

FIRE, SMOKE AND VAPOUR.
JAN BRUEGHEL'S 'POETIC HELLS':
'GHESPOOCK' IN EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN ART

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Karel van Mander, in the 'Life of Jeronimus Bos' in his *Schilder-Boeck* of 1604, speaks of the 'wondrous or strange fancies' (*wonderlijcke oft seldsaem versieringhen*), which this artist 'had in his head and expressed with his brush' – the 'phantoms and monsters of hell (*ghespoock en ghedrochten der Hellen*) which are usually not so much kindly as ghastly to look upon'.¹ Taking one of Bosch's depictions of the *Descent of Christ into the Limbo of the Fathers* as an example, van Mander further notes that 'it's a wonder what can be seen there of odd spooks (*oubolligh ghespoock*); also, how subtle and natural (*aerdigh en natuerlijck*) he was with flames, fires, smoke and vapours'.² In the *Schilder-Boeck*, van Mander frequently uses the word 'aerdigh' to describe the aesthetically pleasing quality of small works or small details;³ here, 'aerdigh' refers to the natural and lively depiction of fires.

As it has been observed, van Mander's list of Bosch's painterly expressions echoes Erasmus's often-cited eulogy on Dürer in the *Dialogus de recta Latini Graecique sermonis pronuntiatione* (*Dialogue About the Correct Pronunciation of Latin and Greek*), published in Basel in 1528. According to

¹ Mander K. van, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters, from the first edition of the Schilder-boeck (1603–1604)*, ed. H. Miedema, 6 vols. (Davaco: 1994–99) I 124f. (f. 216v): 'Wie sal verhalen al de wonderlijcke oft seldsaem versieringhen/die Ieronimus Bos in't hooft heeft ghehadt/en met den Pinceel uytghedruckt/van ghespoock en ghedrochten der Hellen/dickwils niet alsoo vriendlijck als grouwlijck aen te sien.' Here and in the following, my translation is largely based on the one given in Miedema's edition of *The Lives*; I use, however, a more literal translation of van Mander's expressions.

² Mander K. van, *Lives* I 124f. (f. 216v): 'Noch is van hem op de Wael een Helle/daer de oude Vaders verlost worden [...] t'is wonder wat daer al te sien is van oubolligh ghespoock: oock hoe aerdigh en natuerlijck hy was/van vlammen/branden/roocken en smoocken.' The painting has not been identified. See Miedema's commentary on this passage in Mander K. van, *Lives* III 55–56 (f. 216v 25).

³ Miedema H., *Fraey en aerdigh, schoon en moy in Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck* (Amsterdam: 1984) 21. For the use and meaning of the word 'aerdigh', see also Mander K. van, *Lives* II 233.

Erasmus, Dürer is superior to Apelles, since Dürer expressed ‘in black lines’ and without the aid of colours ‘that which cannot be depicted: fire, rays of light, thunder, sheet lightning, lightning, or, as they say, the “clouds on the wall”’.⁴ In the *Adagia*, published in Basel in 1520, Erasmus had given the meaning of the phrase ‘clouds on the wall’ as ‘something frivolous or vane’. Referencing the fourth-century Latin poet and rhetorician Ausonius, Erasmus further asserts in the *Adagia* that ‘a cloud is too insubstantial (*inanius*) to be expressed by colours’.⁵ *Inanis*, which literally means ‘containing nothing’ or ‘empty’, was commonly used in the sense of ‘fraudulent’ and ‘false’; *inanis* could further denote the ‘insubstantiality’ of the other world or the ‘incorporeality’ of the shades.⁶ Thus, while both Erasmus and van Mander include subtle, insubstantial things in their catalogues of artistic effects accomplished by Dürer and Bosch, respectively, the differences between the two lists are nonetheless striking. Van Mander explicitly praises Bosch for his exquisite painterly technique;⁷ no mention is further made by van Mander that the objects of Bosch’s imagination are at the boundary of what can be portrayed; and, perhaps most importantly, ‘ghespoock’ and ‘ghedrochten der Hellen’ are added to the fires and flames, which in van Mander’s text exist in three different places and forms: in hell; in Bosch’s head; and in Bosch’s works of art. In this essay I shall further explore the aesthetic and cultural values associated with ‘ghespoock’ as well as the place of images of fires, ghosts and spectres in the visual arts around 1600.

