



BREITGHEI AND  
CONTEMPORARIES:

ART AS  
CONVERT  
RESISTANCE?

ENGLISH

BONNIE FANTEN





Detail from Anthony  
van Dyck, *Portrait of  
Pieter Bruegel II*  
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## Turbulent times

Worried about the coronavirus or global warming? Filled with nostalgia by those chocolate-box Bruegel scenes of snow-covered villages and fun on the ice? Well, don't be fooled! In the sixteenth century, people in the low countries were suffering all the privations of a 'Little Ice Age'. Arctic winters and chilly summers brought crop failures and famine. At the same time, prosperous cities like Antwerp, Bruges and Brussels were seething with resentment about the persecution of religious dissidents. Under the rule of Habsburg Emperor Charles V and his son and successor King Philip II of Spain, religious reformers protesting about abuses in the Roman Catholic Church were hounded and put to death. A storm was clearly brewing. In the course of 1566, the so-called 'Year of Miracles', the reformers became ever more open in their opposition. The local nobility begged for a reduction in the persecution and thousands flocked to listen to the open-air hedge sermons of Protestant preachers in the countryside around Antwerp. On 10 August, the storm broke. Furious crowds burst into churches and smashed 'idolatrous' works of religious art. The 'Beeldenstorm' (wave of iconoclasm) swept from town to town, marking the start of a revolt in the

Netherlands, both north and south, that would lead to some eighty years of warfare. At stake were issues of both religion and government. The long period of strife would eventually produce the modern states of Belgium and the Netherlands.

### **‘We all have our cross to bear’**

Derived from the Bible, this expression is in recorded use since the early fourteenth century. It means that everyone has to shoulder some burden of personal misfortune, just as Christ had to carry the cross on which he was to die from Jerusalem to the place of execution at Golgotha.

The details of Christ’s final journey are given in the New Testament. According to three of the four gospels – those of Mark, Matthew and Luke – the soldiers guarding Christ stopped a man called Simon of Cyrene as he was entering the city and ordered him to help Christ carry the cross. Only one of the four gospel writers, Luke, mentions a large crowd following the condemned man and how Christ admonished a group of weeping women. Since two other criminals were crucified alongside Jesus, the procession must have included a total of three prisoners. Later writers elaborated the story further, adding figures like Veronica, whose name is a garbled version of the phrase Vera Icon (‘true image’).

When Veronica wiped the sweat and blood from Jesus’ face, an imprint of his face was left on the cloth. The Catholic Church regarded this unique ‘portrait’ of the Redeemer as a supremely important relic.

The many dramatic details in the story of Christ carrying the cross made it a rewarding subject for painters and woodcarvers. Initially, in the Late Middle Ages, their work tended to form part of Passion cycles: narrative depictions of the series of events culminating in the Crucifixion. But from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, starting with a work by Jan van Eyck that is now known only from copies, isolated depictions – prints and paintings – of Christ carrying the cross became increasingly common. And where some artists focused closely on the suffering of Christ, turning the scene into an ‘Andachtsbild’ (devotional image), others presented panoramic views peopled with masses of small figures. Certain artists even incorporated elements of direct or indirect social criticism in their paintings of what is, at first sight, a scene of purely religious significance. This exhibition aims to show how Christ had his cross to bear throughout the whole, long sixteenth century.







## The cross and the eagle

In 2013, when Willem-Alexander came to the throne, the Dutch national holiday known for over a century as 'Koninginnedag' (Queen's Day) was replaced by 'Koningsdag' (King's Day). However, many people still use the old name. Ingrained habits like that take decades to change. The Low Countries of the sixteenth century – a loose collection of geographical areas roughly equivalent to today's Belgium and the Netherlands – had no indigenous monarchy. They were ruled from outside, first by the Burgundians and later by the Habsburgs.

A double-headed eagle displayed sable on a field of gold: that is the heraldic description of the coat of arms of the elected leader of the Holy Roman Empire. The title of Emperor was not inherited; the emperor was an elected leader, even if the election was nothing like the free and democratic process we know today. In 1520, Charles V, Lord of the Netherlands, was crowned emperor. When his son, Philip II, succeeded him as ruler of the Netherlands in 1555, he did not do so as emperor, but 'only' as King of Spain. The imperial title passed to Charles' brother Ferdinand. Even so, people in the Netherlands continued to regard the imperial crest as the supreme symbol of government authority. The yellow and black crest appears time and again in sixteenth-century paintings, not only during the reign of Charles V, but long afterwards. It is generally shown on banners, but can also be seen on signboards, escutcheons, pasted-up government proclamations, and the tunics of messengers.



Previous page: Workshop Pieter Bruegel II, *The Census at Bethlehem*. Photo by Peter Cox / Bonnefanten

Right: detail from Workshop Pieter Bruegel II, *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Photo by Peter Cox / Bonnefanten, long-term loan Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed





Workshop Pieter Brueghel II, *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Photo by Peter Cox / Bonnefanten, long-term loan Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed



It must have been the many copies produced by Pieter Brueghel II that made his father's pictures so famous. The few pictures painted by Pieter I himself were never accessible to a wide audience; in his own lifetime, they were the cherished private possessions of avid collectors. Pieter I's *Procession to Calvary* is now so fragile that the panel will probably never again leave the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, but at least twenty variants made by his son survive. Given the ravages of time, Pieter II and his studio must surely have produced even more.

Like father, like son? Pieter Bruegel the Elder died in 1569, three years after the 'Beeldenstorm'. During the reign of terror imposed by Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, the infamous Duke of Alba, and his Council of Blood, religious and political dissidents were persecuted without mercy. Even as he lay dying, Bruegel is said to have told his wife to burn his drawings for fear that the biting satire they contained might endanger the family.

Decades later, his son Pieter II still painted the soldiers leading Christ to Golgotha under the Habsburg banner. Did he do so to help his contemporaries identify emotionally with the religious scene? Or was he painting in the spirit of his father and was the heraldic device a covert criticism of the authorities who had put reformers to death? We shall never know for certain; the artist must have left his intentions deliberately open to varying interpretation.

## The crescent moon

It's the kind of detail you can easily miss: in the background of this picture of *Christ carrying the cross*, the towers of Jerusalem are adorned with golden crescent moons. In the time of Christ, the city was under Roman rule; but at the time when a follower of Willem Vrelant, in the late fifteenth century painted this miniature, the Islamic Mamluks were in power. That was a thorn in the eye of Christian Europe, which still dreamed of a new crusade and the restoration of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The crescent moon was used to symbolize 'the Turk' (little distinction being drawn between the various Islamic peoples).

The crescent moon seldom had a positive meaning. After all, 'the Turks' were the archenemy of Christendom as a whole, and in the sixteenth century more particularly of the Habsburg emperor Charles V and his descendants. It must have been a slap in the face of the Spanish authorities when people attending the hedge sermons around Antwerp, and later the Beggars (or Gueux, those opposing Spanish rule), wore crescent moon-shaped medallions inscribed 'Liever Turks dan Paaps': 'Rather Turkish than Papist'.







The Vrelant miniature is a page from a catholic book of hours. Whereas a priest or monk used a breviary (Latin: *breviarium*) to keep track of the day's prayers, a lay person would use a book of hours (Latin: *horarium*). And the higher the status of the worshipper, the more richly decorated the book would be. The book of hours from which this page was cut probably contained other miniatures showing scenes from Christ's Passion: the *betrayal by Judas*, the *Imprisonment of Christ*, the *Ecce Homo*, the *Flagellation*, and of course the *Crucifixion* itself. In the Late Middle Ages, Christ carrying the cross usually occurs as part of more comprehensive narrative series.

**D**eus in adiu Ad sexta  
torum meum intend  
Dne ad adiuuandu  
me fortuna. Gloria  
pati. Sicut pms.  
Teu creator ipus. utis. an Rubum que.





## Impossible companions: Luther, Alba and the Pope

It is Luke who describes in his gospel how, on the way to his crucifixion at Golgotha, 'the place of the skull', Christ was followed by a great crowd of people. A motley procession like this provided a wonderful opportunity for an artist to entertain his audience. Different versions of the scene are peopled with a wide variety of 'extras': not just soldiers and Roman and Jewish dignitaries and priests, but also ordinary onlookers, peasants on their way to market, and mischievous boys. Sometimes they wear quasi-biblical dress and sometimes contemporary clothing.

