

Pieter Bruegel

Parables of Order and Enterprise

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

Chapter 1

Commerce, Culture, Crisis 29

Chapter 2

The *Fall of Icarus* and the Natural Order 57

Chapter 3

Wealth and Commonwealth 77

Chapter 4

The City and the Cycle of Nature:
The *Battle between Carnival and Lent* 111

Chapter 5

Custom, Costume, and Community:
Celebrating a Marriage 149

Chapter 6

Invitation to the Dance: The *Peasant Kermis* 184

Chapter 7

Conflict in the Natural World 212

Conclusion 255

Appendix A: Concerning the Colorful Caps 261

Appendix B: *Dialogus creaturum* 264

Notes 267

Bibliography 349

Index 391

Commerce, Culture, Crisis

Chapter 1



Bruegel is in certain ways a creation of sixteenth-century Antwerp, of the big city, and though several of the works that we will explore originated in nearby Brussels, it is Antwerp that more compellingly merits attention. This chapter is not a general survey of the early modern metropolis, but rather a consideration of particular strands of its culture, often interrelated, from which to establish a context for our discussion of Bruegel's pictures. We will be occupied less with Antwerp's role as a commercial capital than with the social consequences of its economic ascendancy: the values, beliefs, and institutions that helped created a sense of a distinct community.

More immediately related to the following studies are the remarks on theater and art with their particular terms and traditions. Antwerp as an artistic and intellectual center nurtured a sophisticated understanding of pictures with a sense of their historical development. It was a city in which scenes of village life and other subjects relatively new to painting found ready buyers. And it was home to a professional class of intellectuals like Abraham Ortelius, the one man whose friendship with Bruegel is documented and who offers us access to an extensive set of artists, humanists, and merchants. Their lives, too, were radically affected by the religious controversies, the iconoclastic riots, and, ultimately, the dedicated political uprising of the 1560s.

Karel van Mander, whose biography of Netherlandish artists appeared in 1604, tells us that Bruegel began his career in Antwerp, studying under the learned and highly successful Pieter Coecke van Aelst. Though Bruegel's first known commission came from Mechelen

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

in 1551, his name already appears in the register of Antwerp's painters' association, the Guild of St. Luke, for the year 1550–1. Apart from a trip to Italy, Bruegel remained in Antwerp for the next twelve years, eventually moving to Brussels around 1563–4, where he married one of Pieter Coecke's daughters.¹ There must have been promise of commissions in this new home. Van Mander relates that Bruegel was asked by the city "shortly before his death" to commemorate the new canal linking Brussels and Antwerp, but there are almost no records concerning his activity in the court city.² It has been reasonably suggested that Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, the powerful adviser to the regent Margaret of Parma, may have offered patronage. The Cardinal Granvelle owned at least two of Bruegel's paintings, including the *Flight into Egypt* now at the Courtauld Institute, yet it is not certain that he acquired them directly from the artist; we learn of Granvelle's pictures when he later tried to recover them for his palace in Besançon.³

Bruegel maintained connections with Antwerp, a half-day's ride to the north. His publisher Hieronymus Cock continued to receive designs for engravings, and in 1565 the Antwerp merchant Nicolaes Jongelincx was still able to commission a series of paintings representing the Months (Figs. 24–5). Given that Antwerp remained the artistic capital with a nurturing public and a critical mass of painters that included the eminent Frans Floris, the standards of this city were no less relevant for Bruegel's later production. Bruegel had established his early reputation in Antwerp and kept his eye on the city from his new residence.

The Economics of Antwerp

It is a cliché of Netherlandish art history that Bruegel painted at a time of crisis. Calvinist iconoclasm and political revolt were highly visible threats to established order, but no less revolutionary was the far more gradual transformation of social values that accompanied the integration of business practices in the culture.

During the first half of the century Antwerp became the center of trade for northern Europe. The Portuguese, having secured connections with India by 1499, made Antwerp their principal European port in 1501; there they could obtain silver and copper from South German entrepreneurs.⁴ Soon Portuguese spices were common cargo on Antwerp docks, and merchants from all major European trading cities were establishing "nations" – organized business communities – there. While distant towns were reached by ship, local markets in the Netherlands and along the Lower Rhine were supplied by wagon along newly

traversable roads; an Italian visitor like Antonio de Beatis might be excused for believing that the Duchy of Brabant extended to Cologne and Aachen. Innovations in bookkeeping and financial practices transformed Antwerp into a banking center on a scale previously unknown.⁵ And industry played a role as well, particularly the production of textiles.⁶ The physical expansion of the city entailed the creation of many new streets and neighborhoods to meet rising demand.⁷ In 1533 a new Exchange was built on a more appropriate site for business transactions, and in the 1560s, vast company headquarters were constructed for the Baltic merchants and for the Southern German community: imposing structures that further imprinted a commercial character on the layout of the city.⁸ By the mid-1560s Antwerp's population numbered about 100,000, comparable only with Paris in Northern Europe.⁹

