

# THE QUINTESSENTIAL REPLICA: JAN BRUEGHEL'S LARGE FORMAT VERSION OF HIS FATHER'S *SERMON OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST*

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder's fascinating composition of John the Baptist preaching in a forest clearing (Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum) enjoyed enormous success in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries<sup>(1)</sup>. At least twenty-four replicas are signed by or have been attributed to his eldest son and prolific imitator Pieter Brueghel the Younger<sup>(2)</sup>. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's younger son Jan Brueghel the Elder, the so-called Velvet Brueghel (1568-1625), is less known as a copyist after his father. However, he also made several replicas after his models, including at least two copies after the *Sermon of St John the Baptist*. The version in the Kunstmuseum Basel, examined here, is one of them (fig. 1)<sup>(3)</sup>.

A close examination of this beautiful painting gives us the opportunity to reassess the context of dissemination of the celebrated composition. In this article, Jan Brueghel's copying procedure will be elucidated and contextualized to foster a better understanding of Bruegel-Brueghel family studio practices<sup>(4)</sup>. In the light of one of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's best versions (Bruges, Groeningemuseum)<sup>(5)</sup>, the study will chart the technical and artistic ties between the two sons of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and their use of the paternal inheritance. Comparisons with Bruegel the Elder's prototype will reveal to what extent the sons were aware of this model in the creation of their own versions. Finally, the study will illustrate the specificities of Jan Brueghel's own style of painting in the making of a copy.

## What Makes an Iconic Image? The Bruegelian *Sermon of St John the Baptist* and Its Success

What makes an iconic image is a relevant question for most of the great Bruegelian compositions, and this is especially applicable to the *Sermon of St John the Baptist* in

- (1) Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 95.2 x 161.7 cm, signed and dated 'BRVEGEL·M·D·LXVI', Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum, inv. 51.2829. For technical studies on this painting, see URBACH 1999, especially p. 129-134; URBACH 2000, p. 79-90; CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 142-183. For a full bibliography on this painting, see URBACH *et al.* 2000, p. 28.
- (2) For technical analysis of four of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's versions, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 445-483.
- (3) Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 114.6 x 165.4 cm, unsigned, Basel, Kunstmuseum, inv. 139 (ERTZ 1979, cat. 52, fig. 517; ERTZ 1998-2000, 1, cat. A356, fig. 264, p. 368; ERTZ & NITZE-ERTZ 2008-10, 2, cat. 257, p. 556).
- (4) On Jan Brueghel's technique, see NEUMEISTER *et al.* 2013.
- (5) Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 118.7 x 168.0 cm, unsigned, Bruges, Groeningemuseum, inv. 0.1561, MARLIER-FOLIE 1969, no. 13, p. 56; ERTZ 1998-2000, no. E338; CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 446-483, fig. 274 *et passim*.



Fig. 1. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 114.6 x 165.4 cm, unsigned, Basel, Kunstmuseum, inv. 139. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

Budapest (fig. 2). Popularized in the first half of the century (Joachim Patinir, Herri met de Bles, Cornelis Massys, etc.), the subject was masterfully renewed by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He set the biblical story of Salvation in a typically northern European wooded landscape and presented it as a contemporary, seemingly trivial episode. At first glance, we see a dense throng of people in a clearing, dressed in the costumes of Bruegel's time. The artist took evident pleasure in detailing their physiognomies, gestures, expressions and garments, some of them colourful and exotic such as gypsies' garbs. However, the attentive viewer will notice John the Baptist, dressed in an animal skin and standing tall amid the crowd, pointing out the modest figure of Christ in blue robes. The biblical subject is also revealed by the tiny scene of the Baptism, all but imperceptible at the river's edge in the background and signalled by a barely distinguishable ray of light coming from the sky.

The depiction of an ostensibly contemporary crowd attending a sermon may conceal discrete allusions to real events that took place on the eve of the *Beeldenstorm* in the Low Countries, namely the Protestant gatherings (*hagenpreken*) held in the open countryside on the outskirts of cities and villages<sup>(6)</sup>. Although Bruegel's own views about these events

(6) On these *hagenpreken* (hedgpreachings), see MACK CREW 1978.



Fig. 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 95.2 x 161.7 cm, signed and dated 1566, Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum, inv. 51.2829. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

remain elusive, those who had experienced the turmoil of the time could hardly fail to make the connection<sup>(7)</sup>.

Several decades later, this composition would still have resonated as a reminder of the religious unrest and violent outbursts of this chaotic period. Late sixteenth and early seventeenth century inventories confirm its widespread success and indeed, numerous artists were inspired by Bruegel's painting<sup>(8)</sup>. However, it was his eldest son that contributed the most to the dissemination of the original model.

Pieter Brueghel the Younger and his workshop produced many replicas. Klaus Ertz, the author of the *catalogue raisonné* of the artist, lists twenty-four versions originating from the workshop, with dated examples ranging from 1601 to 1636<sup>(9)</sup>. Among them, the version in the Groeningemuseum, Bruges, though neither signed nor dated, is one of the most faithful versions of the original composition and one of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's most exquisite works, as revealed by recent cleaning (fig. 3)<sup>(10)</sup>. The presence of the Antwerp

(7) See especially JONCKHEERE 2012, p. 65-69, 75 *et passim*.

(8) As with similar subjects such as the *Sermon on the Mount* or the *Sermon by the Sea of Galilee*, the *Sermon of St John the Baptist* was sometimes merely referred to as a *predicatie*: VAN HOGENDORP PROSPERETTI 2009, p. 133.

(9) ERTZ 1998-2000, nos. E331-F355.

(10) SOBczyk 2012.



Fig. 3. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 118.7 x 168.0 cm, unsigned, Bruges, Groeningemuseum, inv. O.1561. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

brand on the reverse proves that the panel was painted in 1618 or later, falling in the middle of the range of Brueghel's signed and dated versions of the composition<sup>(11)</sup>.

Nonetheless, the earliest known dated replica was not painted by Brueghel's elder son but by the younger son Jan. His Munich version is signed BRVEGHHEL and bears the date 1598; thus it was made after his sojourn in Italy (fig.4)<sup>(12)</sup>. Much smaller than the original, it is a cabinet painting typical of Jan's output. As for his Basel version, which is neither signed nor dated (fig. 1), it is an exact copy at the same scale as the original, and very similar at first sight to the replicas painted by Pieter.

(11) On the Antwerp brand on the Bruges version, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 451-452 and fig. 278. On the period of use for this Antwerp brand, see WADUM 1998.

(12) Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 41 x 59 cm, signed and dated 'BRVEGHHEL·1598', Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, n° 834. See MUNICH 2013, n° 25.



Fig. 4. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, oil on panel, 41 x 59 cm, signed and dated 1598, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, inv. 834. © bpk – Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin/Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische, Staatsgemäldesammlungen



Fig. 5. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sermon on the Mount*, oil on copper, signed and dated 1598, 27.7 x 37.8 cm, Los Angeles, The John Paul Getty Museum, object number 84.PC.71 (public domain-Google Art Project/Google Cultural Institute)

Jan also used his father's *Sermon of St John* as inspiration for another composition, the *Sermon of Christ on the Mount* (The John Paul Getty Museum) (fig. 5). This is signed and dated 1598, as with his *Sermon of St John the Baptist* in Munich<sup>(13)</sup>. Like the Munich painting, it is smaller in scale, but it is painted on copper rather than on wood. Several figures are lifted directly from the *Sermon of St John* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, although they are inversed and their clothes are painted in different colours (for example, the gypsy woman with her baby, dressed in red rather than blue). Moreover, Jan has adjusted the composition to suit his own minute and painstaking style. He has minimised the individuality of the figures and increased the proportion of trees, so that human beings are dwarfed by nature. Furthermore, he has modernised the articulation of space and light and shade and updated costumes.