⁴ ‘Durerus quanquam et alias admirandus, in monochromatis, hoc est, nigris lineis, quid non exprimit? umbras, lumen, splendorem, eminentias, depressiones [...] Quin ille pingit et quae pingi non possunt, ignem, radios, tonitura, fulgetra, fulgura, vel nebulas, ut aiunt, in pariete [...]’ I cite from Panofsky E., “‘Nebulae in Pariete’; Notes on Erasmus’ Eulogy on Dürer”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14 (1951) 34–41, here 36. Erasmus’s own text is based upon Pliny’s praise of Apelles (*Naturalis historia* XXXV 96). For the catalogues by Pliny and Erasmus and the significance of Erasmus’s text for sixteenth-century depictions of fires, see Stoichita V.L., “‘Lochi di foco’. La città ardente nella pittura del Cinquecento”, in Pfisterer U. – Seidel M. (eds.), *Visuelle Topoi: Erfindung und tradiertes Wissen in den Künsten der italienischen Renaissance* (Munich-Berlin: 2003).

⁵ Erasmus, *Adagia* (Basel: 1520), 788 (4th chiliar, 5th centuria, no. XXIX). I cite from Panofsky, “‘Nebulae’” 39: ‘[...] significant, frivolum, ac vanum. Nam nebula rest inanius quam ut coloribus exprimi queat.’

⁶ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare (Oxford: 2003) 860.

⁷ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 124f.

Ghespook In and Around Bosch's Head

Van Mander concludes the short vita of Bosch with his own slightly augmented Dutch translation of the Latin verses by the Liège humanist Domenicus Lampsonius that accompanied Bosch's engraved portrait in the series *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies* (*Portraits of Some of the Famous Painters of Lower Germany*). Collected by Lampsonius, the 23 'portraits' were published by Hieronymus Cock in Antwerp in 1572:

Hieronymus Bosch, what means your frightened face
 And pale appearance? It seems as though you just
 Saw all infernal spectres fly close around your ears.
 I think that all the deepest rings of miserly Pluto
 Were revealed, and the wide habitations of Hell
 Opened to you – because you are so art-ful
 In painting with your right hand depictions
 Of all that the deepest bowels of Hell contain.⁸

Van Mander's image of the 'wondrous fancies' (*wonderlijke oft seldsaem versieringhen*) in Bosch's head is here supplemented, in a witty and visually evocative manner, by the motif of the 'infernal spectres' (*helsch ghespook*) flying at close distance around Bosch's ears. In fact, 'versieringe' can mean both ornamental detail and mental image or conception. 'Versieren' was often used synonymously with 'dichten', thus meaning 'to devise', 'imagine', 'dream up'.⁹ The 'infernal spectres' whizzing past Bosch's ears recall contemporary proverbs, moral tales and visual satires about monstrous insects and other devilish creatures that persecute the wicked, ridiculous, or mad.¹⁰ But the 'wondrous fancies' and 'infernal spectres' also expand on art theoretical notions that were, by the

⁸ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 124–27 (f. 216v–217r): 'Ieroon Bos, wat beduydt u soo verschrickt ghesicht, | En aenschijn alsoo bleeck, het schijnt oft even dicht | Ghy al het helsch ghespook saeght vliegghen om u ooren. | Ick acht dat al ontdaen u zijn de diepste chooren | Gheweest van Pluto ghier, en d'helsche wonsten wijt | V open zijn ghedaen, dat ghy soo constigh zijt, | Om met u rechter handt gheschildert uyt te stellen, | Al wat in hem begrijpt den dipsten schoot der Hellen.' See Koldewij J. – Vandenbroeck P. – Vermet B., *Hieronymus Bosch: The Complete Paintings and Drawings* (Rotterdam: 2001) 10f.

⁹ Verwijs E. – Verdaem J., *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* VIII ('s-Gravenhage: 1916) cols. 2431–32.