Businessmen coming from abroad contributed significantly to the standing population, particularly among the well-to-do. Antwerp counted over one thousand foreign merchants who belonged to the various "nations" and thus resided semipermanently in the city. The Spanish, with a standing company of around three hundred, were in the majority, followed by the Portuguese, the Italians, the Northern Germans, the Southern Germans, the English, and the French.¹⁰ Among the Florentines was Ludovico Guicciardini, author of the *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* (1567), an extensive account of the Netherlands that covers not only the topography and history but also the culture and customs of the principal towns and cities within the seventeen provinces, an extraordinarily rich source for many areas of interest.¹¹

There existed a substantial gulf between those who were well-off and the large impoverished segment of the population. The earliest substantial data comes from 1574, the year in which the *magistraat* exacted a forced loan of 400,000 guilders after Spanish troops mutinied. According to the revealing analysis of Guido de Marnef, only about fifteen percent of the households were wealthy enough to be assessed, and of these, the top one percent contributed over a third of the sum, while the upper ten percent paid almost sixty percent of the loan. The lower half of the group contributed less than five percent of the total, and around eighty-five percent of the population made too little to be charged at all.¹² This model of a polarized society is corroborated by information gathered by Jan van Roey for the years 1584–5, a census registering the economic conditions during Antwerp's brief and troubled interval as a rebel city yet indicative of longer-standing divisions within the town walls. Only twelve percent were then judged wealthy enough to pay taxes: an upper class composed almost exclusively of merchants with a few highly specialized artisans such as furriers, dyers, and cabinetmakers at the lowest

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

level of the group. A second twelve percent of Antwerpens comprised roughly a middle class, whereas the remaining three-quarters of the population ranged from modest artisans down to day laborers and the unemployed, who often lived at a subsistence level.¹³

The government of the city was dominated by a restricted elite. The chief civic offices were those of the interior and exterior burgo-master, sixteen aldermen, and two treasurers, all of whom comprised the *magistraat* or primary administrative body. Unlike other cities such as Lyon or London, Antwerp remained under the political control of the nobility, who were neither required to pay taxes nor permitted to engage in activity for profit. These aristocratic municipal officials, however, recognized the local market as Antwerp's lifeline and the source of their power and therefore tended to support legislation that furthered the commercial interests of the city. The high degree of social mobility typical of mercantile centers is exemplified by Melchior Schetz, the financier who was knighted in 1561 (though he continued to oversee family business).¹⁴

Antwerp differed in more than size from Brussels, the administrative capital of the provinces with a population of around 40,000 in the middle of the sixteenth century. There the regent Margaret of Parma kept her court, and the leading nobles maintained splendid palaces while enjoying the pleasure of Netherlandish high society. The roughly four hundred individuals attached to the regent's court were attended by more than two thousand servants and thus accounted for about eight percent of the inhabitants. Around this nucleus gathered administrators, lawyers, clerks, and other skilled people who took care of the daily running of the government and its several standing councils.¹⁵ Brussels's own prosperous commercial sector was dominated by the production and export of luxury goods like tapestries, which were purchased by royalty and great families such as the Fugger and the Medici, though wealthy merchants increasingly acted as middlemen. Fine metalwork and glassblowing also thrived there, while the production of less costly textiles was largely ceded to other towns; less highly skilled workers in Brussels suffered high levels of unemployment.¹⁶

The Culture of Commerce

The dramatic growth and success of the mercantile cities during the first half of the sixteenth century fostered an increasing integration of the merchant's practical wisdom into a general social code. Much literature of the time expressed important issues in terms immediately familiar to the businessman, as we find, for instance in a Dutch adaptation of

Seneca's *Consolation against Fortune* (Brussels, 1516): "Nature [is] like a creditor (*crediteur*) who has lent life and existence to man in this world. I therefore say than no human debtor who has understanding may justifiably complain against, nor be dismayed by Mother Nature, the creditor, even should she again desire and demand that which she has lent him – that is, life and existence in this world."¹⁷ Business terms are already marked in the *Sterfboeck* of 1488, a Dutch translation of the *Art of Dying Well*, in which God is explicitly called a merchant (*coepman*), but one who accepts neither gold nor silver at his sale.¹⁸

Instructional texts were produced in great number to assist in the acquisition of needed skills from bookkeeping to fluency in French, the lingua franca of the mercantile community. Noel de Berlaimont's *Vocabulare*, the most famous of the many language books published in the Netherlands, was clearly geared to the aspiring merchant, for the examples of conversation and models for letters pertained mostly to commercial activities: the paying of debts, the buying of textiles, and so forth. It is no accident that Berlaimont's grammar was largely a reworking of tracts for Bruges merchants written a century earlier, when that Flemish city was economically ascendant, and it is fitting that the one extant copy of the 1540 edition was owned by Christoff Fugger, a young member of the famous Augsburg banking family, who had presumably been sent to Antwerp for his apprenticeship.¹⁹

Pleij, Vandenbroeck, and others have argued for an urban culture based on notions of practicality.²⁰ Publishers marketing the traditional medieval romances to urban audiences, in fact, take pains to allay suspicions that such literature was frivolous and self-indulgent. The prologue to the 1576 edition of the classic *Floris and Blanckefloer* offers the story as a means to avoid idleness, "the mother of all evil." Such tales were billed as "wondrous" and "exciting," as we would expect, but they might also be recommended for their quasimedical value, as excellent remedies for "common people afflicted with melancholy." In an early edition of *Renard the Fox* (1479), the publisher Gerard Leeu insists that the story is "profitable" (*profitelijck*) as well as enjoyable. As Franssen argues, fictional literature was promoted as essentially functional and rational.²¹

In much of the writing directed toward readers in the city, we repeatedly encounter the words "useful," "profitable," "ambitious," "enterprising," and "risk-taking" (*avontuurlijk*).²² Pleij discerns a personification of these values in the popular hero – or anti-hero – who ascends the social ladder or successfully confronts the system on the basis of his cleverness and craftiness, an opportunist in a positive sense in that he makes the most of opportunity or fortune. Aesop, Uilenspiegel, Markolf, Reynard, and the Pastoor van Kalkenberg are among the shrewd folk-heroes

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise



Fig. 13[a].
Jacques Jongelinck.
*Portrait Medal of Antoon
van Stralen*. Obverse.
Brussels, Bibliothèque
royale Albert 1^{er}. Photo:
author.

Fig. 13[b].
Jacques Jongelinck.
*Portrait Medal of Antoon
van Stralen*. Reverse.
Brussels, Bibliothèque
royale Albert 1^{er}. Photo:
author.

whose deeds appeared in many editions around 1500; all are confirmed individualists, who spurn accepted wisdom and customary behavior, surviving instead by their own cunning.²³ The personal motto of the wealthy businessman Jan della Faille – “Each man for himself” – expresses concisely this discrepancy between the developing perspective of the contemporary merchant and older attitudes toward social responsibility.²⁴

The renewed emphasis on Fortuna in the art and literature of sixteenth-century Europe, a multifaceted phenomenon, is thought to reflect a heightened risk-consciousness attributable to the prominence of international commerce with its inevitable hazards. The similarity between the Dutch word for fortune, “*avontuur*,” and the term “Merchant Adventurers,” the name for the early trade companies, bespeaks the acceptance of uncertain fortune as a fact of life and its consequent inscription in everyday language. In Middle Dutch literature, fortune had stood in unclear relationship to the will of God, though bad luck was often visited upon fools and sinners. The need to tolerate the tremendous risks of sea trade was likely a major factor in modifying this understanding of fate, retribution, and divine justice; fortune became an independent agent of adversity whose victims no longer merited their hardships. In Seneca and other stoic writers, readers found elements of a practical ethic with which to justify and dignify social practice. The true stoic was free of an immoderate love of possessions and impervious to Fortuna’s slings and arrows.

We find affirmations of this philosophy in the mottos of Antwerp notables, which were often recorded on their portrait medals. Burgomaster Antoon van Stralen exemplifies this practice in the medal he



had struck by Jacques Jongelinck, a distinguished metalworker and brother to Bruegel's patron, Nicolaes. On the obverse we see van Stralen in profile, identified as "*Heer van Mercxem*," the neighboring village from which he derived his title (Fig. 13a). On the reverse, van Stralen announces his intention to prevail through "*virtute et constantia*"; his credo surrounds the antithetical figure of Fortuna, who stands on an unstable sphere with her cloak turned to the changing winds (Fig. 13b). Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle likewise constructed his identity around an expression of stoic conviction (Fig. 14a). Jongelinck, who struck four different medals for Granvelle during his tenure in Antwerp, presents him here as Bishop of Arras, before he was appointed cardinal. The reverse represents misfortune at sea (Fig. 14b). Underneath the personal imperative, "persevere!" ("*durate*"), Neptune appears, laying waste to an imposing ship.²⁵

If misfortune might be excused, labor and diligence were sanctified. Guicciardini praised the city's populace for being "suited to work and profit from childhood."²⁶ It was a talent that they were expected to exploit and were so instructed in several prints that reinforce this work ethic. One of the most direct was the otherwise anonymous *Divin Philosophe*, a large woodcut showing a patriarchal figure in the act of preaching. Beneath him the text of his putative sermon grounds labor in the Word of God and the law of Nature.²⁷ This tendency to regard labor as a virtue has been discussed by Ilya Veldman as a distinctive aspect of Netherlandish society during this period, a sign of an accommodation between business practice and religious values.²⁸

Fig. 14[a].
Jacques Jongelinck.
Portrait Medal of Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle.
Obverse. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale Albert 1^{er}. Photo: author.

Fig. 14[b].
Jacques Jongelinck.
Portrait Medal of Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle.
Reverse. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale Albert 1^{er}. Photo: author.

Intellectuals, Businessmen, and the Circle of Ortelius

By the middle of the sixteenth century, a substantial urban elite had emerged with its intellectual pursuits and pleasant pastimes that no longer needed to be defended as efficacious. Engravings produced at Antwerp, even of subjects drawn from familiar life, usually included a text in Latin, an indication that educated and cultivated citizens formed a sizable market.²⁹ Those comfortably well-off might appreciate the culture of modest townspeople, but their participation was often noticeably self-conscious, as they became ill at ease with the spontaneous and undisciplined character of popular celebrations. Urban festivities were placed ever more securely under centralized control; the festival of fools held at Brussels in 1551, for example, was carefully administered by the authorities.³⁰ Public spectacles thus came to register the values and references of a new dominant class. Hugo Soly calls attention to the published programs that accompanied civic processions at Antwerp during the 1560s, a sign that the current humanist vocabulary and complex allegorical language needed translation for numerous onlookers.³¹

The chambers of rhetoric would be asked to design these allegorical processions that wound their way through the town on the local saints' days or on other special occasions, and their subject matter and manner of allusion show a close relationship with the visual arts, as Walter Gibson has emphasized.³² Theatrical competitions, the "*Landjuwelen*" periodically held between chambers of the various cities, were highly esteemed. Poetry and song might accompany the plays, though there were entire competitions dedicated to *refreinen*, the ballade-like compositions that were the mainstay of literary composition. Antwerp's *Landjuweel* of 1561 was tremendously popular as crowds lined up to see the magnificent entries of the chambers, decked out in their colors and led by their prince, factor, and fool.³³ There followed shortly afterwards a *Haagspel*, a minor-league version in which local villages competed for prizes. Meanwhile in Holland, Rotterdam held its own *Landjuweel* the same year for the chambers of that county. Interest was such that the Antwerp publisher Willem Silvius came out with an edition of the plays of the Antwerp *Landjuweel* and *Haagspel* the next year, followed two years later by the publication of the major Rotterdam plays.³⁴

The rhetoricians, or *rederijkers*, performed before a broad and socially variegated audience, yet they might thereby also affirm the interests and mode of expression proper to ranking society. If Cornelis Everaert, the Bruges dramatist, worked as a weaver, most *rederijkers* were educated men of business, the arts, or the professions. Willem van Haecht, factor of Antwerp's *Violieren*, the chamber to which many

artists belonged, was a man of pronounced humanist leanings who wrote several plays on mythological themes. Cornelis van Ghistele, the factor of Antwerp's rival chamber, the *Goudbloem*, was one of the most distinguished classicists in the city, publishing translations of Ovid, Vergil, Terrence, and Horace.³⁵

Emblematic of this cultivated elite is the company affiliated with Abraham Ortelius, whom we see in a portrait engraving by his friend, Philips Galle (Fig. 15). He appears at a somewhat younger age in an anonymous and previously unknown design for a medal (Fig. 16), apparently never cast, which includes his motto in Greek on the reverse: ΜΩΡΙΑ ΠΑΡΑ ΤΩ ΦΕΩ (Folly on God's behalf), an assertion of an Erasmian distrust of worldly wisdom.³⁶

Much has been made of Ortelius's association with Pieter Bruegel. The "Cosmographer to Philip II" seems to have been a good friend as well as the owner of Bruegel's *Death of the Virgin*, for in addition to the elaborate and moving tribute to the painter that Ortelius penned in his *album amicorum* after the artist's death, we have two letters from the Roman scholar Scipio Fabio asking Ortelius for news of Bruegel and his probable companion, the painter Marten de Vos, whom Fabio had met during their travels through Italy in 1553. The letters, dated 1561 and 1565, indicate a friendship between Bruegel and Ortelius of considerable strength and duration.³⁷ Ortelius thought highly enough of Bruegel's *Death of the Virgin* to have Philips Galle engrave the image for distribution to several of his acquaintances. Dirck Coornhert – scholar, playwright, and one-time teacher of Galle – responded in gratitude, extolling the subtle and affecting depiction of the apostles' grief at Mary's bedside.³⁸ Benito Arias Montanus, censor for the Inquisition, also received one of the images, though he left no detailed response.³⁹ Ortelius and his well-documented colleagues tell us something about the circles of association in Netherlandish society and the range of values and concerns within these groups.

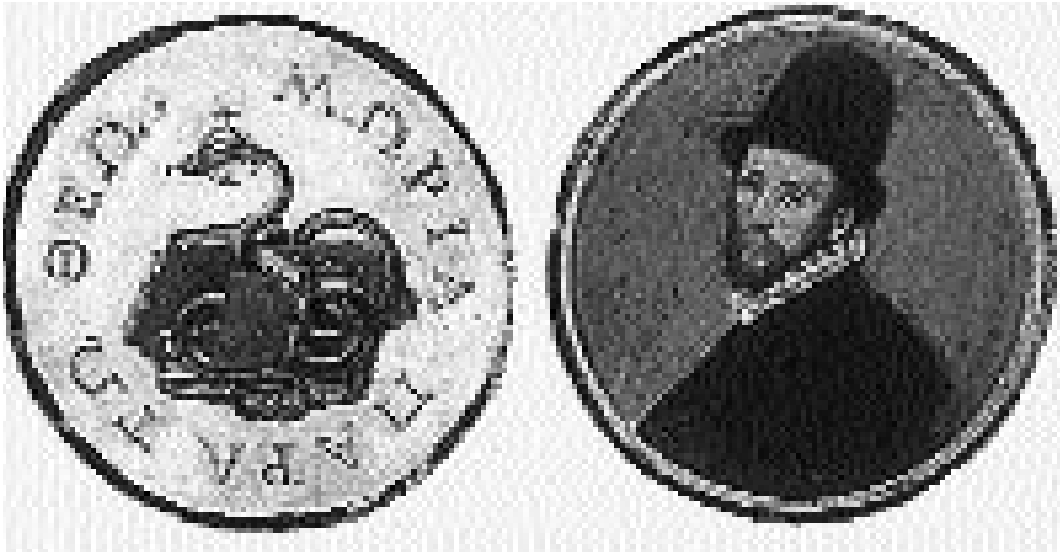
Orphaned at twelve, Ortelius was brought up by his uncle, Jacob van Meteren, and developed a lifelong friendship with his cousin, Emanuel van Meteren.⁴⁰ In Antwerp Ortelius was apprenticed as a map engraver, joining the artists' association, the Guild of St. Luke, in 1547. He was inscribed as a "colorer of maps," and though he may have regarded this practice of hand-coloring luxury editions as a necessary if lucrative sideline, his guild membership brought him into contact with the artists of the city, several of whom became friends: In addition to Bruegel they included the painters Marten de Vos, Joris Hoefnagel, and Lucas d'Heere, and the printmakers Philips Galle and Frans Hogenberg.⁴¹ Ortelius often journeyed to other cities of cultural



Fig. 15.
Philips Galle.
*Portrait of Abraham
Ortelius*. Engraving.
Photo: author.

importance. He was a regular at the Frankfurt book fair and found reasons to visit Paris, London, Breslau, Cologne, Augsburg, Vienna, Ferrara, and Rome, as his correspondence and the entries of friends in his *album amicorum* attest. In the autumn of 1575 Ortelius toured regions in northwest Europe with Jean Vivien from Valenciennes and Jeronimus Schollier of Antwerp, paying particular attention to antiquities from Roman colonial settlements.⁴²

This dedication to travel and to the arts, so integral to Ortelius, was publicly commemorated in the collection of maps and views of European cities published by Georg Braun; Frans Hogenberg engraved the plates for this project, which began appearing in 1572. Beside the map of Poitiers, Braun illustrated the famous monumental boulder resting about a mile from the city, the “*pierre levée*” that ranked as one of nature’s wonders and had consequently become a notable tourist attraction (Fig. 17).⁴³ Joris Hoefnagel supplied the publisher with a drawing of the landmark, including a selection of names inscribed on its surface, as had become the fashion. These marks, however, are hardly those of random visitors but rather of artists and intellectuals from



Antwerp, who were generally acquainted with one another. Together with his own signature, Hoefnagel recorded the names of Abraham Ortelius, Frans Hogenberg, Philips Galle, the painter Bartholomeus Spranger, the younger engravers Hieronymus Wierix and Johannes Sadelier, the celebrated cartographer Gerard Mercator, and the publisher Georg Braun. Among the others recorded are Guillaume Mostaert, a young man related to the Hoefnagels, and Guillaume de Kempeneer, the grandson of the famous tapestry-maker Willem de Kempeneer.⁴⁴

Fig. 16.
Anonymous.
Design for Portrait Medal of Abraham Ortelius.
Drawing on vellum.
Private collection.
Photo: author.



Fig. 17.
Illustration to G. Braun,
Civitates orbis terrarum,
vol. 5, Antwerp and
Cologne, 1597.
*The pierre levée outside
Poitiers.* Detail.
Engraved by Frans
Hogenberg after Joris
Hoefnagel. Photo:
author.

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

It was Ortelius's own atlas, the enormously successful *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, that brought him renown. Gathering together maps from various sources, Ortelius published in 1570 his famous compendium, the first convenient guide to the world as it was then understood; numerous later editions expanded coverage, as better maps became available and new lands were charted. Frans Hogenberg and others were employed engraving the plates, and Ortelius's good friend Peeter Heyns assisted in preparing the Dutch edition, which appeared in 1571.⁴⁵ Joannes Radermacher, friend to both Ortelius and van Meeren, reported years later that the merchant Gillis Hooftman had financed much of the enterprise. The Antwerp magnate Hooftman ran a truly global enterprise that extended to the major ports in France and Spain, Morocco, Tunisia, and Russia.⁴⁶ Extensive commercial interests help account for his support of the atlas, but such undertakings were not solely practical. The study of the arts, of geography, and antiquity befitted the gentleman, the man of affairs; many of those highly successful in business aspired to this level of cultural refinement. Radermacher, Hooftman's assistant, first in Antwerp and then in London, was well-versed in Italian and French literature and a friend to several artists.⁴⁷ Hooftman himself, whose relations with Ortelius were personal as well as professional, resembled in his patronage of the arts and intellectual inquiry the Bruges merchant Marcus Laurinus, who became the enthusiastic Maecenas of Hubert Goltzius, supporting his antiquarian studies and numismatic publications.

Hubert Goltz or Goltzius, an older relative of the famous engraver Hendrick Goltzius, must also be counted a member of this group. Hubert is of particular interest because he married a sister of Pieter Coecke's wife, Marie Verhulst, making him a brother-in-law of Bruegel's teacher and an uncle to Pieter Bruegel. His writings on ancient coins established him as an authority on Roman iconography and commended him naturally to Ortelius and his friends with confirmed humanist interests.⁴⁸ Goltzius had first chosen a career as a painter, traveling to Liège in order to study with the learned Lambert Lombard, who had also instructed Frans Floris, Willem Key, and Domenicus Lampsonius – the leading classicizing Netherlandish painters and critics at mid-century. By 1546 Goltzius had moved to Antwerp and, like Bruegel, become a member of the Guild of St. Luke by the early 1550s. Probably through Ortelius, Goltzius met the brothers Laurinus from Bruges. Marcus Laurinus in particular shared an abiding interest in all vestiges of antiquity and proved an invaluable patron, financing study trips across Europe and supporting the publication of Goltzius's numismatic oeuvre. In 1558 Goltzius left

Antwerp to settle in Bruges with his family, most likely in one of Laurinus's houses.⁴⁹

Somewhat of an anomaly in this group is Peeter Heyns, whose ample correspondence with Ortelius testifies to their unusually open relationship. A dedicated schoolteacher his entire life, Heyns was also a poet of moderate ability; though living in Antwerp, he was active in the *rederijkers'* chamber of Berchem, a town located on the outskirts of the metropolis. By the 1570s Heyns's school for young girls, the *Lauwerboom*, or "Laurel Tree," proved exceedingly popular among a familiar set: Heyns and his wife were entrusted with the daughters of Jacques Jongelinck, Philips Galle, Gillis Hooftman, and the publisher Willem Silvius among others.⁵⁰ In his classes, Heyns used the French grammars written by his fellow Antwerp schoolteacher, Gabriel Meurier, who in turn dedicated a volume of instructional dialogues in French, *La Guirlande des Jeunes Filles*, to Heyns and the students of the *Lauwerboom*.⁵¹

This community of geographers, publishers, artists, and businessmen was remarkably close-knit; the *alba amicorum* of Ortelius, Emanuel van Meteren, Jean Vivien, and Johannes Radermacher reveal a great many names in common.⁵² Marten de Vos became a familiar not only of Ortelius but also of Radermacher and Hooftman, for whom he worked. To Jean Vivien's *album amicorum* he contributed an allegorical drawing of Apollo, signifying the enlightenment brought about by the arts – a tribute to Vivien's appreciation of painting and intellectual accomplishments (Fig. 18).⁵³

These men were thoroughly practiced in the skills of interpreting written texts and images, attentive to different channels of communication. Insight into their perspective can be gleaned from the often intricate and allusive inscriptions in their *alba amicorum*, as it can from their taste for hermetic symbols. A case in point is the book of emblems by the Hungarian humanist Johannes Sambucus, an acquaintance of Ortelius, Goltzius, and the Laurinus brothers. In the foreword to the Dutch edition, the translator, Marcus Antonius Gillis van Diest, emphatically praised the veiled nature of emblems and the intellectual effort needed to uncover their significance. Referring to the ancient Greek practice of addressing the intellect through art, he stated: "For this reason they also made certain that the [designs] were not so obvious or plain that anyone could understand them, no matter how simple or stupid they were; nor were they so obscure and oblique that a man of understanding could not comprehend them through contemplation alone." In the remainder of the foreword, he elaborated on the theme of delight to the intellect, defining an ideal audience of "noble and understanding people."⁵⁴

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

In much the same vein, the Mechelen humanist Jerome Busleyden praised Thomas More's *Utopia* because it "withholds itself from the many, and only imparts itself to the few – to such above all as have the candor to wish, the knowledge to understand, the credit which will qualify, and the influence which will enable them to consult the common interest as dutifully, justly and proficiently as you now plainly do."⁵⁵ Van Diest's excursus should not be understood in a narrow professional sense as a prescription for painting but rather as indicating a habit of mind, a tendency to seek meaning at different levels of reference and to esteem talent at this enterprise. The passage reminds us of the subtle manner of communication anticipated by educated viewers. Though it is not clear how such tastes applied to actual painting – let alone those by Bruegel – it is worth remembering that Bruegel's patrons were most likely familiar with this sort of hermeneutic enterprise.⁵⁶

Another remarkable aspect of this cultivated Antwerp society was an appreciation of spiritual values held in common despite differences in institutional allegiance. Ortelius was on good terms with both orthodox Catholics and Calvinists over a period of several decades.⁵⁷ The Venetian merchant Giovanni Zonca wrote admiringly about the extraordinary freedom of speech and of thought he found there during the mid-1560s, though limits to these liberties varied from month to month.⁵⁸ The Duke of Alva was unable to make much sense of the competing religious bodies and interests that characterized the city by 1568; writing to Philip II, he complained of Antwerp as "a Babylon, confusion and receptacle of all sects indifferently."⁵⁹

There were many who remained outside of the organized churches and who are often counted as part of the broad spiritualist movement in the Netherlands. Attentive above all to the model of Christ and the lessons of the scripture, these persons were nurtured on a long tradition of private devotional practice that tended to emphasize ethical issues over more academic or doctrinal matters. There was a gradual and subtle interface with less dogmatic Lutherans, Anabaptists, Calvinists, and Catholics, who may not have endorsed all the tenets of their religion and showed little interest in polemical conflicts between confessions.⁶⁰ The general tendency toward Christocentric spiritualism, religious tolerance, and hope of reconciliation, which might loosely be called Erasmian, proved particularly attractive to the better educated with humanist interests and to many business people.⁶¹ Thus, in an oft-quoted letter, Ortelius could write to van Meteren in December of 1567, attributing current troubles even-handedly to "the Catholic evil, the Gueux fever, and the Huguenot dysentery, mixed with other vexations of black horsemen and soldiers. . . ." ⁶² Later in life, Ortelius



Fig. 18.
Marten de Vos.
Apollo. Drawing in
Album Amicorum
Johanni Viviani. 1579.
Photo: The Hague,
Royal Library.

would concede “that a wise man must keep silent in these days,” and “that Christianity which imposes us to believe this or that has nothing to do with Christianity.”⁶³ In the *alba amicorum* of both Ortelius and Vivien, the engraver Philips Galle drew for his friends a bust-length picture of Christ. “What could I better give you?” the author asked rhetorically, for the image of Christ as reminder of His exemplary life pointed to the essence of their faith.⁶⁴

A series of paintings commissioned by Gillis Hooftman indicates how art might affirm the spiritual foundation of this community while referring obliquely to contemporary religious and political conflicts. In 1568 Hooftman, a prominent Calvinist in Antwerp’s business community, ordered five paintings from Marten de Vos, who was suspected of Lutheran sympathies. Three of the paintings have survived, all representing scenes from the life of St. Paul drawn from the Acts of the Apostles: *St. Paul on Malta*, now in Paris; *St. Paul and the Silversmith Demetrius*, in Brussels; and *Ss. Paul and Barnabus at Lystra*, in a private collection.⁶⁵ Much of our information about this undertaking comes from two letters written by the aged Joannes Radermacher in 1603 to Ortelius’s nephew, Jacob Cools. Radermacher, it seems, was to recom-

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

mend an artist to decorate Hooftman's dining room and had asked Ortelius for advice. Ortelius suggested Marten de Vos as a painter less expensive than Frans Floris, but one with an impressive technique and an admirable sense of invention. We learn that de Vos was required to follow a program, probably devised by Radermacher, though the writer does not mention the subjects of the individual pictures. By 1567 Radermacher was in London and de Vos seems to have relied on Ortelius for direction nearer at hand.⁶⁶

There was nothing heretical about the series or the individual subjects chosen,⁶⁷ though it is worth recalling that St. Paul was the apostle most admired in Reformed circles, set before all others by Luther as witness to Christ and teacher of His message.⁶⁸ As Saul, he had been struck down from his horse by divine command, and his very name marked the righteous conversion to a new faith – though this event was not depicted by Marten de Vos, at least not in the extant works. Although Catholics could well have admired these paintings, a half century of Reformed writings had given the subjects an appreciable Protestant shading.

St. Paul and the Silversmith Demetrius (Acts 19:23–41) represents the scene at Ephesus in which Demetrius and his colleagues, their livelihood threatened by Christian proscription against pagan images, aggressively confront the Apostle (Fig. 19). The painting may well have been understood as a lightly veiled reference to current controversy over the use of images and criticism of insufficiently restrictive Catholic practice. De Vos's panel also portrays the burning of pagan books of magic by the apostles, an act that might relate to the Protestant rejection of apocryphal texts still credited by Rome. The picture of *Paul and Barnabus at Lystra* (Acts 14:8–18) could be read in much the same manner. Mistaken for Zeus and Hermes by the people at Lystra, the two apostles disclaim the unwarranted adoration and directed their audience to the true God, who had created heaven and earth. The theme, common in Dutch art of the early seventeenth century, might have been taken as an attack on the Catholic worship of saints and the proliferation of cults.⁶⁹

Most interesting for our purposes is the painting that represents *St. Paul on Malta* (Fig. 20). Surviving their shipwreck, Paul and the Apostles were hospitably received by the inhabitants on Malta, who led them out of the cold to a great fire (Acts 28:1–6). When Paul laid a piece of wood on the blaze, an adder suddenly appeared, fastening its poisonous jaws to his hand, but Paul calmly shook the serpent back into the fire and suffered no ill effects. Their Maltese hosts, first suspecting the apostle to be a murderer struck down by divine wrath, now

Opposite top:
Fig. 19.
Marten de Vos.
St. Paul and the Silversmith Demetrius. Oil on Panel. 1568. Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts. Photo: ACL.

Opposite bottom:
Fig. 20.
Marten de Vos.
St. Paul on Malta. Oil on Panel. 1568. Paris, Louvre. Photo: museum.

Commerce, Culture, Crisis



Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

considered him a God. Marten de Vos shows St. Paul at the center, bending down to cast the snake back into the fire. Gathered around him are the terrified Maltese, framed at both sides by large figures who ponder more calmly the significance of the incident; many of these look out at the viewer. Armin Zweite suggests that a secondary reference to Christ's prophesy after the resurrection may have been intended: Those who believe "will drive out evil spirits in my name . . . , they will raise serpents, and even if they drink deadly poison, it shall do them no harm; they shall lay their hands upon the sick and they will be healed" (Mark 16:17–18) – as Paul was soon to do on Malta. Given the current religious climate in Antwerp, which had impelled both Radermacher and Hooftman's own brother to emigrate to London, the event might serve as an heartening example for those who persevered on account of their faith.⁷⁰