The Bruegel sons' copies, either close replicas or variants, contributed to fixing Pieter Bruegel the Elder's prototype in the collective memory. But it remains to be seen how the sons reproduced their father's original version so faithfully. This was already discussed in an earlier publication in relation to Pieter Brueghel the Younger's copies but will be reconsidered below in the light of the technical examination of Jan Brueghel's Basel version<sup>(14)</sup>.

(13) Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sermon on the Mount* (previously identified as a *Sermon of St John*), oil on copper, signed and dated 'BRVEGHEL·1598', 27.7 x 37.8 cm, Los Angeles, The John Paul Getty Museum, inv. no. 84.PC.71. See ERTZ 1979, no. 53, pl. 519; VAN HOGENDORP PROSPERETTI 2009, p. 134-136, fig. 5.5.

(14) CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 446-483.



Fig. 6. Unpainted edges and corresponding rebates on the reverse. a-b. details from front and back of Jan Brueghel's Basel version; c-d. details from Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version (green paint was added later). © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

## Jan Brueghel the Elder's Painting Technique Step by Step. A Close Examination of the Basel Version

### *From Panel to Underdrawing*

Jan Brueghel's Basel version is painted on an oak panel comprising five horizontally laid planks, with unpainted lateral borders and *barbes* on the front side and corresponding

rebates on the reverse (fig. 6)<sup>(15)</sup>. These features also characterise the Bruges version by his brother Pieter and to a certain degree the original version by Bruegel the Elder<sup>(16)</sup>. Unprepared borders and rebates attest to the former presence of grooved battens, which would have been applied perpendicular to the wood grain by the panel-maker to prevent the panel from warping, and removed just before framing. In the Basel version, short indentations on the reverse here and there suggest the former presence of nails, perhaps applied to help keep the battens in place<sup>(17)</sup>.

The panel has been prepared for painting with a white ground layer, most likely chalk-glue, smoothed down after drying with a scraper. Short, evenly spaced striations left behind by a scraper can be made out in the infrared image<sup>(18)</sup>. A streaky grey *imprimatura*, most likely oil-based, was then applied with a wide, stiff brush. This would have sealed the porous ground and served as a light, neutral tint on which to paint. A similar grey *imprimatura* is also seen in Jan's Munich version of the *Sermon of St John* and in Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version<sup>(19)</sup>. This type of priming was indeed common in Antwerp panel painting during the period<sup>(20)</sup>. In Bruegel the Elder's original version in Budapest, the *imprimatura* is somewhat different to that of his sons, being almost white. It is composed of a thin layer of lead white mixed with a little chalk and a few fine black particles and is not noticeably grey or streaky<sup>(21)</sup>.

As in Pieter Brueghel the Younger's copies, infrared reflectography of Jan Brueghel's Basel version revealed a detailed underdrawing for the entire composition in a dry, carbon-based medium (figs. 7, 8a). The slightly scratchy, uneven, very black appearance of the

(15) Unpainted edges and corresponding rebates have been noted in two collaborative works by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens: *Return from War: Mars Disarmed by Venus*, c. 1610-1612, and *Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man*, c. 1617 (DOHERTY *et al.* 2006, p. 219-220 and fig. 126, p. 234). They have also been observed in a great number of panels by Pieter Brueghel the Younger and in works by contemporaries such as Peter Paul Rubens, Marten De Vos and Frans II Francken and Ambrosius Francken. See also CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 3, p. 732-733.

(16) In the original version by Bruegel the Elder, such unpainted edges are indeed present at right angles to the grain, which in this case runs vertically. Traces of former temporary battens are also present to left and right, but planing down of the reverse prior to cradling has removed any possible remains of rebates (see CURRIE and ALLART 2012, 1, p. 146-147). For examples of such features in other panel paintings by Bruegel the Elder, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 246-248.

(17) The reverse of the painting has been planed and cradled, but this has not completely removed the traces of the rebates, which originally must have been about half a centimetre deep.

(18) There are longer, comb-like markings in the ground layer of Jan Brueghel's *Wedding Procession*, also witness to the use of a scraper (Brussels, Maison du Roi-Broodhuis; KIK-IRPA file: 2013.11842).

(19) In the Munich version, since the edges of the paint layer do not extend to the edges of the panel, the streaky *imprimatura* is clearly visible. We are grateful to Mirjam Neumeister for kindly sending us an image of the painting unframed. A similar *imprimatura* was also noted in a cross-section and scientific imagery of Jan Brueghel the Elder's *Wedding Procession* (Brussels, Maison du Roi-Broodhuis; KIK-IRPA file: 2013.11842). A detail showing the streaky *imprimatura* at the edge of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version is published in CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 453, fig. 280.

(20) CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 3, p. 742-745.

(21) CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 148.



Fig. 7. Detail of Jan Bruegel's Basel version: pouncing visible for figures, distant castle and landscape contours (indicated with red dots), infrared reflectography (IRR). © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

drawing lines might favour black chalk over graphite in this instance<sup>(22)</sup>. In many areas the underdrawing appears to have skipped over the slightly ribbed texture of the *imprimatura*, suggesting that the drawing was applied after the latter, which was also Pieter Brueghel the Younger's usual sequence of working<sup>(23)</sup>.

### *Pricked Cartoons as a Guide to Underdrawing*

The examination of the Basel version with infrared reflectography was particularly gratifying, since black dots were detected in places alongside the underdrawing, giving a vital clue to elucidating the copying process (figs 7, 8a). Indeed, this is clear evidence of pouncing and confirms the use of a pricked cartoon (or cartoons) to transfer the design to panel<sup>(24)</sup>.

This is the same *modus operandi* as was previously surmised for Pieter Brueghel the Younger's copies, but also for Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version. The underdrawing style of Bruegel the Elder for the main figures in the Budapest painting is neat and unwavering, with few spontaneous touches, leading us to believe that he too used pricked cartoons for the transfer of his composition to panel (fig. 8c)<sup>(25)</sup>.

The underdrawing style in Jan Brueghel's Basel version and Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version is exceedingly similar. In the tasselled hood of the tall figure in the lower right, for example, the same level of detail is achieved, with outlines for the folds of the hood as well as short hatches for tone (figs. 8a-b). The monk's face to the right shows a similar handling of outline in the eyes, nose and moustache. For the figure of Jesus, the garment and hand are rather tentatively drawn in both copies, with attention paid to folds and creases (fig. 9 a,c). In the seated group in the upper right, facial features are well-defined in both copies, with comparable outlines for chins, noses, eyelids and profiles, and analogous wiry outlines, hooks and squiggles for the folds in a woman's wimple (figs. 8a-b; 9a,c; 10a,d). The purpose of the underdrawing in both cases was to provide a precise and unambiguous guide during painting. Not a single modification has been made during the drawing process by either artist; the underdrawings are functional reproductions of the composition, devoid of creativity. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to tell them apart in terms of attribution.

A close inspection of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's underdrawing in the original Budapest version reveals that it is even more utilitarian than that of the sons' copies and some-

(22) The underdrawing in Jan Brueghel's Basel version of the *Sermon of St John* is comparable to that in a version of the *Massacre of the Innocents* by Pieter Brueghel the Younger in the Brukenthal Collection, Sibiu (Romania), where black chalk was identified. On this painting, see ALLART *et al.* 2013.

(23) CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 3, p. 755.

(24) It is unusual that the pouncing remains visible, as it would normally have been wiped away after underdrawing and before painting. On this, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 349.

(25) This was already suggested as a possibility by S. Urbach in 1999: 'It lacks completely the draughtsmanship of Bruegel's autonomous drawings (...). Can we conclude from the revealed underdrawing of the Budapest panel that, to place the main figures, he used a cartoon, and transferred it to the panel?' (URBACH 1999, p. 133). On this, see also CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 148-161 (with numerous illustrations, supporting Urbach's opinion) and CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 3, p. 880-884.



a



b



c

Fig. 8 Monks in discussion, a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, revealing pouncing; b. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version c. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version, all IRR. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels



Fig. 9. Christ, underdrawing. a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, b. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version, all IRR. ©KIK-IRPA, Brussels

what lacking in artistry (figs. 8c; 9b; 10c). In fact, it gives the impression that Bruegel simply joined up his now-lost pouncing dots for the main figures, with the scantiest of indications for eyes, noses and mouths and a little hatching here and there to establish tone. Motifs of lesser importance are sketched more roughly and the artist made a few minor adjustments during drawing and painting. Bruegel's underdrawing simply sought to guide the placement of forms during painting. The development of the motifs and the working out of the composition must have been done previously, in now-lost sketches and compositional drawings. The underdrawing, never intended to be seen, is thus entirely different to the creative and witty independent drawings the great artist produced for engravings, and cannot be compared to them.

To determine the copying process, Jan's version was traced and overlaid with tracings of three of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's versions, including the Bruges version (fig. 11). This proved without a doubt that both brothers must have used the same set of cartoons. Two slight left/right shifts were required, suggesting that the cartoon was split into three separate sheets – one for the far left of the composition, one for the centre-left section and one for the right area.

The tracing of Bruegel the Elder's Budapest painting, when superposed with the tracings of the sons' copies, shows no overall correlation, nor are there three correlating sections as in the copies. Nonetheless, many of the figure groupings do provide a good match, for example the gypsy family and figures just behind them in the centre foreground. This suggests that either the brothers (in all likelihood Pieter, as elder son) inherited a set of cartoons of details from their father, and/or that one or other of them traced areas from the Budapest painting.

The new evidence from the infrared image of Jan's version would seem to favour the second hypothesis. The surviving pouncing marks in Jan's version are in fact closer to the



Fig. 10. Top right seated group, a-b. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, IRR and normal light. c. Pieter Brueghel the Elder's original version, IRR, d. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version, IRR. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

original version's painted appearance than to its underdrawing<sup>(26)</sup>. The pilgrim's batten, for example, which was not foreseen in the preparatory stages of the original version, is pounced, underdrawn and reserved in Jan's version (fig. 12a-b). Further evidence is seen to the right, where Brueghel the Elder underdrew a man's purse to touch the tree root, but changed his mind during painting and moved it upwards (fig. 13c). Again, the pouncing marks and underdrawing in Jan's copy follow the design in his father's final paint layer rather than the initial underdrawn idea (fig. 13a-b). Furthermore, the few motifs that Brueghel the Elder drew then dropped during painting, such as a spindly tree in the distant landscape vista, are absent from the pounced design and underdrawing of Jan's version<sup>(27)</sup>.

(26) This is unlike the situation in the *Battle between Carnival and Lent* series, where infrared evidence from Pieter Brueghel the Younger's copy in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels suggests that he reused his father's pricked preparatory cartoons. On the *Battle between Carnival and Lent*, and the relationship between the original version and the copies, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 344-379.

(27) For the spindly tree dropped by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in the Budapest painting and other differences between the underdrawing and painting stages, see CURRIE and ALLART 2012, 1, p. 176-179 and figs. 63-64.

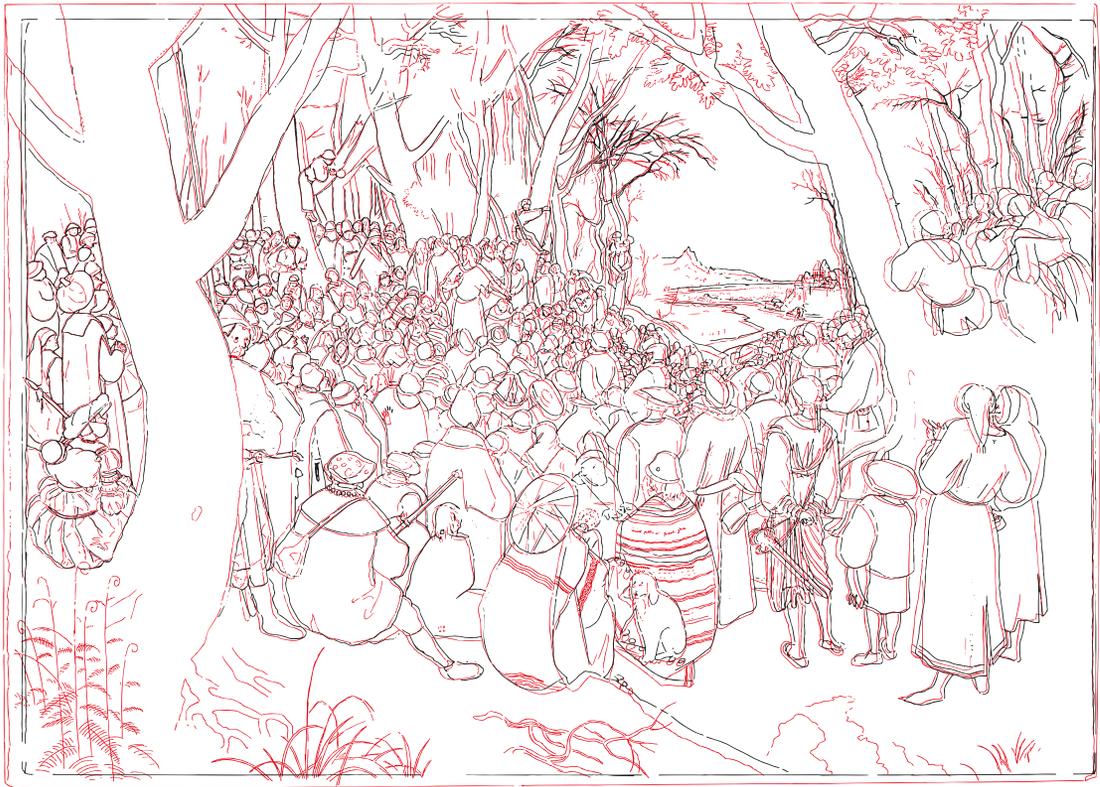


Fig. 11. Tracing of Jan Brueghel's Basel version (black) laid over Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version (red), aligned left. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

### *The Original Version as Live Model During Painting*

In his Basel version, Jan Brueghel made very few adjustments during painting. The positions of certain feet were rethought and repositioned, for example, the right foot of the Oriental (fig. 14a-b), whose shallower angle is more in line with its stance in Bruegel the Elder's Budapest version (fig. 14c-d). Conversely, Pieter the Younger painted the same foot according to its underdrawn position (fig. 14e-f).

