jerome* in which the different episodes of the saint's life is meditated on by the spectator, who, likewise understood the identification with, and emulation of the saint. As the beholder travels with his eye over the landscape and his mind dwells on the details, he undertakes the 'pilgrimage through the world.'

audience, I argue, would not envision themselves on a pilgrimage, literally following the life of Christ in the painting. Rather, as witnesses to the event, they faced a single moral decision. For mid-sixteenth-century viewers, the decision lies perhaps between feeling compassion for the suffering of Christ, following the example of the Marian group, or responding with mild curiosity (or not at all), as illustrated by the remaining figures in the landscape.

Bruegel used the single narrative strategy and contemporary dress again in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*. The audience remained a witness to the saint's sermon, but I propose that the significance of this picture lies in how one takes in what is happening at the event. The means of gaining spirituality in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* addresses both hearing and seeing, unlike the *Procession to Calvary*, which seems to privilege sight, given the amount of information and how it is presented in visually striking patterns. In the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, we see St. John preaching while his left arm points to Christ who stands a few feet away. In this vignette, most of the surrounding figures turn their attention to St. John, but we also see several heads looking at Christ. Seemingly, a sequence of events takes place within the pictorial narrative. The viewer can almost sense the crowd captivated by the sound of the saint's words about God and his only Son, and then turning to look at the figure of Christ himself.

The attentive nature of the listeners is interrupted by a man in the foreground, distinctive for his attire designating him as a member of the wealthy urban bourgeoisie, holding out his right palm to a fortune-teller, likely understood as being a gypsy.[101]

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[101] For details on gypsies, see Andrew Morrall's "Soldiers and Gypsies: Outsiders and their Families," in *Artful Armies, Beautiful Battles: Art and Warfare in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pia F. Cuneo (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 159–180.

Instead of looking at his client's hand, the fortune-teller gypsy appears to be looking at someone else, another gypsy who is seated with a baby in her arms. Together, the family of gypsies forms an anti-type Holy Family, and, along with their client, are examples of how not to behave. Physically and mentally, both the man and the fortune-telling gypsy turn their backs on the saint. Instead of paying heed to the sermon as most of the listeners, the man in urban dress ignores the words of the saint, more interested in learning his fortune, his material need. This interruption in the picture provides the viewer with another choice: listening carefully to the Word of God and, as a true Christian, actually seeing St. John and Christ, or, partaking in other activities that distract one from the path of spirituality. In his paintings, Bruegel seems to offer examples of behavior, in the form of exempla and counter-exempla. In *Procession to Calvary*, the example of the monumental Rogierian group counters everyone else in the picture; with the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, the prominent figures in the fortune-telling vignette exist as the counter-example, while the rest of the figures in the painting behave positively.

As discussed previously, the fortune-telling scene may indicate tensions toward open-air sermons during the Reformation, as noted by Grossmann.[102] However, with its monumental form and position in the foreground, this scene also serves to test the audience's level of perception to the saint and his sermon, as well as to the figure of Christ. This is demonstrated by Bruegel's placement of the viewer's vantage point—at the horizon line, but behind the distracting figural group of the man and his fortune teller.

[102] Grossmann 1966, 201.

Moreover, the stripes and colorful patterns in the clothing of these foreground figures, which provide visual interest and variety, also act as diversions. The audience attending the sermon represents a range of people, including those who appear to be foreign. The foreign dress in the picture possibly came from types found in sixteenth-century costume books and Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum*.[103] Although Wolfgang Stechow sees the exotic visitors as enemies of Christ and the Baptist, I disagree, as most of the foreigners appear to turn their attention to the saint.[104] Not only do their costumes serve to illustrate another type of world landscape, as noted by Kavaler,[105] I argue further that Bruegel's depiction of the foreign amongst the contemporary dress functioned to bring the world closer in proximity to Antwerp itself, a city whose prominence as a European commercial center made it a hub for numerous foreign traders and goods. Comparable to the city with its changing values of morality, the painting contains many diversions. With so much distraction, how might the faithful viewer find his or her way to the Word of God? Bruegel presents the viewer with obstacles and key points of decision, in that the distracting figural groups are akin to the antithetical structure of the rocky and easy pathways to Heaven or Hell.

Ocular and audio sensibilities compete in the painting. Does one listen to the Word of God, as spoken by St. John, or does one let visual distractions block access to God? In the changing religious and economic climate of mid-sixteenth-century Antwerp, the audience may connect the distractions in the painting to its own shifting values, where

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[103] Kavaler 1999, 180–181.

[104] Kavaler 1999, 180. As cited in Kavaler, 180, note 83.

[105] Ibid., 181. Kavaler notes the World, formerly represented by a panoramic landscape, is here signified by the different peoples represented, denoted by dress.

capitalism resides and its cousin greed remains latent. The distracting figures are reminiscent of similar motifs in Herri met de Bles's painting of the same subject (*Landscape with Saint John the Baptist Preaching*, ca. 1535, Cleveland Museum of Art) (fig. 13), in which we notice a man in the front row asleep, head cradled in his arms.[106] However, Bruegel's use of distracting figures extend beyond the visual, and question the contemporary audience's means of seeing—or in this painting, hearing—its way to spirituality.

The compositional structure underscores my argument of the viewer's choice between listening to the sermon and regaining spiritual health, or turning to the attention of temporal needs. Gibson points out the power of the diagonal movement created in the painting, from the onlookers at the lower right to the trees beyond St. John in the left distance.[107] However, he fails to note the second diagonal emerging from the foregrounded figure of the seated gypsy to the peasants amidst the trees in the upper right. The two diagonals conjoined with the viewer's location, as I understand it to be at the center of the painting, form the Y-shape of a moral crossroads and a decision point (fig. 14). Like the antithetical structure of Patinir's landscapes, in which the faithful observer decides between the difficult or the easy path to Heaven or Hell, respectively, or Hercules's moral decision to follow Virtue or Vice, Bruegel's Y-shape structure in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* reminds his audience that one needs to be diligent in making the correct decision on the road to regain spirituality and live a moral life.

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[106] Walter S. Gibson, "Herri Met de Bles: Landscape with Saint John the Baptist Preaching," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 55.3 (1968): 81.

[107] Gibson 1977, 145.

Drawing from Netherlandish artistic canons and classical education, with the use of antithetical structures and the theme of the literal and moral crossroads, Bruegel lays a 'slow fuse' for his sophisticated audience. Not only do Bruegel's paintings invoke the example of his predecessor Patinir in the use of world landscapes, but I would argue that Bruegel's pictorial narrative strategy was informed by another great Netherlandish artist, Lucas van Leyden. These artists were innovators, and knowledge of their work is presumed for Bruegel's astute viewers, who would have needed to have this familiarity in order to navigate Bruegel's own unusual compositions and method of storytelling successfully.

Preceding Bruegel by several decades, Lucas used the single scene narrative in his 1510 *Ecce Homo* (fig. 15) in which the witness—the viewer—is part of the crowd deciding Christ's fate. In fact, the viewer is an active participant in the scene, and is urged by Pontius Pilate to make a decision between saving Christ or releasing Barabbas. Lucas's intermingling of historical and contemporary attire conjoined with perspectival orthogonals situates the event in a credible time and place, presenting to its audience, as witness, an actual and significant choice.[108] Likewise, Lucas's *Calvary* from 1517 (fig. 16), another single-scene picture, integrates the viewer into the scene as a participant, and presents the spectator with choices. Should the viewer emulate the mourning group at the foot of Christ's cross in the background? Or will he or she be distracted by the anecdotal groups of people along the diagonal path to Golgotha? I consider Bruegel's use of foreign dress and the fortune-telling group analogous to Lucas's distracting figural groups.

[108] Parshall 1978, 217.

For all three Bruegel paintings in this study, the visual reference to Lucas extends to the compositional structure in which the chief subject is small and resides in the middle ground or the background, appearing as an inverted narrative. Bruegel's use of a high horizon line, an adaptation of Lucas's deep landscape space, underscores the inverted narrative. With this compositional strategy, two things to consider are the search for the inconspicuous main subject, and the position of the viewer as a witness to the event. I will first address the effect of Bruegel's use of small figures for the chief subject.