The contemporary figures are what immediately catch your eye in the version of the scene painted by Jan van Wechelen, an artist who was probably a member of the Anabaptists, one of the most severely persecuted sects of the reformation movement. Of the two figures following Christ on horseback, one wears a red bishop's mitre while the other is dressed as a scholar in a black gown and black beret. Are they intended as a type of pictogram representing the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) and his main opponent, the reformer Martin Luther? And, looking slightly to the right, could the equestrian figure in black with a tall black hat and long beard be the same sort of pictogram for Alba? In this painting, the main players in the political and religious conflicts of the day accompany Christ to his execution. Even without understanding the finer points of Van Wechelen's intentions, it is clear that the painting is a commentary on the contemporary troubles in the Netherlands.



The winding city walls on the left and the steeply rising road on the right produce a rather odd perspective. Perhaps, at the back of his mind, the artist was recalling the landscape and exotic city walls in an engraving produced a decade earlier. The print was published by Hieronymus Cock, and was itself based on a drawing made in the 1550s by Liège-based painter Lambert Lombard. The caption on the print even indicates the model on which Lombard based his drawing: a painting by Jheronimus Bosch. It is a 'lineage' that shows how artists in the north were constantly drawing on their own pictorial traditions.



Detail from Jan van Wechelen, *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne



## The impact of the image

His sinuous pose and tight, brightly coloured clothes makes this man look almost like a dancer. But nothing could be further from the truth. He is a soldier, one of the guards cruelly tormenting the three condemned prisoners on their way to Golgotha. With his left hand he seizes the robe of Christ, collapsing under the weight of the cross, and drags him mercilessly to his feet. It is clear from his multi-coloured, slashed outfit and the long pike over his shoulder that he is a 'Landsknecht': one of the dreaded mercenaries of German or Swiss origin principally employed to fight on behalf of the German emperor. At the time when this painting must have been made, that was the Habsburg Emperor Charles V, who was also Lord of the Netherlands. In later paintings, the soldiers leading Christ to his execution often wear distinctive red items – hats, trousers and jackets, or sashes – that identify them as supporters of the Catholic cause. But why? Were the artists using contemporary references to help the viewer identify emotionally with the story? Or was there more to it than that? Was it a way of equating the present-day persecution of religious reformers with that of Christ? Maybe it was a case of 'plausible deniability': paintings like these were generally kept deliberately open to varying interpretation.



Detail from Master of the Douai Carrying of the Cross, possibly Master J. Kock, *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Photo: Daniel Lefebvre, Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai.





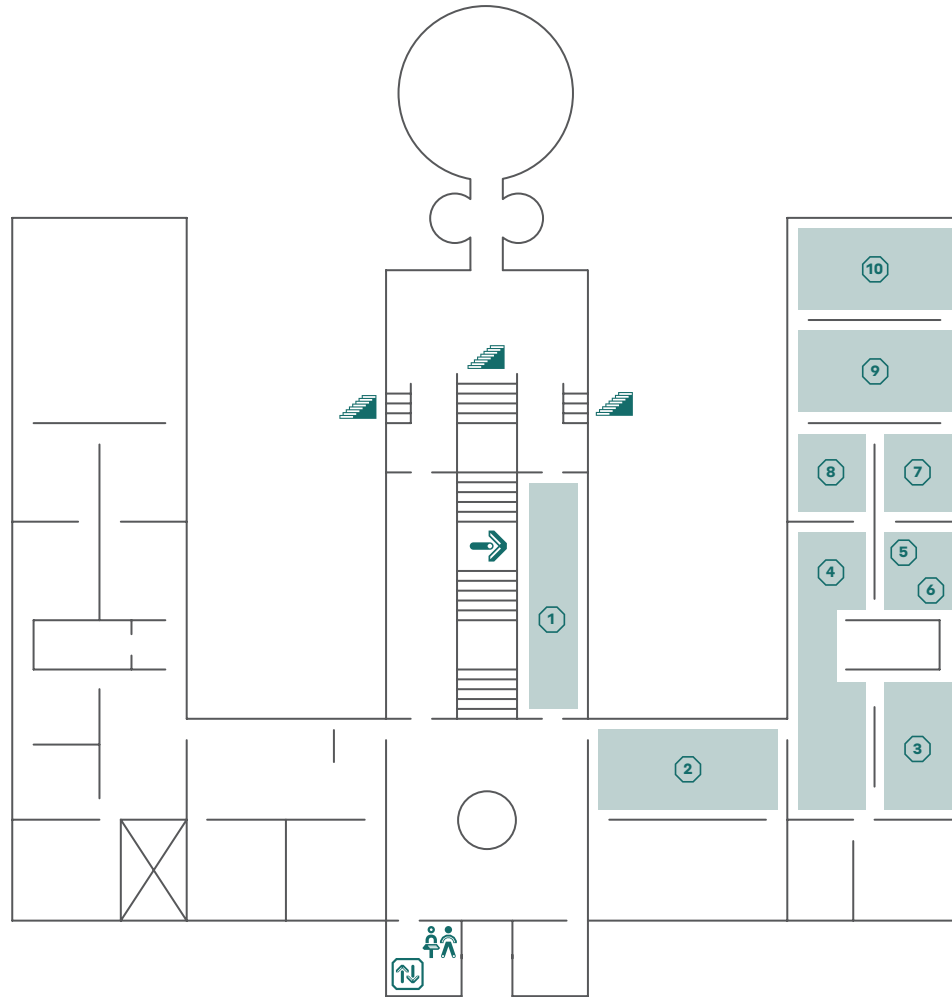
➔ Exhibition starts here

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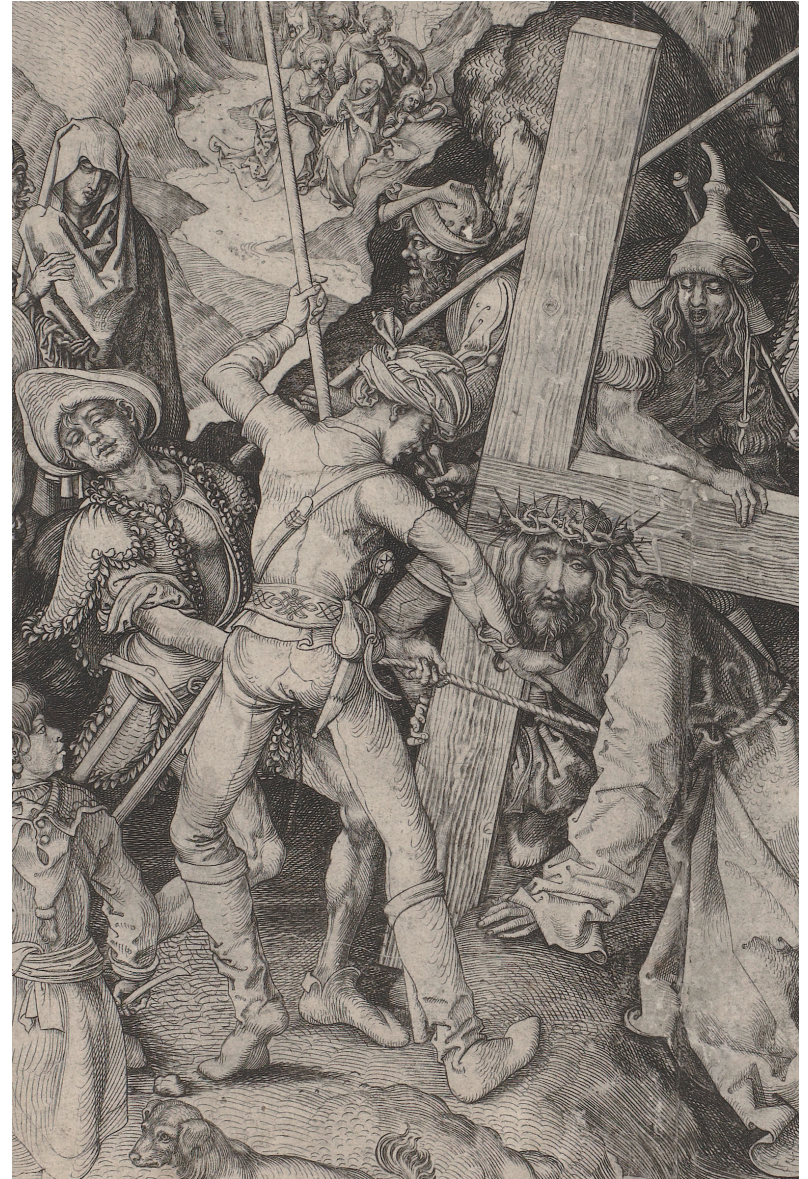
↗ Stairs to other floors

♿ Toilets



These days, an overwhelming and virtually endless mass of visual images is available to us at a swipe of the screen or click of the mouse. But, of course, that was not always the case. Centuries ago, the everyday life of the average person must have been a lot less colourful. Imagine how much more impact pictures must have had then! Martin Schongauer's great *Christ Carrying the Cross* is a real tour de force: a virtuoso engraving of unusually large size. Its astonishingly fine details in no way detract from the dramatic focus of the depiction. Produced in a run of several hundred (the result of the still new technology of printing), this print had a huge impact on the art of Schongauer's time. Soon, copies, partial copies and derivative versions of his *Christ Carrying the Cross* could be found everywhere. For the painter of this Landsknecht, an artist in the Northern Netherlands, the figure of the soldier in Schongauer's print may not literally have been a model, but it was certainly a source of inspiration.

Below: Master of the Douai Carrying of the Cross, possibly Master J. Kock, *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Photo: Daniel Lefebvre, Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai.  
Right: detail from Martin Schongauer, *Christ Carrying the Cross* © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam









## The Brueghel family firm

What makes an unfinished work of art so intriguing? It's as if an incomplete image appeals to the imagination more than a finished one. Interesting, too, how it lets you get inside the mind of the artist. It was no different for viewers in the seventeenth century. So, the non finito (a grand art historical term for 'unfinished') effect in the series of etchings later published as the *Iconography* must have been deliberate. The likenesses of statesmen, soldiers, writers and artists were made by Anthony van Dyck, the foremost portrait painter of the day. His virtuoso portraits of the Brueghel brothers, Pieter II and Jan, are apparently casual sketches: swiftly made but animated. Van Dijk has drawn Pieter slightly squinting and contemplative. The airy folds of the ruff framing the face of the elder of the two brothers serve as an elegant transition between the detailed depiction of his features and the loose lines indicating his clothing and hands.

At the death of their father, the Bruegel – that is, Pieter Bruegel I or 'Peasant Bruegel' – his two sons were still too young to learn to paint. Pieter II and Jan received their first artistic training from their maternal grandmother, Mayken Verhulst. Yet it was their work that would eventually make their father's paintings far more renowned than they would otherwise have been. Pieter Brueghel II ('Hell Brueghel') is regarded as a mere imitator of his father and large numbers of copies and versions of varying quality were produced in his studio in Antwerp.. Jan was less inclined to draw directly on his father's work and was skilled in a wide range of genres. He owed his nickname 'Velvet Brueghel' to his meticulous, but animated painting style. Much more successful than his brother, Jan received prestigious commissions, became court painter to Archduke Albert and Duchess Isabella (rulers of the Southern Netherlands), and collaborated on a regular basis with Peter Paul Rubens.



Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Pieter Brueghel II* © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam







## Christmas card with mass murder

The snow-covered Brabant village looks like a scene from a Christmas card, so it takes a moment to realise what is actually going on: a horrifying massacre, with babies being butchered by the armed band that has just ridden in. Desperate parents are fleeing with their children in their arms; soldiers are forcing their way into houses or being surrounded by villagers. Some people are pleading for the lives of their infant sons and one devastated mother has collapsed in the snow with her dead baby in her lap. In the foreground lies the corpse of a baby looking almost like a doll and, rather further back, just in front of the inn, a dog sniffs enquiringly at another.

However you look at it, the *Massacre of the Innocents* is one of the grimmest of all the cruel stories in the New Testament. When the Jewish King Herod, a puppet of the Romans, hears the prophesy of the birth of a king, he doesn't know which baby it concerns. So, for fear of losing his throne, he orders the murder of all boy children born in Bethlehem in the previous two years. His efforts are in vain: Jesus escapes the massacre after an angel warns Joseph to flee. The Catholic Church regarded the 'innocents' as the first Christian martyrs.

The prototype for the *Massacre of the Innocents* located in a snowy Brabant village was a painting by Pieter Bruegel I. Dozens of copies and variants of his composition survive. They were produced by Marten van Cleve, Gillis Mostaert and, most especially, Pieter Bruegel II and his studio. Given that there must once have been even more of them, such depictions of the *Massacre of the Innocents* must have been very popular, albeit for a relatively short period.

Since the subject is a particularly horrible episode in the New Testament, the question is why the pictorial tradition blossomed to such an extent. Was it the opportunity it offered for covert social criticism? The fact that Herod's soldiers were out to kill the Redeemer meant that very little was needed – a banner, or a caricatural likeness of the hated Duke of Alba – to turn the scene into a critical commentary on contemporary oppressors.

Previous page: Pieter Bruegel II, *the Massacre of the Innocents*, Kunstsammlung der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen. Below: Pieter Bruegel II, *the Massacre of the Innocents*, Kunstsammlung der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen.









## A covert portrait of the age?

A motley crowd of people have flocked to a little wooded valley: soldiers, pilgrims, peasants – and not just men, but women and children too. Why? You have to look closely to find out: almost hidden in the background, St John the Baptist is preaching to them, while Jesus, dressed in blue, stands listening with his arms folded a little way to the right. A few people have climbed trees to hear more clearly, but not everyone is so attentive: some people are chatting and a man in the foreground is having his fortune read.

Dozens of copies of this picture have survived. At least twenty are attributed to Pieter Bruegel II or his studio, and four to his younger brother Jan. It is hard to tell whether the two brothers were copying a painting by their father or basing their pictures on cartoons inherited from him.

Previous page: detail from Pieter Bruegel II, *The Sermon of St John the Baptist*. LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn

Below: Pieter Bruegel II, *The Sermon of St John the Baptist*. LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn



As in the case of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, there was a long pictorial tradition surrounding *the Preaching of St John*. There must have been some reason for the Brueghel family, father and sons, to depart so clearly from that tradition. Setting the scene in the shelter of a wood turns it into something very reminiscent of a 'hedge sermon': those meetings outside Antwerp where large crowds of people – thousands, according to some reports – gathered to hear the often inflammatory sermons of Protestant preachers. Forbidden by the Catholic authorities, such preaching took place as covertly as possible.

The painting by Pieter Bruegel I most often designated as the prototype, now in the Szépművészeti Múzeum in Budapest, is dated 1566 – the year in which the hedge sermons culminated in the famous 'Beeldenstorm', when Protestant rioters stormed into Catholic churches in the Low Countries and violently 'purged' them of their 'blasphemous' religious images.

Did the Bruegel[s] sympathize with the reform movement? There has been much speculation on the subject. But, if they did, it is unlikely that they would have displayed their support so openly in their paintings. To do so would have been bad for business and, under the Catholic government of the Southern Netherlands, actually dangerous. It is more probable that they deliberately kept their work open to multiple interpretations.









## The Church triumphant

We are witnessing the very moment when Christ collapses under the weight of the cross, his face literally grey with pain and exhaustion. The impression of a man under torture is reinforced by the contrast with the healthy, pink-cheeked face of the young woman kneeling opposite him. Filled with compassion, Veronica wipes the forehead of the suffering Christ. In his oil sketch, Peter Paul Rubens depicts her as a voluptuous Antwerp wench with long blond hair.

Despite its considerable size, this picture of Christ carrying the cross is only a sketch. Rubens uses rapid, loose brushstrokes in a restricted range of colours to fill the picture plane with a writhing pyramid of figures. The eye is led upwards from the soldiers at the bottom, via Christ and the horseman with vertical lance, to the sky.

Although this one never got that far, Rubens' oil sketches were generally intended to be turned into finished paintings of great size. He employed assistants to help him do this and so to enable him to fulfil the many commissions he received from religious institutions and people in high office. At his Antwerp studio, specially designed to accommodate vast canvases, they painted the many square metres after Rubens' design sketches. So, you really can't get much closer to Rubens' creative genius than in this oil sketch.







Baroque paintings swoop and swirl, but so does the brushwork within them. It is a style designed to create artworks that reflect the recovery of the Catholic Church from the deep depression into which the Reformation had thrown it. Through the hands of great masters like Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob Jordaens and Anthony van Dyck, the triumphant Mother Church proclaims the one and only true faith. Propaganda? Of course it is.

Working through the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church had taken almost twenty years to determine a plan of action in response to the accusations of abuse and corruption levelled at it by Martin Luther and his associates. The measures taken to achieve that Counter-Reformation, as it was called, included an overhaul of ecclesiastical art. From the early seventeenth century, following a rather tentative start, the new approach began to result in artworks that were grand and compelling, with swirling figures made even more overwhelming by being positioned close to the viewer, seen from below, and filling the picture plane: the baroque!





# Brueghel and Contemporaries: Art As Covert Resistance?

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Cover image: Workshop Pieter Brueghel II - *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Photo by Peter Cox / Bonnefanten, long-term loan Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed

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