Jan also corrected the tip of the shoe of the man in a light blue robe in the lower right to conform with the original painted version. These are minor adjustments versus the sons' cartoon that testify to Jan's desire for exactitude in the reproduction of his father's masterpiece.

There are also a few motifs that Jan has consciously improved upon during painting. For example, he moved the head of the figure at the upper right edge further into the body of the painting so that it became fully visible instead of being partially cut off as in his father's model. In Pieter Brueghel the Younger's versions, this head is also fully visible. Jan also modified slightly the clasped hands of the Oriental (fig. 15a-b). In Bruegel the Elder's

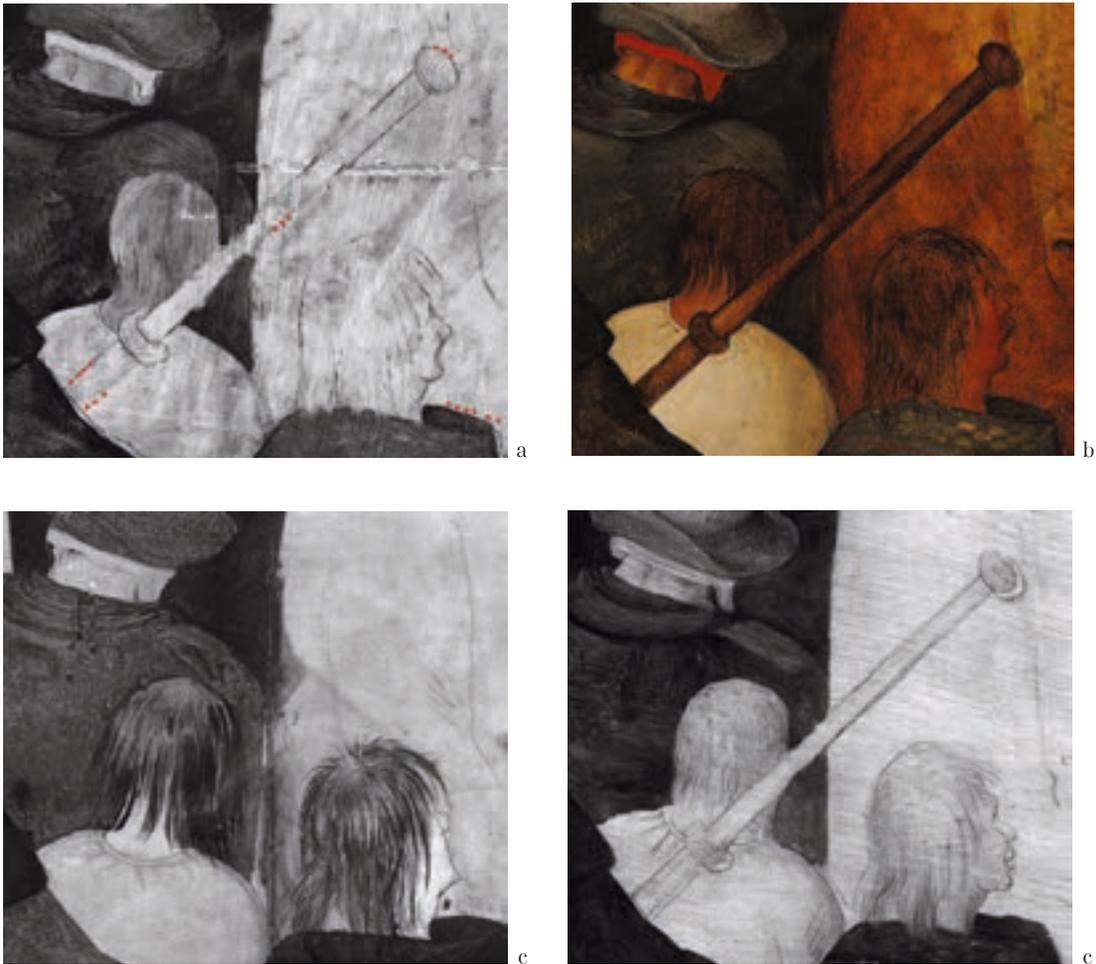


Fig. 12. Pilgrim's batten, a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version (pouncing indicated with red dots), IRR, b. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, normal light, c. Pieter Brueghel the Elder's original version, with no reserve or underdrawing for batten, IRR, d. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version, IRR. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

underdrawing, the hands are loosely joined and the index and middle fingers of the figure's left hand are extended, but during painting, he closed them (fig. 15c-d). Jan, during painting, adjusted the arrangement of the fingers, giving them more definition.

Jan's small format Munich version (fig. 4) is even closer to his father's original version in many respects. For example, it includes the white streak of the Holy Spirit in the sky pointing down to the Baptism in the distant landscape, which is missing in the Basel version, as well as the delicate red embroidery pattern on the gypsy woman's white sleeve, also absent in the Basel version. In the Munich version, Jan's signature in the lower right has been written and framed by grasses in precisely the same way and in the same place as in the original, only differing in the spelling of the name and the date. In his Basel version,

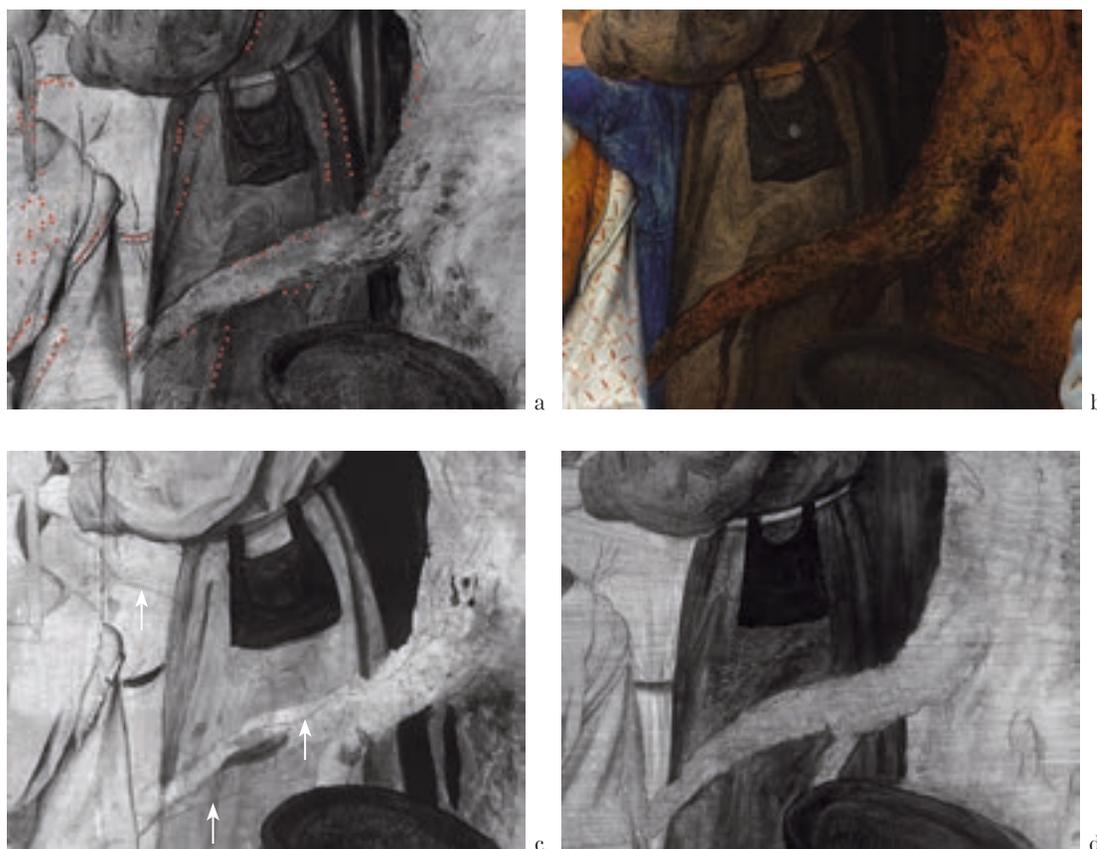


Fig. 13. Detail of tree root, a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, pouncing (indicated with red dots), IRR, b. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, normal light, c. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version: root, purse and sleeve shifted up during painting (arrows), IRR, d. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version, IRR. © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

there is a similarly 'framed' space, but close inspection found no traces of a signature, as if he had finally decided against adding one. Finally, and rather curiously, in the Munich version, the dog has been extended over the paint layer of the gypsy's robe, in imitation of the same *pentimento* in the original version<sup>(28)</sup>; this is not the case in the Basel version. Conversely, one detail in the Basel version that is based on the original but not present in the Munich version is the hand emblem on the cloth of a beggar's garment<sup>(29)</sup>.

This evidence points to the likelihood that Jan Brueghel had the Budapest version in front of him during the painting of both his copies. Subtle similarities in the handling of details and in painterly style also reinforce the idea that the model was the painting itself, and not just a drawing or a cartoon.

(28) This *pentimento* in the original version is illustrated in CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, fig. 78.

(29) This motif in the original version is illustrated in CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, fig. 84.

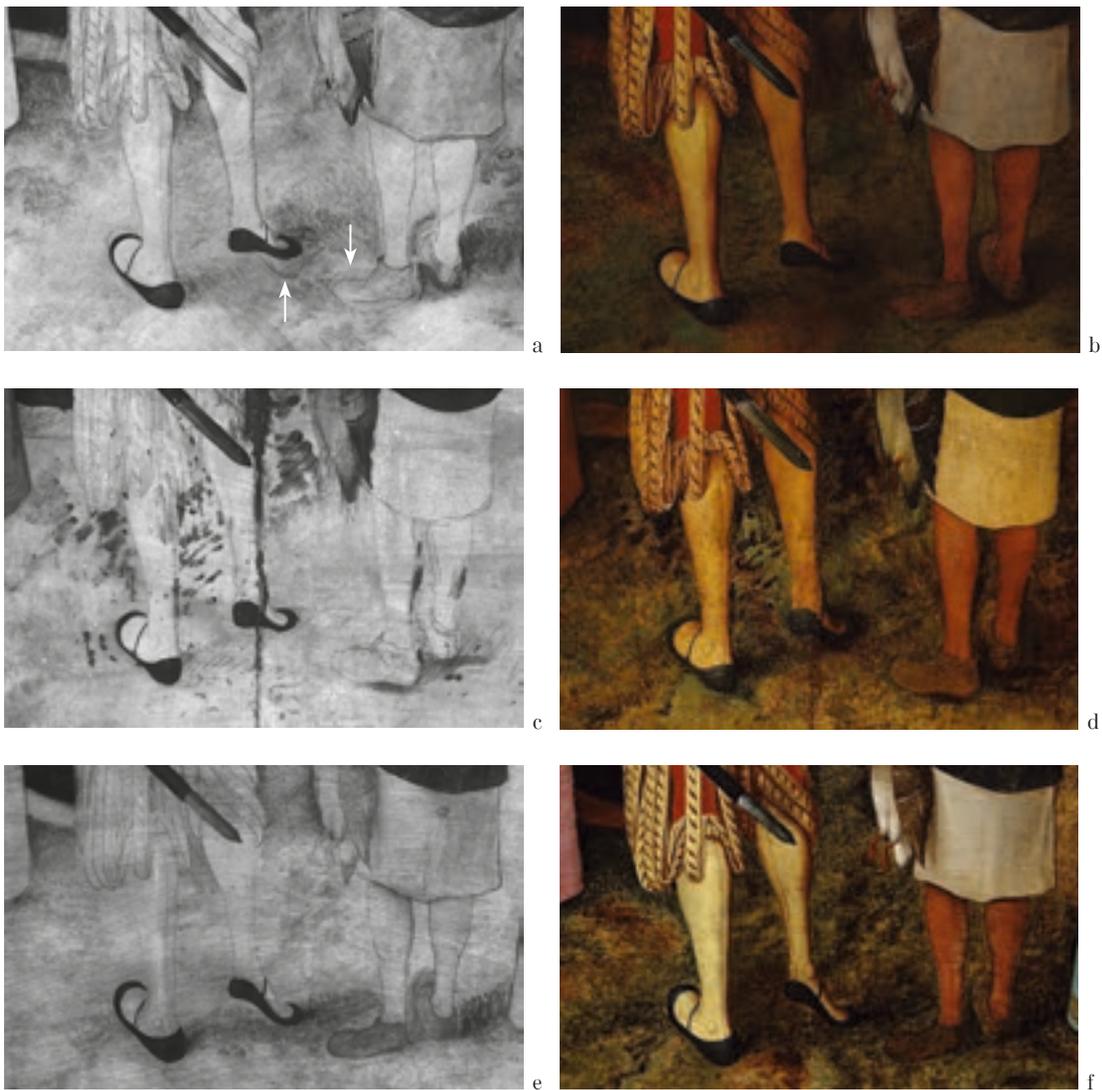


Fig. 14. Legs and feet of Oriental and boy with bird, a-b Jan Brueghel's Basel version, with adjustment to feet during painting (arrows), IRR and normal light, c-d. Pieter Brueghel the Elder's original version, IRR and normal light, e-f. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version, IRR and normal light. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

Our previous studies led to the same conclusion for Pieter Brueghel the Younger copies, and this is particularly obvious in the case of the Bruges version, which is one of the best preserved and most faithful copies (fig. 3). Subtle details from the original reproduced in this version include the white streak for the Holy Spirit in the sky, the red stripe on the gypsy woman's cape – missing in Jan's two versions – and the embroidered hand on the beggar's cloak.



Fig. 15. Clasped hands of the Oriental, a-b. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, IRR and normal light, c-d. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, IRR and normal light. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

### *Sequence of Painting*

The examination of Jan's Basel version, as well uncovering numerous technical features in common with his father's and his brother's versions, also reveals an extremely similar sequence of painting. As with Brueghel the Younger's copies, Jan's large format version shares an identical system of painterly reserves<sup>(30)</sup>. This means that spaces were left during painting for overlapping motifs still to be added, the aim being to avoid the

(30) On the use of reserves in Pieter Brueghel the Younger's versions, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 463.

unnecessary build-up of multiple paint layers, which might lead to premature cracking. It also avoided having to apply light colours over dark areas, which would sooner or later influence the tonality of any lighter colour applied on top. Notable reserves include the pilgrim's batten, reserved in the hair of the man to the right, and the tree root to the centre right, reserved in the coat of the man with a large hanging purse (fig. 13a-b). Bruegel the Elder also reserved motifs during the painting of the primary version (fig. 13c), although these are not as extensive as in his sons' copies. The pilgrim's batten, for example, is not reserved in the original, which confirms that it was a detail added to the composition during the painting stage (fig. 12c).

#### *Additional Remarks on Colour Alterations*

Jan Brueghel's Basel version was not analysed in terms of its pigments and samples were not taken. However, it is worth pointing out that the reds in Jan's Basel and Munich versions and in Pieter the Younger's Bruges copy have all started to turn mauve. This is a classic sign of the degradation of the pigment vermilion. Of the more than seventy paintings studied by Pieter Brueghel the Younger by the authors, just over a third suffer from this chemical change on ageing, which causes grey patches to appear on the surface of vermilion red paint. Several explanations have been given, such as pollution, humidity, light and the binding of the pigment<sup>(31)</sup>. In the case of Jan's Basel version, the discolouration seems to follow the lines of fine age cracks in the red paint, and is less present in red areas that have been painted over with a red lake glaze. Thicker paint seems to suffer less than thin paint. This suggests that the discolouration is provoked by the exposure of the pigment to air. Further study of Jan Brueghel's oeuvre would be needed to establish whether it is a common problem in his work in general, as with his brother<sup>(32)</sup>.

A key discrepancy between the original version and the sons' copies can also be explained by a colour change in the former over the years. In Bruegel the Elder's prototype, the greyish gypsy woman's cape, as well as a number of other motifs, was found to be painted with smalt<sup>(33)</sup>. This cobalt-containing glass pigment would originally have had a bright blue hue akin to that of natural ultramarine, but can fade completely over time<sup>(34)</sup>. The cape would therefore originally have appeared blue, as in the copies (fig. 20).

#### **Imitation and Emulation amongst Family Members: Brushwork and Style**

Copying Pieter Bruegel the Elder's composition is itself a token of admiration. However, Jan and Pieter not only copied the composition and the motifs from the original version, but also Bruegel the Elder's actual brushwork. In the group of observers in the

(31) For a discussion of the possible causes of the discolouration of vermilion and illustrations of cases in Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Pieter Brueghel the Younger's respective paintings, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 119 and fig. 2012b, p. 462-463; 2, fig. 372a, p. 560 and 2012c, p. 762-763 and note 108.

(32) Mauve patches, for example, also affect the reds in Jan Brueghel's *Wedding Procession* (Brussels, Maison du Roi-Broodhuis). On this painting, see notes 18-19.

(33) CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 161-165 and figs. 65-66 and 77-78.

(34) On smalt and its tendency to fade, see MÜHLETHALER & THISSEN 1993, STEGE 2004, SPRING *et al.* 2005 and ROBINET *et al.* 2011.



Fig. 16. Observers in upper right, a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, b. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

upper right, for example, Jan Brueghel precisely imitates his father's directional, translucent brushwork in a blue garment (fig. 16a-b). Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version also succeeds in imitating the brushy, translucent quality of the blue robe (fig. 16c), and the result is very similar to that of his brother Jan.

In painting the arms-crossed figure of Jesus, Jan has succeeded in emulating the anatomically ambiguous and formless hand of the original version, using identical brushwork (fig. 17d-e). Pieter the Younger's Bruges version, on the other hand, defines the fingers more realistically. Such comparisons also reveal the qualities of Pieter the Elder's own style. In the wide-eyed moustached figure gazing up at St John, Bruegel the Elder turns to caricature without making us aware of it. He captures the essence of the character, hinting at features rather than painting every detail (fig. 17h).

Jan Brueghel imitates the colour and texture of his father's painting in an old man's woollen cap, probably with a similar manipulation of the brush (fig. 18a). Jan has successfully mimicked the loosely defined eyes of the original, unlike Pieter the Younger, who has defined them more precisely, as with the beard (fig. 18c).

Jan's use of a blunt point, probably the back end of a paint brush, to mark an arabesque pattern into the still-soft paint of the stripes of the gypsy man's garment (fig. 20) closely follows his father's original version. This patterning is likewise copied by Pieter the Younger in his Bruges version. The brothers also follow the way in which Bruegel the Elder drew a brush end through a red glaze of the cloak of a Moor to produce stripes (fig. 21).

Jan Brueghel, like his brother, successfully emulates his father's virtuoso wet-in-wet brushwork, for example, in the slashed costume of the Oriental and in the pilgrim woman's



Fig. 17. Jesus surrounded by crowd, a, d, g. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, b, e, h. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c, f, i. Pieter Bruegel the Younger's Bruges version. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

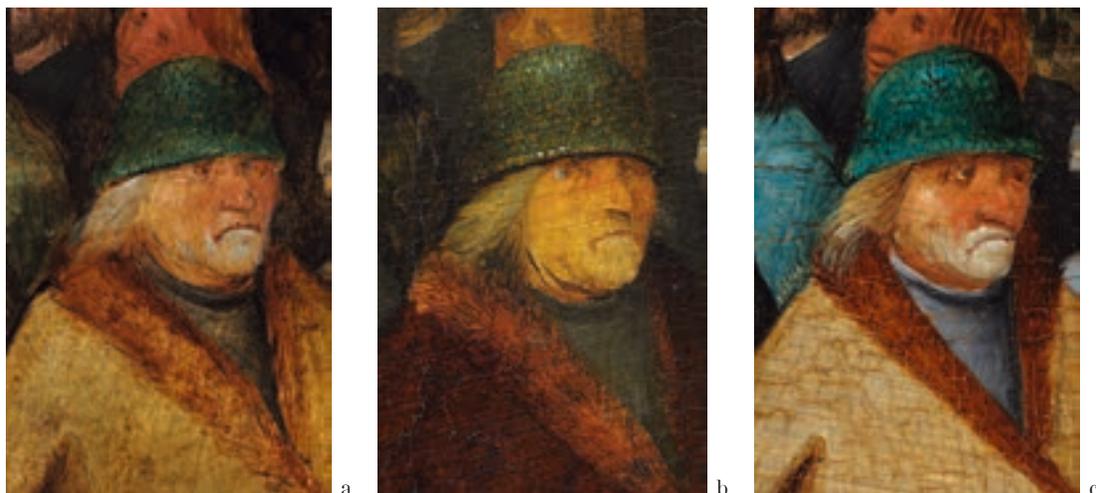


Fig. 18. Old man with woolly hat, a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, b. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

gathered skirt (fig. 15b). He also precisely copies Bruegel the Elder's wet-on-dry strokes, for example the coloured stripes on the knotted white headband of the abovementioned Moor (fig. 21a-b) and the red dashes of the white puffed sleeves of the Oriental (fig. 15b).

In the landscape background, Jan and Pieter painstakingly reproduce their father's tiny figures around the Baptism, as they do the miniature highlights on the trees nearby. In the forest floor, Jan skilfully renders Pieter the Elder's grassy earth patterns, using slightly smaller brushstrokes, carefully matching the opaque green and glaze-like black and brown patches. Pieter the Younger matches the transparency and colour in this area, but without producing a precise imitation. In the trees profiled against the sky in the distant landscape vista, Jan's leaves closely follow those of his father in form, but are not quite as loose in style and the paint not as liquid; Pieter the Younger's foliage is more stylised than that of Jan's, the tree leaves arranged into neat sets of parallel clusters.

### The Location of the Original and Format Questions

As we have seen above, technical examination of the copies leaves no doubt that both Bruegel's sons had access to the Budapest version, invalidating an old tradition whereby the painting was already in Hungary in the sixteenth century<sup>(35)</sup>. In fact, the earliest mention of it in Hungary is in 1905; nothing is known of its former location<sup>(36)</sup>.

(35) It has been suggested that the original version by Bruegel the Elder was in Boldizsár Batthyányi's collection at this early time. However, Dóra Bobory, the author of a monograph on Batthyányi (BOBORY 2009), did not find any archival evidence of this. We thank her for her help in clarifying this point.

(36) The Budapest painting was cited by A.L. Romdahl in 1905 (ROMDAHL 1905, p. 103, 165). It might have been shown at an exhibition held in Budapest in 1896, but unfortunately, there is no trace of it in the catalogue. On this, see URBACH 2000, p. 79-80 (she recognises this, but surprisingly reaffirms the presence of the painting in the Batthyányi collection in the sixteenth century), and CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 144.

An inventory of the Archducal Collection in the Coudenberg Palace in Brussels, drawn up between 1633 and 1650, cites *Een predicatie van St Jan, van den Ouden Breughel*<sup>(37)</sup>. This painting cannot be identified with the Budapest version, since its measurements are quite different to those given in the inventory (4 ft 7 in x 7 ft 2 in, equivalent to 127.8 x 198 cm if using the Antwerp foot). Intriguingly, if these dimensions included a frame, the painting cited in the inventory would have been much closer in size to the Basel copy and to most of the copies by Pieter Brueghel the Younger than to the putative model, the painting now in Budapest<sup>(38)</sup>. As for the latter, it is approximately the same width as the copies but significantly shorter in height. Though atypical within Bruegelian production, its wide format is original, as proven by the presence of unpainted edges and *barbes* at top and bottom<sup>(39)</sup>.

Consequently, the mention in the Brussels inventory raises two hypotheses. First, the version formerly owned by Archduchess Isabella might have been erroneously attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder by the compiler of the inventory; it might have been instead an exact copy by one of his sons. The fidelity of Bruegel's sons' copies was such that confusion would be understandable. In support of this suggestion, it should be remembered that Jan Brueghel the Elder served as a court painter to the Archdukes and might have provided them with an excellent replica by himself or by his brother. Alternatively, the assumption that the mention in the Brussels inventory is reliable would imply the existence of a second autograph version by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. If we suppose that this was the prototype used by his sons rather than the Budapest version, it would mean that it was perfectly identical to the latter, yet with more landscape at the top<sup>(40)</sup>. Indeed, such an option cannot be definitively dismissed. However, it is at odds with the fact that we know of no exact replicas painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder himself after his own work. When the artist repeated themes, such as the Tower of Babel or the Adoration of the Magi, he produced significantly different compositions.

As a matter of fact, it seems highly likely that the Budapest version was accessible to Bruegel's sons somewhere in the area around Antwerp in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and that they painted or modified their copies directly after the paternal model. This assumption is in line with the similarities in subtle details and in handling that have been observed between this painting and the copies, especially the two by Jan. Thus it is probable that the painting now in Budapest remained in the Low Countries for some time, which would also explain how Pieter Stevens, the famous Antwerp collector (1590-1668), was able to claim that he saw Bruegel the Elder's *Sermon of John the Baptist*<sup>(41)</sup>.

(37) DE MAEYER 1955, p. 423.

(38) On the size of the copies by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 450.

(39) This was already noted in URBACH 2000, p. 81. On comparisons of format between the Budapest painting and Bruegel's sons' copies, see also CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 468-472. It should be noted that in terms of proportion, Jan's small Munich version is also closer to the version listed in the Coudenberg Palace inventory than it is to its putative model in Budapest.

(40) This was already suggested in URBACH 1999, p. 129.

(41) At an undetermined date between 1625 and 1668, Stevens included this information in the margin of the biography of Bruegel in his copy of Van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* (Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana).



Fig. 19. Background figures, a. Jan Bruegel's Basel version, b. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c. Pieter Bruegel the Younger's Bruges version. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

The question remains as to why there is a difference in height between the Budapest painting and the copies. It appears to be a modernisation on the part of the sons. It should be recalled that Jan Bruegel was no stranger to updating his father's compositions as and when he saw fit, as he did with his *Sermon of Christ on the Mount*, painted in the same year as his small version of the *Sermon of St John the Baptist* in Munich (fig. 5)<sup>(42)</sup>. He may have considered the unusually wide Budapest version as awkward and old-fashioned, with the figures somewhat cramped in a frieze-like space. The addition of trees and foliage at the top allowed him to increase the proportion of landscape, which he favoured so much in his own compositions. Nonetheless, in the added landscape section, Jan and Pieter's versions are very alike, and since Jan's Basel copy and most of Pieter's versions bear no date, it is impossible to be sure which of the brothers invented the new arrangement for the upper part.

In any case, the change in format may also have been due to practical and/or commercial reasons. Bruegelian paintings tended to conform to several standard formats. This is already true for Pieter Bruegel the Elder's works: the large ones generally complied with

Unfortunately, he gave no indication about the painting's location and measurements. On this, see BRIELS 1980, p. 206-207; ALLART 2001-2002, p. 49-50; CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 145.

(42) Other examples of Jan updating his father's compositions include the *Crucifixion* (see Vienna and Munich versions, discussed and illustrated in CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 636-638), and a version of the *Wedding Dance in the Open Air* (privately owned, illustrated in ERTZ 1998, cat. 22, p. 89).

a standard format, whose dimensions were roughly equivalent to 4 x 6 Antwerp feet (114.7 x 172 cm). In most of his copies, Pieter Brueghel the Younger followed the same formats as those of his father. In this respect, a mention of an unfinished work in the inventory of Frans I Francken (1617) is of special interest, since it reveals the existence of a standard format explicitly connected with 'Bruegel': *Een Breugelsmaet daerop staende een begonste Boerenkermisse near Breugel voors*<sup>(43)</sup>. Unfortunately, the inventory gives no measurements for this painting. For some unknown reason, the Budapest *Sermon of Saint John the Baptist* does not comply with Bruegel the Elder's standard large format, which could have led his sons to correct the 'anomaly'.

### Jan Brueghel: a Copyist with a Distinctive Style

Jan Brueghel betrays his personal painting style here and there in the Basel version of the *Sermon of St John*, despite his obvious search for verisimilitude with the original version. His flesh tones, for example, are considerably more opaque and the colours more finely blended than those either of his father or his brother. This can be seen in the face of Jesus (fig. 17d).

Background figures reveal his distinctive style even more clearly. In the top row of heads behind Saint John, for example, the faces are modelled in finely blended opaque paint and features defined in a somewhat sculptural fashion. His flesh tones seem to have more of a burnt sienna tint than those of his brother and father. Pieter the Younger's brushwork, on the other hand, is less blended and more graphic, making greater use of translucent paint mixtures and allowing the streaky *imprimatura* to peek through. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painterly handling is looser than that of either son, suggesting facial features rather than describing them explicitly (figs. 18b-19b).

There are also subtle idiosyncrasies in colour that set Jan's two versions apart from the original and those of his brother. He occasionally replaces his father's colours with an intense and vibrant blue hue, probably ultramarine (lapis lazuli), for example, in the stripes on the gypsy man's cloak (fig. 20a) and in the tiny figures of John and bystanders in the Baptism scene in the background<sup>(44)</sup>. Nonetheless, the fact that there are so many blue garments and headgears in Jan's two versions versus their greyish counterparts in the original version is not always due to a deliberate choice on the part of Jan, but to the drastic fading of smalt-based blues in the original. In the Bruges version, Pieter Brueghel the Younger's blues are generally less bright; the gypsy woman's cloak, for example, is painted in an azurite blue rather than in ultramarine. In his other versions, Pieter occasionally mimics the brighter, ultramarine blues of his brother<sup>(45)</sup>.

(43) DUVERGER 1984-2002, 1, p. 394. On this, see also CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 3, p.729-732.

(44) The addition of bright blues is seen in many of Jan's copies or versions of his father's compositions, for example, his version of the *Wedding Dance in the Open Air* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux (CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 603-609). In the case of the *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, the browned appearance of the glaze-like stripes in both the original version by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the Bruges version by Pieter Brueghel the Younger is likely due to the discolouration of a translucent green pigment known as copper resinate.

(45) An example of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's use of a bright ultramarine blue in the *Sermon of St John* was shown at the Galerie De Jonckheere, Paris, in 1989 (CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 469, fig. 294).



Fig. 20. Gypsy family with detail of stripy pink cloak, a, d. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, b, e. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c, f. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's Bruges version.  
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Textural differences are also manifest. In the Basel version, Jan uses his fingers as a tool to break up areas of dark green translucent paint in background foliage, a tree trunk and the grassy floor in the foreground. Similarly, he employs his fingers to give texture to a dark glaze in the smaller Munich copy<sup>(46)</sup>. There is also one accidental fingerprint at the upper edge in the Basel version, no doubt made by Jan or someone else while the paint was still soft. In the original painting by Bruegel the Elder, there is only one area in which fingerprints are clearly seen and this is in the red stripe of the gypsy wife's robe<sup>(47)</sup>. Pieter the Younger also used his fingers on occasion to soften a transition<sup>(48)</sup>, but not, it seems, in his series of copies of the *Sermon of St John*. Jan also incised the back of a brush into soft paint to indicate leaves in an area of green foliage, as in his *Wedding Procession* (Brussels, Maison du Roi-Broodhuis). This is not seen in foliage in Bruegel the Elder's version or in Pieter the Younger's Bruges copy.

Finally, in the Basel version, Jan omits the red stripes and embroidered pattern on the garment of the gypsy woman (fig. 20a). It was not that he was unaware of these decorative details, as his Munich version shows the red pattern on the white sleeve. In terms of design,

(46) See MUNICH 2013, p. 198 and fig. 138.

(47) For discussion and illustrations of other fingerprints in Bruegel the Elder's work, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 310, figs. 172-173, web 126a-e. It is not a new or particularly unusual technique, and is seen in the work of other Northern and Italian masters before and after Bruegel's day. See CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 1, p. 317, note 97.

(48) For examples of the use of the fingers as a painting tool in Pieter Brueghel the Younger's work, see CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 3, p. 777, figs. 544-545.



Fig. 21. Moor, with detail of striped red gown, a. Jan Brueghel's Basel version, b. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original version, c. Pieter Bruegel the Younger's Bruges version. © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

he might have considered a pure and densely pigmented blue layer more impactful for this centrally placed figure.

### Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

The examination of Jan Brueghel's *Sermon of St John the Baptist* (Basel), seen in the context of his father and brother's versions, provides exciting new insights into the working methods and artistic practices of the Brueg(h)el dynasty.

From a technical point of view, there are many similarities in the preparation of the oak panels. Jan's version is, however, unique in revealing the tell-tale dots of pouncing, confirming that pricked cartoons were used to transfer the image to panel. Interestingly, his brother most probably used the same set of cartoons, as tracings of their compositions superpose perfectly. It is worth recalling that Jan and Pieter also most likely shared the

same cartoon for their respective versions of the *Wedding Dance in the Open Air*<sup>(49)</sup>. In Jan's *Sermon of St John*, the lack of correspondence of the pouncing dots with Bruegel the Elder's underdrawing makes it likely that the sons' cartoons were derived from tracings or drawings made after the finished painted composition of the original rather than after inherited preparatory cartoons.

Jan and Pieter the Younger's underdrawings, ostensibly a simple joining up of a pounced design, are excessively similar in notation and style and hard to tell apart. During painting, they both left exactly the same motifs in reserve as they went along. Their co-dependence on the same cartoons and their similar drawing and painting techniques raise the intriguing possibility that Jan worked in his brother Pieter's studio for the production of the Basel version, probably in the early years after his return from Italy in 1596.

The striking verisimilitude in motif, colour and brushwork between Bruegel the Elder's original version now in Budapest and the copies by Jan and Pieter strongly suggests that the sons had this version in front of them during painting, which implies that it was accessible somewhere near Antwerp at that time. The part in which their versions both differ from Bruegel the Elder's original – the additional section of sky and trees – is extremely similar in the Basel copy and Pieter's copies, supporting the idea that Jan may have worked in his brother's workshop, with one or other of them producing the model for this area. Given the predilection of Jan Brueghel for updating his father's compositions, this could well have been Jan.

Comparison of the sons' copies and Bruegel the Elder's original reveals their respective talents as painters, Jan's style being more sculptural, with blended and opaque colours, Pieter the Younger's more graphic, with semi-transparent mixtures, and Pieter the Elder's suggestive yet capturing the essential, with translucent and ethereal paint. Jan's two versions have a few subtle features that mark them out, such as the preponderance of intense ultramarine blues and the use of the fingers to modify glazes.

Why Jan Brueghel decided to create his own – unsigned – large-format version of the *Sermon of St John the Baptist* remains open to speculation. He could perhaps have produced it for the open market, maybe as part of his brother's output. The small-format Munich version on the other hand, which is signed and dated 1598, could have been made on commission for a client or friend.

Technical research into the other paintings that Jan Brueghel the Elder created after extant or lost paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder is ongoing and will further elucidate the ways in which the second son exploited his father's artistic heritage.

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(49) CURRIE & ALLART 2012, 2, p. 603-609.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Une œuvre clé: la grande *Prédication de Jean Baptiste* de Jan Brueghel l'Ancien d'après son père

Si Pieter Brueghel le Jeune (1564/5-1636) s'est affirmé comme le copiste attitré de son célèbre père (ca 1525-1569), son frère cadet Jan Brueghel l'Ancien (1568-1625) a suivi une

voie plus personnelle, non sans réaliser, lui aussi, quelques répliques ou copies plus libres des œuvres de Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien. Parmi les exemples de cette facette de son activité, la *Prédication de Jean Baptiste* du Kunstmuseum de Bâle est intéressante à plus d'un titre. Elle est ici comparée avec l'une des meilleures versions de la composition dues à Pieter Brueghel le Jeune (Bruges, Groeningemuseum) et avec leur prototype commun, le tableau de Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien daté de 1566, conservé au Szépművészeti Múzeum de Budapest. On peut ainsi mieux saisir la personnalité artistique respective des deux frères. En effet, certaines de leurs particularités individuelles restent décelables, en dépit de leur recours à une technique globalement similaire et de leur fidélité au modèle, dont ils ne s'écartent que par l'option d'un format laissant plus de place au paysage et au ciel. La confrontation de leurs répliques avec l'original semble indiquer qu'ils eurent accès à ce dernier et qu'ils l'étudièrent tous deux *de visu*. Elle fait également mieux ressortir les qualités techniques et expressives de l'original de Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien. Enfin, l'examen comparatif du dessin sous-jacent des deux copies éclaire d'un jour nouveau les liens qui unissaient les deux fils de Bruegel. On constate en effet que Jan utilisa le même procédé de reproduction que son frère aîné: comme lui, il recourut à la technique du poncif (ici clairement établie) et, selon toute apparence, il se servit du même ensemble de cartons pour ce faire.

DDAIIA

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