In the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, Christ is positioned in the middle ground, at the horizontal center of the picture. In this central location, he takes precedence over St. John, and by extension, God's Word is given priority over the saint's voice.[109] However, the figure of Christ, like the saint and the surrounding crowd, and like the Christ figure in *Procession to Calvary*, remains small in size, approximately one-fifth that of the foreground figures. The employment of inconspicuous figures to denote significant meaning harkens back to medieval devotional imagery and marginalia in illuminated manuscripts.[110] The tiny scale of figures in devotional text invites the beholder to enter the picture, to dwell on key moments depicted so that he or she can meditate and internalize Christ's episodes before the internal spiritual eye, as discussed by Falkenburg.[111] In this same sense, searching for and finding the small figure of Christ in the background of Bruegel's painting perhaps is the first step towards spiritual

[109] Kavaler 1999, 181.

[110] Reindert L. Falkenburg, "Marginal Motifs in Early Flemish Landscape Painting," in *Herri Met de Bles: Studies and Explorations of the World Landscape Tradition*, ed. Muller et al. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1998), 156, 159. Falkenburg discusses vita Christi texts of which *Meditations vitae Christi* was the best known.

[111] Ibid., 156.

enlightenment. With this picture of St. John's sermon, I would argue that seeing the central subject of the holy figures, but not really seeing with one's true spiritual vision, remains one of Bruegel's critiques. To be "blind with one's eyes open" was a common theme in sixteenth-century Netherlandish art.[112]

The inverted narrative strategy also allows Bruegel to integrate the viewer into the biblical event. Lucas's deep landscape technique of raising the foreground plane clarifies the viewer's perspective as seen in *Ecce Homo*, where the presumed audience is located behind the crowd in front of the podium, a position established by the building's orthogonal lines.[113] In using a high horizon line, Bruegel employs a similar technique in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* to confirm the viewer's position, and to provide a convenient space for him or her in the back of the scene, which is in fact the foreground of the picture. Locating the presumed viewer behind the monumental foreground figures of gypsies, Bruegel tested the audience's attention. With attention as one of the main topics in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, Bruegel succeeded in luring and maintaining his viewers' attention through strategic structures and interplay between good attention and bad distraction.

I have discussed previously the ramifications of the viewer as a witness in the event, and his or her choice to listen attentively to the saint and the Word of God, or conversely, to privilege worldly distractions above spiritual needs. But now, the question I raise is, why borrow a narrative strategy and spatial composition so closely aligned with

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[112] Ibid., 164. Falkenburg refers to Herri met de Bles's *Landscape with the Sermon of St. John* in Dortmund with Jesus emerging from the background.

[113] Parshall 1978, 199. Parshall notes precedence of the technique of raising the foreground plane in Gerard David's work.

Lucas van Leyden? What does the invocation of Lucas contribute to the viewer's understanding of the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*? I suggest Bruegel's audience of cultivated humanists, familiar with multiple layers of meaning in classical and biblical narratives, as well as with the engravings of Lucas van Leyden, would have seen Bruegel's compositions and pictorial narratives as depictions of biblical scenes to which they are a witness, with the responsibility of making decisions and interpretations. As Lucas had done with *Ecce Homo* and *Calvary*, so, too, did Bruegel depict psychological interactions that heightened the viewer's participation and urge to interpret. With this consideration, I contend that Bruegel drew from Lucas to emphasize the viewer's role in deriving and even making meaning from the painting. For in the turbulent period of the Reformation, access to God remained the sole responsibility of the individual, and his or her own reading of the biblical passages.

I find Bruegel's critique on social order and ownership of one's path to eternal life to extend to his *Conversion of St. Paul* (fig. 3). The painting places the viewer as a witness to Saul's event, but at the same time, prevents the faithful from partaking in the conversion itself. In this sense, Bruegel's depiction of Saul's conversion prepares the viewer for his or her own experience. Bruegel's choice of a mountainous setting helped establish a familiar, though foreign and Alpine, environment for the contemporary audience to begin contemplating their own transformation.

Carel van Mander was struck by Bruegel's landscape, as he noted the painting "represent[ed] some very beautiful cliffs."[114] The mountain path rests high above the

[114] Van Mander 1936, 155.

ground as we observe a cloud formation emerging from the rocky crevice on the upper right of the painting. The audience of humanists, familiar with the world landscape design, likely identified high places within landscapes as areas for important holy events.[115] Moreover, with a world landscape that included trees and mountains from Bruegel's own series of *Large Landscapes*,[116] the sixteenth-century cultivated viewer, already familiar with the environs, can begin to unpack the painting's central subject and meaning. Structurally, the monumental figures in the foreground of the *Conversion of St. Paul*, like those found in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, act as devices to locate the viewer within the picture. As part of the company of soldiers, the spectator's position remains directly behind the peasant in the pink top, and high on the mountain path such that the vantage point lies midway between the horizon and the top of the painting.

With costumes that conflated the biblical period with the mid-sixteenth century, Bruegel's painting of Saul's conversion helped cement the connection between the audience and the work, and between seeing and experiencing. The contemporary dress of the soldiers and peasants encouraged the viewer to contemplate his or her own stage in the process of attaining spirituality. Bruegel seemed to draw from his own work for the military costumes, as we find the red riding coats of Roman soldiers from the *Procession to Calvary* (fig. 1) transformed into stylish black and yellow ones worn by the

[115] Gibson 1977, 182; Silver 2006, 49.

[116] The mountains and trees in *Conversion of St. Paul* are similar to those from Bruegel's *Large Landscape* series, specifically *Alpine Landscape with Deep Valley* (c. 1555-1560). For more details on Bruegel's *Large Landscapes*, see Gibson 1977, 39.

monumental figures in the *Conversion of St. Paul*.[117] Additionally, the soldiers surrounding Saul don the chest armor and helmets worn previously by the anthropomorphic figures in *Battle between the Piggy Banks and Strongboxes* (fig. 7).[118]

I find the intrigue of the picture arises not from the landscape, but rather from the search for its underlying meaning and the main protagonist himself. As the viewer explores beyond the monumental figures of men on horseback in the foreground, he or she lights on the figure of Saul lying helpless in the middle ground. Bruegel depicted the moment after Saul, blinded by Jesus's light, fell to the ground. We know this because his horse remains on the dirt path with its legs folded beneath its massive body. We also see Saul propped up on his left elbow to look towards the light, gesturing with his right hand as if beseeching the Almighty (fig. 17). The soldiers remain almost completely unaware of the event before them, more concerned with negotiating the rocky road or lost in their own thoughts.[119] Only Saul and a few men in his immediate presence look upward toward the light source.[120] Although the biblical text does not provide for a mountainous landscape, nor does it suggest military soldiers on horseback,[121] Bruegel decided to

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[117] I consider the man in the yellow riding dress to be a combination of a merchant (depicted by the riding dress) and a dandy (depicted by the feather in the cap); these two types are found in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. Given this consideration, then my argument for the audience as witness to the event is further strengthened as the viewers would 1) identify with the merchant or the dandy (depicted in *Netherlandish Proverbs* as someone who has the world in his or her hands); and 2) acknowledge the setting as contemporary, given the evidence of the dress from Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. For more details of merchants and dandies in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*, see Meadow 1992, 147, 148.

[118] Kavaler 1996, 155. The engraving was published posthumously in the early 1570s though designed perhaps a decade earlier.

[119] Kenneth C. Lindsay and Bernard Huppé, "Meaning and Method in Bruegel's Painting," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14.3 (1956): 381.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Acts 9: 3-9 (*The New English Bible with Apocrypha*).

include these elements, a significant move to induce audience identification with the event, and perhaps to imbue the scene with a sense of awesome drama in order to gain the viewers' attention. One could view the picture as a political allusion depicting Netherlanders' hopes of Duke Alva being diverted from his purpose of the Inquisition as he crossed the Alps in 1567.[122] However, while not arguing against that interpretation, I propose an alternative view that allows for the consideration of cultural identity.

I have already suggested that the sixteenth-century audience engaged with Saul's event as a model for their own conversion to true seeing, against a conventional, albeit dramatic, backdrop of a world landscape. Once the viewer finds Saul and his horse lying prostrate, the central event is crystallized. In the company of soldiers, the observer likely perceived the flash of light streaming from the heavens but would not be able to fully understand the experience itself. Bruegel's conversion of Saul to St. Paul appears to the viewer as a physical, destabilizing act of God. No angels hold the soon-to-be saint by the hand; instead, Saul is blinded, lying on the ground, and remains helpless as a few of his men rush to his assistance while others show surprise. In the biblical passage, Saul remained blind for three days without food and drink.[123] I contend the little vignette of Saul in the background connected the audience to the biblical passage, and thus helped them contemplate their own transformation. Bruegel showed the conversion of Saul as an individual, almost isolating, event, one not understood by the men surrounding him. The conversion, like the audience's connection to the painting, is about individual experience, something exceeding verbal articulation that can only be understood by going through the

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[122] Gibson 1977, 182; Zupnick 1964, 283.

[123] Acts 9: 3-9 (*The New English Bible with Apocrypha*).

experience itself, one rooted in the notion of vision. In this regard, with the *Conversion of St. Paul*, Bruegel helped viewers concretize their own spirituality and morality in an individual access to God.

In the context of sixteenth-century humanist culture, morality and spiritualism affected a cognitive link to self-knowledge. With a belief in the value of man, the implied humanist viewer sought to improve himself and his society with moral examinations.[124] Hence, introspection as a type of inner vision and spiritualism remained closely tied. Though Bruegel's painting of St. Paul's conversion perhaps played handmaiden to his viewer's spiritual health, I argue the picture further proposes the idea of achieving true inner vision through visuality.[125] As we observe in this era of humanism, inward vision encompasses both spiritual vision and self-knowledge. The challenge of depicting inner vision and visuality harkens back to the Medieval period.[126] Since a personal experience of internal vision likely cannot be illustrated, Bruegel chose instead to *suggest* a path to reach it. This experience, similar to the event of a conversion, remains solely between a beholder and God.

The goal of attaining this kind of inner vision is suggested in the *Conversion of St. Paul*, as contemporary viewers, upon seeing the figure of the saint lying on the ground, might realize two things at once: the painting is a biblical narrative; and the rocky setting

[124] Kenneth Gouwens, "Perceiving the Past: Renaissance Humanism after the 'Cognitive Turn,'" *The American Historical Review* 103.1 (1998): 77.

[125] I am defining visuality as socially and culturally constructed means for the body and psyche to gain vision. For writings on visuality, consult *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988); *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[126] Medieval icons, for example, served to strengthen monastic meditation in order to gain spiritual vision.

and threatening weather conditions indicate a dramatic event has just happened. Depictions of Saul's conversion in Netherlandish art conventionally show the saint on the ground, lying next to his steed. Hence, the cultivated audience would connect this image to prior depictions and understand its iconographic meaning. For instance, we see Saul lying next to his horse in Lucas van Leyden's engraving (*The Conversion of St. Paul*, 1509) (fig. 18), in which the conversion is relegated to the background, while the foreground portrays the saint, blinded and seemingly broken, being led away to Damascus by his company of soldiers. In Bruegel's version, the figure of Saul, wearing grey armor, blends in with the rest of his men and does not immediately jump out to the viewer as the chief subject of the painting. The presumed viewer, as witness on the mountain pass, may not know yet the subject of the painting until he or she conducts close looking and searching. Perhaps the only reason the viewer would look closely at all is because he or she is struck by the sense that, as a witness to the event behind the company of soldiers, movement along the rugged mountain path has come to a halt. As the contemporary audience conducts a search of the painting to find Saul in the middle ground, the process of achieving vision—and in essence, removing one's spiritual blindness—is initiated.

Though unable to experience Saul's conversion—a personal exclusive event—the audience, nevertheless, witnesses his attainment of true spiritual vision and may use it to as a point of reflection for their own introspection. In this regard, viewers are held both at bay, and yet also, through an intense engagement with the painting that subjects the audience to the process of visuality, captivated and are presented with one possible means of achieving inner spiritual vision in their own personal terms. In suggesting the

Conversion of St. Paul is structured to encourage the viewer to look closely and depicts visuality, but does not show the vision itself, I argue that Bruegel alluded to what he perhaps considered the superiority of painting, in which he 'painted many things that cannot be painted,' as described by Ortelius in his encomium.[127] In doing so, Bruegel provided the humanist audience with more than what can be depicted on canvas. Ortelius, in his epitaph in *Album Amicorum*, also agreed with and emphasized Bruegel's power of suggestion by comparing his friend to the ancient painter Timanthes, who had perfected this art.[128] Timanthes, known for his ability to depict emotions, showed the art of suggestion in the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, in which he painted Iphigenia's father Agamemnon with a veiled head, indicating his grief was too great to depict.[129] Walter Melion has proposed that in the *Procession to Calvary*, Bruegel obscures Christ to reveal the tragic circumstances surrounding the event.[130] I will add that Bruegel's art of suggestion is advanced in the *Conversion of St. Paul*, as the audience, engaged with the painting to the point of being a witness within the company of soldiers, found themselves on the precipice of experiencing spiritual enlightenment.

Bruegel's use of structural elements in the painting of Saul also worked to evoke the audience's contemplation of their own spiritual life. The overall composition follows

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[127] Zagorin 2003, 83. I use Zagorin's quotation from *Album Amicorum Abraham Ortelius*, ed. Jean Puraye (Amsterdam, 1969).

[128] Walter S. Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 178. Melion notes Timanthes's success at evoking things without actually painting them, for example, in the *Iphigenia*, he discloses passion by suppressing gesture.

[129] "Timanthes" *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Classical Art and Architecture*. ed. John B. Hattendorf. Oxford University Press, 2007. Temple University. 3 December 2009 http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.temple.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t231.e1014.

[130] Melion 1991, 178.

a sweeping diagonal movement. All the figures—from the company of men traversing up the mountain path, to the men on horseback in the foreground, to the tiny caravan in the background—trudge in the direction of the mountain's passage within the top half of the image. The progression starts from the crevice of the bottom left corner and ends with the pink flag whipping around on the upper right. Bruegel's use of the mountain may refer to pictorial and textual depictions in which access to God is associated with high places.[131] In light of this, I propose the contemporary audience might understand Saul's passage from the lowlands on the left side of the picture to the mountainous cliffs on the right half as an allusion to their own possible journey to heightened spirituality and a moral life. This journey, like the moral choice and crossroads discussed previously with the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, associates difficult paths with the attainment of virtue. In images of Hercules at the crossroads between Virtue and Vice, the choice is often posed as an easy, smooth, flat path leading to Vice, represented typically by a semi-clad beautiful woman, and a rocky, treacherous road that winds its way to the chaste figure of Virtue. In the reincarnation of the moral decision and crossroads in the *Conversion of St. Paul*, perhaps Bruegel spoke to the prevalent anxiety felt in a rapidly changing mercantilist culture, in which traditional virtues were replaced by a new system that seemingly rewarded avarice. This structural element of Saul's passage provided the mid-sixteenth-century audience of merchants and humanists a tactile way to contemplate their own path forward in the search for true vision and visuality.

[131] Gibson 1977, 182.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

In reexamining Bruegel's paintings of religious narratives, the nature of the audience's close engagement with these three pictures relies on their formal structures, as well as on the viewers' knowledge of biblical and humanist texts, and of the period's major current events. The vignettes and figural groups captured the sixteenth-century audience's attention while the main subjects, once detected in the middle ground or background of the inverted narratives, clarified the key meanings of the paintings.

In the environment of Antwerp's mercantilist order and decline of spiritualism, coupled with the tensions and turmoil of its religious and political climates, Bruegel's audience of merchants and noblemen considered his paintings a source for contemplation and self-reflection. As a witness and participant to the biblical events, the viewer is faced with moral decisions he or she would need to make independently in order to gain spiritual health. During the period of the Reformation, attaining personal salvation and access to God remained the sole responsibility of individuals. Thus, Bruegel's paintings, especially the *Procession to Calvary* featuring Christ's Passion, played handmaiden to the contemporary beholder's avenue to spirituality and a moral life.

One single, easy answer to the paintings was not attainable, nor was it expected. As I have shown in my argument, the contemporary audience of cultured elite, familiar with multiple meanings in art and knowledgeable in biblical and classical studies, would recognize Bruegel's visual references to fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Flemish artists. The 'slow fuse' implemented by Bruegel between the viewer and his religious paintings worked to convey visually the values of piety, compassion and charity, as

observed in the *Procession to Calvary*, and the recognition of God, as presented in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, and a pathway to spiritual growth and self-knowledge, as suggested in the *Conversion of St. Paul*.

Bruegel's claims about his own art and the medium of painting situated northern art in a position of privilege. Bruegel adapted the techniques of his predecessors—sometimes invoking them directly (as in borrowed motifs from Rogier) or competing with them in their own terms (as in inverted narrative strategies of Patinir and Lucas)—which create an intertextual engagement with his esteemed Netherlandish artistic forerunners. More importantly, in choosing to place his own style and pictorial narrative alongside that of his predecessors, Bruegel considered himself a part of the lineage that created the canons of Netherlandish art.

In the Reformation, when sculptures of holy figures were subjected to destruction or, at the very least, were frowned upon by Protestants, painting emerged as the most acceptable medium to depict Christ and other sacred beings.[132] The acceptance of paintings of religious subjects depended on their didactic use, and specifically within a biblical narrative. Religious paintings now needed to be instructive, and—as demanded by the Catholics—if narrative, then to represent clearly and faithfully the lives of Christ and saints from officially sanctioned stories. Bruegel's paintings, on the other hand, appear ambiguous and filled with a sense of excess, permitting visual distractions and vignettes that allowed viewers the freedom to look around the painting, and hence, seem more sympathetic to 'Protestant' methods of interpretation. Since Bruegel's paintings

[132] Paintings of holy figures were issues in the Reformation too. Most of Pieter Aertsen's altarpieces were destroyed during Antwerp's iconoclastic acts of 1566.

were not altarpieces, but rather, commissions for Antwerp's cultured patrons, they entered the arena of functioning simultaneously as art objects and as models for other kinds of contemplation, including spiritual and moral. In this arena of art, open interpretation was permissible, and not necessarily controversial. Along those lines, Bruegel's use of an inverted narrative strategy creates ambiguity and saves him from possible accusations of idolatry, as the holy figures remain small in the background. In this sense, Bruegel placed painting above sculpture as the medium most suitable in the Reformation for conveying and generating spirituality. With its emphasis on instruction rather than on veneration, northern art secured a privileged position within Reform communities during the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Each of the three paintings in this study located the contemporary viewer in the position of a witness to a significant event. The implied viewer must take time to understand the little vignettes while standing in front of the large canvases. In doing so, the viewer's knowledge of preceding and succeeding events of each biblical story coalesce with the main episode, often hidden in the painting. We should consider how the narrative could continue in the spectator's mind and what that means for audience absorption, for the *Procession to Calvary* suggests Christ's eventual Crucifixion; the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* alludes to Christ's disciples and their apostolic missions; and the *Conversion of St. Paul* suggests the work of St. Paul in converting others to Christianity. Bruegel's power of suggestion to capture the viewer 'between the folds' of his conceptual structures and intervisual references not only served to engage the viewer but also to maintain his or her attention, thereby stimulating profound self-reflection on

the narratives of the biblical past and the viewer's role in the unstable conditions of the Flemish present.

Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Procession to Calvary*, 1564. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Figure 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, 1566. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Figure 3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Conversion of St. Paul*, 1567. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Figure 4. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Death of the Virgin*, 1564. Upton House, Banbury, Oxfordshire.

Figure 5. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel*, 1563. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Figure 6. Limbourg Brothers, *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry: October*, ca. 1411. Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

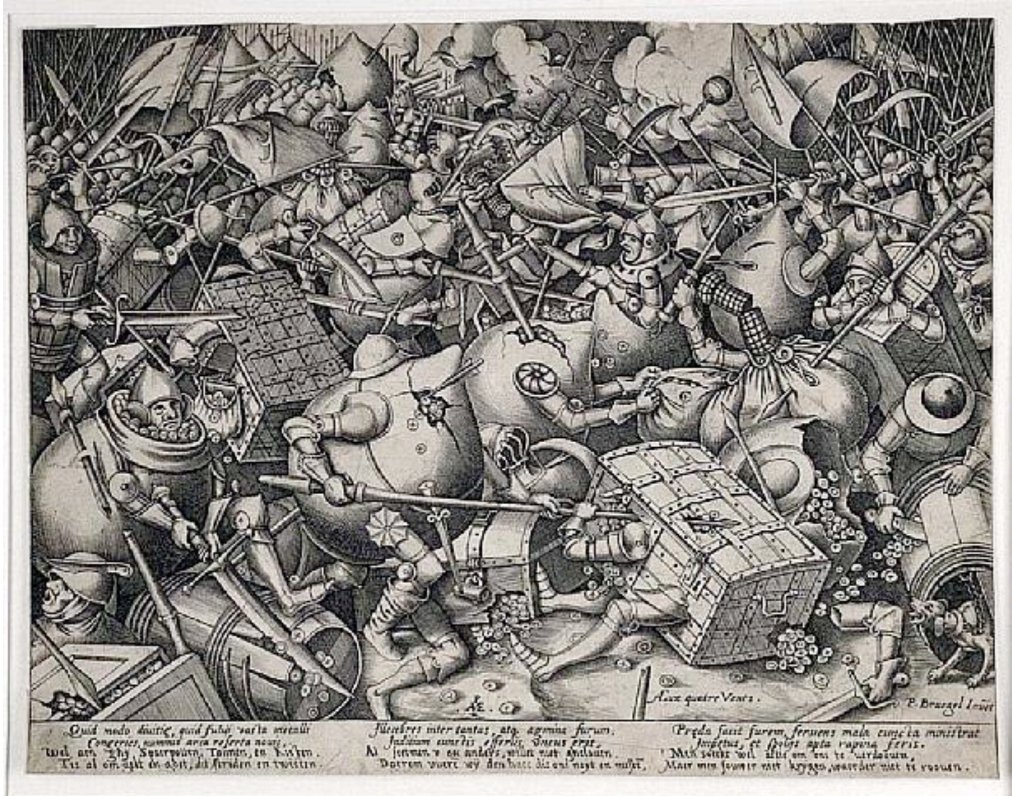

Figure 7. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, after, *Battle between the Piggy Banks and Strong Boxes*, 1570s, engraving.

Figure 8. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1566. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

Figure 9. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools*, ca. 1495. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 10. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Procession to Calvary*, detail of Simon of Cyrene.

Figure 11. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Procession to Calvary*, detail of St. John and the Holy Women.

Figure 12. Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, ca. 1435. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 13. Herri Met de Bles, *Landscape with Saint John the Baptist Preaching*, ca. 1535. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

Figure 14. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Sermon of St. John the Baptist*, modified with diagonals forming Y-shape.

Figure 15. Lucas van Leyden, *Ecce Homo*, 1510, engraving.

Figure 16. Lucas van Leyden, *Calvary*, 1517, engraving. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Katharine E. Bullard Fund in memory of Francis Bullard 63.1636.

Figure 17. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Conversion of St. Paul*, detail of St. Paul.

Figure 18. Lucas van Leyden, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, 1509, engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1934 (34.94.4).

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