Integrated among the biblical figures in the painting in the Louvre are portraits of Gillis Hooftman, his family, and his friends, portraits that Radermacher extolled in one of his letters to Jacob Cools for their verisimilitude and lifelike quality. The man standing at the far left is likely Gillis Hooftman himself, his features agreeing with those in Martin de Vos's double portrait of him and his wife, Margaretha van Nispen, who may be the woman shown next to him in the Paris painting. Seated before them are no doubt their children, while at the far right, a portrait head is visible between the two biblical figures standing in the foreground. This most probably represents Abraham Ortelius, as Zweite proposes, for the features accord closely with those in Philips Galle's portrait engraving of the geographer.⁷¹

The story of St. Paul on Malta was represented in a highly reductive and symbolic form in Claude Paradin's *Devises Heroïques*, as Zweite observes (Fig. 21). A hand is shown emerging from a cloud above a fire, casting down a serpent that bites one of its fingers. "*Quis contra nos?*" ("Who is against us?") asks the motto above the image. "For truly," the short explanation concludes, "nothing can harm those whom God would assist." Paradin's collection of emblems seems to have been rather well-known and may have suggested a concentrated reading of de Vos's far more elaborate and expansive rendering of the narrative. First published in 1551 by Jean de Tournes at Lyon, it was issued at Antwerp in five editions between 1561 and 1567, both in the original French and in two Latin translations.⁷² Johan Bol, a preacher in Ghent and Middelburg, used a copy of Paradin's emblem book as the basis for his own *album amicorum*, inserting blank pages on which friends might record their sentiments.⁷³

The significance of the concise emblem is perhaps greater, for its



motto was adopted as a personal device by Emanuel van Meteren, an intimate of all of the principals. In 1577 Van Meteren inscribed Jean Vivien’s *album amicorum* with the motto: “*Quis contra nos*” in a bande-rolle that appears beneath the tetragram, the four Hebrew letters signifying the name of God.⁷⁴ And van Meteren likewise penned “*Quis contra nos*” in a slightly different arrangement in the *album amicorum* of Hooftman’s grandson, Gillis Anselmo (Fig. 22).⁷⁵ At the edge of the banderole appears the abbreviated reference “Ro 8,” indicating the eighth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. “If God is for us, who is against us?” (“*quis contra nos?*”) reads verse 31. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” asks Paul shortly afterwards. “Shall tribulations, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered’” (Romans 8:35–6). Emanuel van Meteren and others from this trusted company were eager to find encouragement in the model of Christ’s earliest disciples, viewing their own ordeals as part of a continuing historical process that encompassed all who had endured for their faith. Paradin’s em-

Fig. 21. Illustration to Claude Paradin’s *Devises Heroiques*. “*Quis contra nos?*” Antwerp, 1567. Photo: author.

Fig. 22. *Album Amicorum Jobanni Viviani*. Entry by Emanuel de Meteren. 1579. Photo: The Hague, Royal Library.

Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise

blem reflects the prominence of the story as a sign of divine favor; its appeal to Hooftman and friends as a confessional reference may have been heightened by the frequent Antwerp printings.

It may seem odd that such a religiously diverse group would permit painting so potentially polemical to commemorate their friendship and affirm their sense of community: Ortelius was at least nominally Catholic, and de Vos apparently a Lutheran, while Radermacher, Hooftman, and van Meteren were Calvinist. The members of this group seem to have shared certain central beliefs, which weighed more heavily than the doctrinal distinctions between their churches. When Hooftman arranged for fifty thousand ducats to go to the poor at his death, for instance, he stipulated that the money be distributed equally among Catholics and Protestants. The paintings by Marten de Vos, commissioned in 1568, accommodated a range of attitudes while still allowing for local political reference.⁷⁶

An Art Capital

Hooftman chose Marten de Vos from a wide selection of candidates, for there was no shortage of painters in Antwerp. By mid-century the city had become a sophisticated center of art, attracting many of the most accomplished painters in the Netherlands: Pieter Aertsen from Amsterdam, Lucas d'Heere from Ghent, Hans Bol and Pieter Baltens from Mechelen. Some stayed, others returned to their own towns or ventured abroad.⁷⁷ In the 1540s, after decades as one of Europe's leading art markets, Antwerp relegated the second floor of its stock exchange to the sale of painting and sculpture. Though less well-known today, Antwerp sculpture enjoyed a formidable reputation; the leading workshop of Cornelis Floris carved tombs for shipment to central Germany and the Baltic, though even more popular were the engravings after architectural designs by Floris and Hans Vredeman de Vries. In 1553 Marie Verhulst, Pieter Coecke's widow and an artist in her own right,⁷⁸ published a complete edition of Serlio's treatise on architecture, a project that had occupied her late husband for some years, and the standards of Vitruvius soon became criteria in formal contracts.⁷⁹ Frans Floris, the brother of Cornelis and perhaps the leading painter in Antwerp, specialized in mythological and religious pictures in a manner that revealed his great debt to Central Italian and Venetian art. The house of Frans Floris, built by Cornelis and decorated by his brother, was a monument to the status of the artist and his profession. Also indicative of Floris's standing is the frequent mention in inventories of *troniën* by this painter, sometimes indicating bust-length por-