¹⁰ Vandenbroeck P., "Zur Herkunft und Verwurzelung der 'Grillen'. Vom Volksmythos zum kunst- und literaturtheoretischen Begriff, 15.–17. Jahrhundert", *De zeventiende eeuw* 3 (1987) 53–84; Bredekamp H., "Grillenfänge von Michelangelo bis Goethe", *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 22 (1989) 169–180.

beginning of the seventeenth century, commonplace in the humanist literature on Bosch and his works. Already the Spanish art critic and collector of Flemish paintings, Don Felipe de Guevara, in his manuscript *Comentarios de la Pintura* (*Commentaries on Painting*) of about 1560, views Bosch's figural inventions in the tradition of the 'comical figures' and 'grylli' (crickets), which the Greek painter Antiphilus had elevated to a separate pictorial genre.¹¹

Translated by van Mander, Lampsonius's verses describe what can be called an effect of interaction or contagion.¹² The interior experience of the places of hell affects the expression on Bosch's face; he is terrified (*verschrickt, attonitus*) and turns pale from the blood's withdrawal (*aenschijn alsoo bleeck, pallor in ore*). 'Ghastly' (*grouwlijck*) to look at, Bosch's paintings in their turn 'infect' the beholders with corresponding emotions. Moreover, the monsters of hell find their doubles in the 'infernal spectres' (*helsch ghespoock*), fancies, or dreams (*versieringhen*) in or around Bosch's head. Finally, it was Bosch's artfulness (*const*) that granted him access to the underworld and the habitations of devils and ghosts.¹³

The concept of a mutual attraction between an artist's temperament and a specific artistic genre lies at the foundation of van Mander's biographical writing. In the dedication of the *Netherlandish Lives*, van Mander expands on Virgil's dictum 'that everyone is attracted to what pleases him' (*Dat yeder is tot zijn vvelust ghetrocken*):

For one finds that each person's desire and inclination pleasantly attracts and draws him towards something besides the necessities of life, that is towards something which agrees with the form and being of his spirit and nature.¹⁴

¹¹ Felipe de Guevara, *Comentarios de la Pintura*, c. 1560. Sánchez Cantón FJ., *Fuentes Literarias para la Historia del Arte Español I* (Madrid: 1923) 159. See Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* XXXV 144.

¹² For the role of contagion and interaction, in particular the 'contagion of laughter', in early modern literature, see Betrand D., "Contagious Laughter and the Burlesque: From the Literal to the Metaphorical", in *Imagining Contagion in Early Modern Europe*, ed. C.L. Carlin (Houndmills: 2005) 177–94.

¹³ For the interrelationship between artistic and demonological theories of imagination, see Swan C., *Art, Science, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Holland: Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629)* (Cambridge: 2005) 123–56, and *passim*.

¹⁴ Mander K. van, *Lives I* 46f. (f. 197r7, 10–13): 'Want men bevindt, dat yeder Menschen lust en genegentheyt, beneffens behoeffijcke dinghen, ergen toe soetlijck aenghelockt en ghetrocken wort, te weten, tot sulcx, als zijnen geest en aert van gedaent en wesen zijn.' The Virgil quote, 'Trahit sua quemque voluptas', is from *Eclogues* 2, v. 65.

Desire is here explained as a natural inclination toward something that corresponds 'in form and essence' with one's own spirit (*gheest*) and nature (*aerdt*). While Virgil's dictum is referred here by van Mander to honour his dedicatees' love for the visual arts – van Mander dedicated this part of the *Schilder-Boeck* to the goldsmith Jan Mathijsz. Ban and the wine merchant Cornelis Vlasman –, the same mechanism of attraction is proposed throughout the *Lives* to explain artists' habits. In early modern art theory, preferences for specific artistic styles, genres, subjects, or working techniques were often thought to reveal artists' temperaments as well as these artists' national and regional origins. In Italian art criticism, images of fire, smoke and spectres were soon to be identified with the 'maniera Fiamminga', that is to say, with a 'foreign' manner distinct from the dominant regional styles of Italian art. Vasari, in his *Lives* of 1568, lists 'fantasticherie, bizzarrie, sogni, imaginations' with 'fuochi, notti, splendori, diavoli' as subjects in which Flemish artists excelled:

Franz Mostaert, who was passing skilful in painting landscapes in oils, fantasies, bizarre inventions, dreams, and suchlike imaginings. Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel of Breda were imitators of that Mostaert, and Lancelot Blondeel has been excellent in painting fires, nights, splendours, devils, and other things of that kind.¹⁵

The variety of airy, fiery, or ethereal 'subtle' substances is here expanded through other evanescent qualities, objects, and states such as 'fantasies', 'imaginationes' and 'dreams'. In early modern usage, 'spook' could equally refer to a ghost, a phantom, spectre, dream, fantasy, or delusion.¹⁶ Similarly, 'ghedroch' or 'ghedrocht' meant a false apparition,

¹⁵ Vasari G., *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, ed. Pergola P. della – Grassi L. – Previtali G., 9 vols. (Novara: 1967) VII 467f.: '[...] Francesco Mostaret, che valse assai in fare paesi a olio, fantasticherie, bizzarrie, sogni et imaginations. Girolamo Hertogliani Bos e Pietro Bruveghel di Breda furono imitatori di costui, e Lancelotto è stato eccellente in far fuochi, notti, splendori, diavoli e cose somiglianti.' For the English translation see Vasari G., *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. G. du C. de Vere, 2 vols. (New York: 1996) II 863. See also Guicciardini L., *Descriptione di tutti i Paesi Bassi, altrimenti detti Germania inferiore* [...] (Antwerp: 1567) 98G: 'Lancilotto mirabile nel far' apparire un 'fuoco vivo, & naturale, come l'incendio di Troia, & simile cose [...]' I cite from Miedema, in Mander K. van, *Lives* II 246.

¹⁶ Grimm J. – Grimm W., *Deutsches Wörterbuch* IV (Leipzig: 1897) cols. 417f.; 'Gespuke'; Vervuijs E. – Verdaem J., *Middelnederlandsch woordenboek* II (s-Gravenhage: 1912) cols. 1775–77; Kilianus C., *Etymologicum teutonicae linguae, sive, Dictionarium teutonico-latinum* (3rd, increased and revised ed. Antwerp: ex officina Plantiniana, apud Ioannem Moretum, 1599) 515; 'spoocke/spoocksel' is translated as 'spectrum, larva, phantasma'.

vision, spook, or phantom¹⁷ and was often used synonymously with ‘tovernie’, sorcery.¹⁸ According to contemporary experts in demonology, demons enjoyed mingling with the gaseous and vaporous substances of the air in order to make themselves visible to human eyes.¹⁹

‘Poetic Hells’ by Jan Brueghel the Elder

At the centre of my subsequent discussion are the nocturnal fires and hellish landscapes produced by Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1624) from about 1594 to about 1608, within a period of roughly 15 years.²⁰ Jan Brueghel the Elder is generally seen as the ‘last heir’ of a generation of Flemish painters who worked in the manner of Bosch.²¹ His association with Bosch’s imagery followed a family tradition: Jan was the second son of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/30–1569) who, in his turn, was already during his lifetime called a ‘great imitator of the science and fantasies of Hieronymus Bosch’, and, consequently, a ‘second Bosch’.²²

‘Invented’ in the mid 1590s in Italy, the ‘branden’, ‘fuochi’, or ‘incendi’ by Jan Brueghel the Elder exhibit Bosch’s monsters and spectres as part of new pictorial inventions that met the taste for the strange and wondrous shared by the aristocratic and clerical elites of the day. So unique and distinctive were these hellish landscapes that, by the end of the seventeenth century, they were excluded from Jan’s work and ascribed to his elder brother, Pieter Brueghel the Younger

¹⁷ Verwijs E. – Verdaem J., *Woordenboek* II col. 470f.: Kilianus C., *Etymologicum* 128, gives ‘ghedrogh/ghedroght’ as Latin ‘ludificatio, impostura, praestigiae, spectrum, phantasma. & