Bruegel in Black and White

Three Grisailles Reunited

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Karen Serres

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY
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THE COURTAULD Gallery

Foreword

This focused exhibition brings together for the first time Pieter Bruegel the Elder's three surviving grisaille paintings and considers them alongside closely related works, including near-contemporary copies. Allied to their small scale and evident mastery of a now largely unfamiliar technique, the quiet and pronounced inward quality of these panels presents a fascinating and unknown side of an artist still predominantly associated with paintings of peasant life and Flemish proverbs. The display aims to investigate this little known aspect of Bruegel's oeuvre, with reference also to his circle of patrons and friends and the emergence of grisailles as independent works of art.

Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery was presented to The Courtauld by Count Antoine Seilern (1901–1978) as part of the Princes Gate Bequest. This great bequest also included the painting *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* and one of the two drawings by Bruegel that now grace the collection, as well as a group of *naer het leven* ('from life') drawings and sheets depicting panoramic landscapes then thought to be by Bruegel (they are now attributed, respectively, to Roelandt Savery and to the anonymous Master of the Mountain Landscapes). The Courtauld's other autograph Bruegel drawing was presented by Lord Lee of Fareham, who, coincidentally, had owned *The Death of the Virgin* now at Upton and included in the exhbition. The conditions of the Princes Gate Bequest prevent the loan of any painting on panel earlier in date than 1600, meaning that this exhibition could only have happened at The Courtauld Gallery.

We are immensely grateful to our colleagues for sharing our ambition and agreeing to lend their precious works.

At the National Trust, special thanks are due to David Taylor, Christine Sitwell, Fernanda Torrente and the staff at Upton House. We are similarly indebted to Xavier F. Salomon and Joanna Sheers Seidenstein at The Frick Collection. Important further loans were made possible by Peter van der Coelen at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam; Mirjam Neumeister and her colleagues at the Alte Pinakothek, Munich; the Fondation Custodia, Paris, especially Cécile Tainturier; the late Willem Baron van Dedem; Emmanuelle Delapierre at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen and Maria Cristina Rodeschini, Giovanni Valagussa and Marina Geneletti at the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo. Technical research forms an important part of this project and we would like to acknowledge the important contributions made by Christina Currie, Dominique Allart, Ruth Bubb, Rachel Billinge, Alice Tate-Harte, Aviva Burnstock and Sophie Scully. For his early advice and encouragement, we are also grateful to Manfred Sellink.

It is a particular pleasure to be able to thank the generous supporters who helped bring this project to fruition – Johnny Van Haeften Ltd, Eijk and Rose-Marie de Mol van Otterloo and the Friends of The Courtauld.

Finally, I would like to extend my warm personal thanks to Karen Serres, Schroder Foundation Curator of Paintings at The Courtauld Gallery. Her discernment and scholarship have resulted in a project that perfectly embodies the character and importance of the Courtauld's programme of focused exhibitions.

ERNST VEGELIN VAN CLAERBERGEN
Head of The Courtauld Gallery

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PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER (c. 1525–1569)

The Death of the Virgin, c. 1562–65

Oil on single oak panel, 36.9 × 55.5 cm (max)
Signed on the chest at the foot of the bed: *BRVEGEL*
National Trust, Upton House, The Bearsted Collection, NT 446749

Provenance: Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598); Isabella Brant (1591–1626) and Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Antwerp; Peeter Stevens (1590–1668), Antwerp ; Jan-Baptista Anthoine, Antwerp, 1691(?); Robert Langton Douglas (1864–1951); purchased from him by Arthur Hamilton Lee, 1st Viscount Lee of Fareham (1868–1947) on 30 August 1929 for £6,000; acquired from him in 1930 by Walter Samuel, 2nd Viscount Bearsted (1882–1948); given by him with Upton House and all its contents to the National Trust in 1948

Pieter Bruegel the Elder is known above all for his fantastical creations in the spirit of Bosch and for his peasant scenes. His three surviving grisailles are far removed from these popular themes. This is especially true in the case of the small painting from Upton House, in which the last moments of the life of the Virgin Mary are played out in an atmosphere of intense piety and gravity. In the deathbed chamber, barely lit by a fire in the hearth and several candles, the dying old woman, her face gaunt, raises herself up in bed to receive the taper handed to her by Saint Peter, her gaze fixed on the crucifix at her feet (see facing). As she prepares to take her last breath, she is enveloped in a supernatural halo of brilliant light. Numerous figures emerge from the mysterious shadows and crowd around the bed, their faces marked with fervour and grief. On a chest at the foot of the bed stands a pail of holy water and an aspergillum; Saint Peter, dressed in a priest's cope, will later use them to bless the deceased. The cat curled up before the crackling fire is seemingly unaffected by the sombre mood, just like the young man seated close by, who is fast asleep. This sleeping figure attracts the attention and draws the viewer into the scene.

This intensely emotional and deeply moving nocturne is without a shadow of doubt by the hand of Bruegel, even if the artist's signature on the front of the chest is today almost illegible. The work is also authenticated by Philips Galle's scrupulously faithful engraving (cat. no. 2), which states explicitly that the model is a virtuoso (*artifice …*

manu) painting (*picta tabella*) and that the author is Bruegel.[1] Moreover, in the last decades of the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century, several documents mention it, as will be seen later. Indeed, *The Death of the Virgin* is the best documented work by Bruegel that has come down to us.

The small format of the painting is not as much of an outlier in the master's oeuvre as it might at first appear. At about 55 cm wide, it is similar in size to other paintings by Bruegel that invite close contemplation: *The Suicide of Saul* (dated 1562; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* (dated 1563; The Courtauld Gallery, London); *The Adoration of the Magi in the Snow* (dated 1563; Dr Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur), and *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap* (dated 1565; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels). Although no date can be discerned, the Upton House grisaille must date from around 1562–65.

When it was first published in 1930 concomitantly by Ludwig Burchard and Gustav Glück as a rediscovered work by Bruegel, the *Death of the Virgin* was in the collection of Viscount Lee of Fareham.[2] Lee then sold it to Lord Bearsted and the panel has been in the collection of Upton House since 1948, when the house and its contents were gifted by Bearsted to the National Trust.

Although the work had been lost for several centuries, several stages of its early history can be precisely retraced. It once belonged to the famous cartographer, humanist and

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Marten Schongauer
The Death of the Virgin, c. 1470–74
Engraving, 25.9 × 17.1 cm
The British Museum, London

collector Abraham Ortelius, a friend of Bruegel. We do not know how Ortelius obtained it; he may have commissioned it, bought it or received it as a gift from Bruegel himself or acquired it at a later date. In any case, it was in his collection by 1574, when he had the picture engraved by the printmaker Philips Galle in order to offer prints of it to his friends. At that time, Bruegel, who had died five years earlier, was more revered than ever. In the seventeenth century, the painting entered the collection of Peter Paul Rubens and appears in the artist's estate inventory drawn up in 1640: "The death of our Lady, white and black, by Bruegel the Elder".[3] From there, it was acquired by the Antwerp art lover and collector Peeter Stevens, who noted that he owned it in his copy of Karel van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* (Biblioteca Hertziana, Rome) in the section on Bruegel. Stevens owned many works by the artist, among them *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*.[4] In the inventory of another Antwerp collection, that of Jan-Baptista Anthoine, drawn up in 1691, a "Death of the Virgin" by "Breugel [sic]" is cited, but whether or not it is a grisaille is not mentioned. Since it was estimated at 200 florins, an average price for the Bruegelian works included in this collection, most of which were explicitly attributed to the younger son of Bruegel ("*fluweelen Breugel*"), it is questionable whether this citation corresponds to the painting in Upton House; it could refer to a version of the composition by one of Bruegel's sons.[5]

The theme of the Death of the Virgin has given rise to an abundant iconography in Byzantine and Western art. An engraving by Marten Schongauer (fig. 5) and a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (fig. 6) are among the works that Bruegel could have known and emulated.[6] Like them, Bruegel abstained from showing the physical apparition of Christ and the angels coming to collect the soul of the Virgin, as favoured by pictorial tradition (for example,

in the well-known version by Hugo van der Goes in the Groeningemuseum, Bruges). Bruegel could also have borrowed from Schongauer or Dürer the figure of the Apostle holding out a taper to Mary, but in his version the Apostle is Peter rather than John.[7] From Schongauer, he reprises the diagonal arrangement of the canopied bed. He owes the motif of the chest at the foot of the bed to Dürer and signed his name in the same location as Dürer had placed his monogram.

Bruegel's version of the theme surprises us nonetheless by its novel features. As Glück already observed in 1930, in other occurrences of this iconography the mourners are always limited to the Apostles. In Bruegel's picture a large anonymous group is present, including women and children. Furthermore, the use of strong contrasts between

light and shade – chiaroscuro – plays an essential role in the composition, which is depicted as a night scene. It is possible that Bruegel was aware of miniatures such as the one by Simon Bening in the Grimani Breviary, which shows a dying person in a room cloaked in darkness (fig. 7) where tapers introduce contrasts in lighting. The effect anticipates that perfected by Bruegel in his grisaille. In the image by Bruegel, however, the light of the candles and the fire connect with the supernatural light that seems to emanate from the Virgin herself. Glück rightly underlines that "never before the work of Rembrandt was such a spiritualization of light aimed at, and even achieved, as in this delicate little grisaille painting".[8] The mystical and emotional suggestion is all the more compelling since the scene takes place in an ordinary domestic setting, filled with objects and utensils referring to daily routines.

As noted above, the young man dozing near the fireplace catches the viewer's attention. He has given rise to considerable commentary, most of which considers him to be Saint John the Evangelist. But no-one has convincingly explained why Christ's preferred disciple, whom he asked to take care of his mother, would then be shown sleeping at the crucial moment of Mary's death.[9]

The episode of the Virgin's Death, not recorded in the Bible, was popularised by apocryphal texts and sermons. It is well known that Chapter 115 of the much read *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine was the principal textual source of its iconography in Western art at the end of the Middle Ages. However, the text has perhaps not been read with all the attention it merits. In this rather long chapter, Jacobus successively relates several traditions regarding the Death and Assumption of the Virgin. One more than the others offers a better understanding of certain peculiarities of the Bruegelian version. It ensues from homilies that

Jacobus attributes to Cosmas Vestitor, but which in fact come from the *Sermo de Assumptione beatae Mariae* by Johannes Aretinus.[10]

According to this variation of the story, the Virgin, informed of her imminent death by an angel, gathered all her friends and relations around her. The attendants were numerous; Jacobus da Voragine mentions the presence of no less than 120 virgins. Saint John arrived by chance, whereas the other Apostles were miraculously transported to the deathbed chamber. Saint John told them the news proclaimed by the angel. They dried their tears, paid their last respects and worshipped Mary, who took to her bed. The text specifies that Peter was placed at her head and John at her feet. Following a clap of thunder, the gathered attendants, with the exception of the Apostles and three
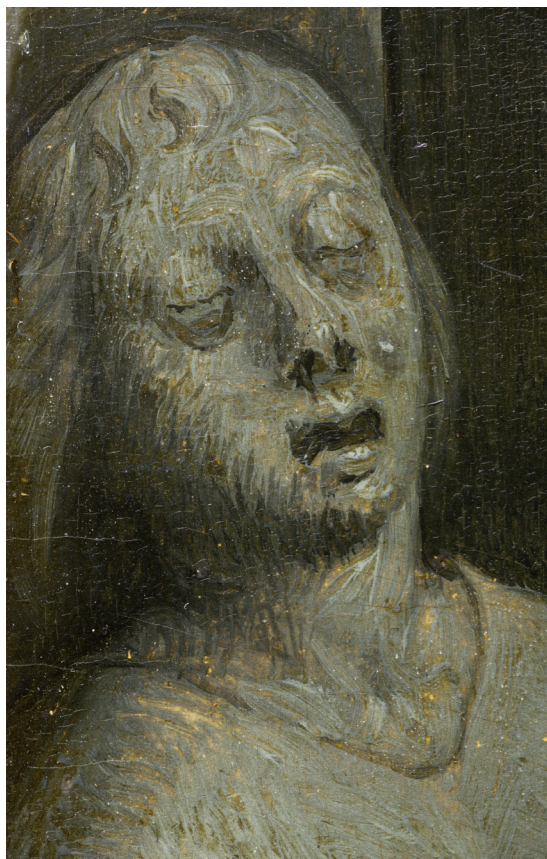
virgins, were plunged into a deep sleep. It was at that point that Jesus arrived with the angels to collect the soul of his mother. At that precise moment, the Virgin radiated a light so vivid that the Apostles could no longer look at her. The other members of the assembly awoke just after Mary expired.

Bruegel's picture is most likely meant to evoke the very moment before the miraculous event of Christ's coming to take Mary's soul, according to this version of the story. This would explain why the attendants were not limited to the Apostles: Mary's family members and friends are also present.[11] The young man dozing near the fireplace could allude to the sleep that would soon overcome part of the audience; that is to say, two successive parts of the account would be condensed. John is featured on the right, at the feet of the Virgin, as explicitly mentioned in the source; indeed, it is possible to recognise his beardless youthful face. The supernatural light starting to radiate from Mary's body heralds the imminent miracle. In the play of chiaroscuro, the importance given to the glimmers of several candles can also be explained by the text of Jacobus da Voragine. According to the same tradition that he attributes to Cosmas Vestitor, Mary advised Peter not to extinguish the lamps as long as she was still alive.

As some have remarked, the presence of a crucifix at the foot of the bed and the emphasis on Saint Peter in the guise of an officiating priest followed by a person carrying a double-barred processional cross are signs of a religious orthodoxy that, if not that of the artist, must have been that of the patron, whether Ortelius or not. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that Ortelius would have been so profoundly attached to the painting had he been a free thinker or member of the heterodox sect of Hendrik Niclaes, as some have supposed.[12]

The caption of Galle's engraving describes its model as "*artifici picta tabella manu*" (this picture, painted by a skillful hand). Indeed, the *Death of the Virgin* serves as a perfect example of Bruegel's technique and of the extraordinary virtuosity of his brushwork.[13]

Bruegel selected a quarter-sawn oak board of excellent quality on which to paint the *Death of the Virgin*. This judicious choice has ensured that the panel is still in excellent condition more than four hundred years after its manufacture.[14] The wood grain is closely spaced and the reverse of the panel displays an attractive pattern or 'figure' characteristic of a premium radial cut. The finish is smooth, which is typical of Flemish panels, and plane

marks are visible in the direction of the grain. Tree-ring analysis (dendrochronology), carried out by Ian Tyers, identified an eastern Baltic origin for the wood.[15] The single board is unusually wide for this region – 36.9 cm – the usual widths being between 25 cm and 32.5 cm. According to the analysis, the tree was felled after c. 1552. Tyers shared the tree-ring data with Pascale Fraiture, a dendrochronologist based in Belgium who had taken part in a wider study on Bruegel's techniques and materials published in 2012.[16] Fraiture was able to deduce that the board comes from exactly the same tree as another identically sized panel by Bruegel, *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap*, signed and dated 1565. The dendrochonological study undertaken on the Brussels panel proved that the tree it originated from was cut down no earlier than 1553. Given that the National Trust board comes from the same tree, the same *terminus post quem* applies. Interestingly, Tyers recently discovered that the single oak board used for Bruegel's *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*, signed and dated 1563 (The Courtauld Gallery, London), also derives from this same tree.[17]

The oak panel was most likely first sized with animal glue, to reduce its porosity. It would then have been ready to receive the preparatory layers, also known as priming. The ground layer is white and extends to the edges of the original panel. Its purpose would have been to smooth out any irregularities in the panel support and to provide as smooth a surface as possible on which to paint. Although no analysis was undertaken, it is likely to be chalk in a glue medium, as in other sampled paintings by Bruegel[18] and indeed most sixteenth-century panel paintings in northern Europe. Bruegel most likely sealed his porous ground with an oiling-out layer. This may have been tinted with lead white, as what appear to be the white grains of lead soaps

are visible in certain areas of thin paint.[19] Lead white would have acted as a drier on the oil and enhanced the whiteness of the ground.

Bruegel kept the paint layer deliberately thin so as to allow his white underlayer to shine through and provide the light tones. But before he even started to paint he would have first drawn on his design. Underdrawing lines are visible here and there in the infrared reflectogram and are sometimes perceptible with the naked eye.[20] They are most visible where Bruegel made minor changes to the design. One such spot is the bed cover of the Virgin. Here, the initial project for the folds has not been followed in paint. Other motifs adjusted during drawing include the profile of the Virgin's female attendant and the firedogs. In these last, the artist shortened the furthermost andiron during painting, presumably to avoid disrupting the portrayal of the flames. Given the complex, multi-figural composition of the *Death of the Virgin*, and the fact that there are no significant differences between the underdrawing and painting stages, it is likely that Bruegel made a detailed independent preliminary sketch before he started.

Following his underdrawing, Bruegel applied a layer of dark grey or black background paint first, leaving spaces for the forms to come, working from the background through to the foreground. The leaving of reserves was an essential step for establishing the carefully modulated tonal harmony of the composition, as this enabled him to exploit his light underlayer as a tone. Reserves would also have prevented the formation of drying cracks.

Bruegel balanced his tones according to the natural and supernatural sources of light, namely the Virgin's halo, the candles and the fireplace. He worked up his figures in shades of grey, finishing them off with light grey highlights and black touches. In certain still-life motifs, he avoided

the use of the lightest grey completely, merely tinting his ground with translucent black or thinly applied opaque grey paint in order to create the lighter tones.

For the sleeping youth on the left, Bruegel literally 'sculpted' the face in one session, starting with the grey mid-tones and then working up the contours using increasingly dark grey and black strokes (fig. 8). Lighter grey highlights are judiciously blended with the previous strokes. Translucent black strokes establish the deeper shadows such as the nostrils and mouth, but also define the shape of the closed eyes. Saint Peter's face is painted with equally audacious brushwork: again, working wet-in-wet on pale grey, the artist rapidly dashed off the eye sockets, nose and mouth using a well-loaded brush and black and white paint, adding the beard, hair and cope clasp at the same time.

One of the most virtuoso passages is the group of attendants praying to the right of the Virgin's bed. Again, in what appears to be one sitting, Bruegel established the mid tones in opaque grey paint, defined certain forms and outlines in black, and then indicated highlights in a series of rapid and perfectly accurate strokes, deftly adding structure to faces, hands and drapery folds. Particularly impressive is his effortless handling of foreshortening.

Finally, the motif of the crucifix at the foot of the Virgin's bed is a tour de force of painting and economy of means (fig. 9). In just a few black strokes and light grey dabs, Bruegel establishes the crowned head and outstretched arms, while just to the left of the head two simple dabs indicate the feet. The viewer's imagination fills in the rest.

Bruegel made just a few minor adjustments during painting.[21] The left shoulder and right arm of the Virgin's attendant were shifted upwards, while the hand patting the pillow was brought down. The perspective of the tester was modified, probably to increase the sense of foreshortening.

During painting, the cat was shifted downwards and slightly left of its reserve; the artist had even started to paint the darkest part of the fur before he changed his mind.

Bruegel's signature is located at the lower right, near the bottom of the chest before the Virgin's bed. It is now invisible to the naked eye but can be made out with magnification. Although "indistinct traces of a date" after the signature were mentioned in the 1964 catalogue of the Bearsted collection, none could be found on either side of the chest.[22] Given that the panel support derives from the same tree as that used for the 1565 *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap* and that *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (cat. 3) is also dated 1565, it seems reasonable to assume that the painting was executed in the mid 1560s.

Bruegel may have inadvertently left his fingerprint in the paint, at the foot of the andiron near the cat. It does not appear to serve any aesthetic function, unlike others in Bruegel's paintings, such as *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap*, in which a fingerprint lightens the corner of a hole in the ice.[23]

"*In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur*" (In all his works, there is always more meaning than he painted): Ortelius thus described Bruegel in the posthumous panegyric he dedicated to him in his *Album Amicorum* (c. 1574; Pembroke College Library, Cambridge).[24] Ortelius probably had his own treasured picture by Bruegel in mind when he made this laudatory comparison. Indeed,

in the *Death of the Virgin*, Bruegel conveys profound feelings without the usual external markers. He makes the sacred mystery of Mary's miraculous reunion with her Son all the more emotive since he does not try to depict it as a physical phenomenon. Ortelius's statement also celebrates Bruegel's vivid brushwork, which alludes to, rather than describes, the crowd around the deathbed.

Five painted versions of the composition have been identified, all probably executed relatively early. They lack the intense gravity of the model, since they are all painted in full vibrant colour.[25] Their authorship is not certain, although one of them, a small painting on copper, is signed *P. BREVGHEL*, suggesting that it may have been produced after 1616 by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, the elder son of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his assiduous copyist.[26] The four other known copies comprise a further copper panel of similar dimensions and three wooden panels, all of different formats. Four of the five copies were certainly made after the engraving rather than the original painting.

It is surprising that Brueghel the Younger, who sometimes painted dozens of copies after his father's compositions, did not exploit the *Death of the Virgin* for serial reproduction. For example, many more copies after *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (cat. 3) have come down to us. Brueghel the Younger would certainly have been aware of the composition through the engraving, if not the original painting itself, which he could have seen in his youth at Ortelius's house and, later on, in Rubens's collection. Had he decided to include the theme among his stock subjects, he would have kept to a standard format, developed a cartoon, and no doubt produced many copies. Perhaps he did not consider the theme sufficiently commercial, or felt that its serious tone was incompatible with his own more anecdotal style. DA, RB & CC

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PHILIPS GALLE (1537–1612), AFTER PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER

The Death of the Virgin, 1574

Engraving (second state of two), 33 × 43.8 cm (sheet)
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, inv. no. BdH 2793

Provenance: Acquired at auction at C.G. Boerner, Leipzig, 2 May 1923 by Dr J.C.J. Bierens de Haan (1867–1951); bequeathed by him to the Museum

Abraham Ortelius was particularly proud to possess *The Death of the Virgin*, an exquisite masterpiece unsurpassed in its power of suggestion. The engraving he commissioned from Philips Galle in 1574 was a means of sharing the pleasure he derived from the painting with his friends, as implied by the inscription in the lower margin.[1] The Latin verses, perhaps composed by Ortelius himself, offer a compelling contemporary comment on the meaning of the picture. They emphasise its emotional aspect, stressing the mixture of joy and sadness felt by the attendants witnessing Mary's final moments before rejoining her Son.

It is no coincidence that the cartographer solicited Philips Galle for the engraving. They both lived in the Lombardenvest in Antwerp at the time and were close friends. Philips Galle proved himself worthy of Ortelius's trust. In this large-format print, executed in the same orientation as the model, he laid out Bruegel's composition in meticulous detail, sensitively completing passages where the original was indistinct. The result is a portrayal of the scene that faithfully renders the original design, yet in a more descriptive manner. The only divergence that he allowed himself was the rectification of the perspective of the chair in the foreground: in Bruegel's painting, the chair is deliberately distorted, to create a link between the sleeping figure in the left foreground and the rest of the composition. Galle took great care to translate the chiaroscuro of the scene into a subtle network of

hatching and cross-hatching. The result of his efforts is a masterpiece, "one of the best prints he ever made".[2]

Some of the recipients of the prints were similarly impressed. On 15 July 1578, the Haarlem humanist, engraver and poet Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert (1522–1590) sent a letter of thanks to Ortelius in which he praised both Bruegel and Galle for surpassing themselves. He wrote that they had created an atmosphere of such deep sorrow that not only his eyes but also his ears were touched. Once again, the emotional aspect of the image was emphasised, as well as the two artists' ability to suggest contrasting feelings: "the room appears funereal", Coornhert wrote, "and yet, it seems to me that everything is alive".[3] Later on, in a letter dated 10 April 1591, another friend of Ortelius, the Spanish Benedictine scholar Arias Montanus (1527–1598) acknowledged receiving prints of Galle's engraving. Previously, on 30 March 1590, he had asked Ortelius for a reproduction of a painting he had probably seen first-hand during his stay in Antwerp between 1568 and 1575. He described it as "painted in the most skilful manner and with great piety".[4]

A pen-and-ink drawing of the composition should also be mentioned in this context (fig. 10).[5] Though anonymous and of somewhat mediocre quality, it is interesting since it is thought to have been retouched by Rubens, who may have introduced the brown wash and white highlights. It is difficult to say whether it was initially executed after the painting or the engraving. The distortion of the chair suggests the former. But, as Kristin Lohse Belkin observes, a point "in favour of the drawing having been copied from the print is its (unusually) large size, which is almost the same as the print".[6] An alternative hypothesis is that a faithful drawn copy was made after the painting when it was in Ortelius's collection, by Galle or one of his draughtsmen, in order to facilitate the execution of the engraving. The Louvre sheet could be a copy of this drawing. In any case, if the retouching is indeed by Rubens, as the experts have confirmed, it would bear witness to the interest that the great Baroque master had in the superb composition of his predecessor.[7] DA, RB & CC

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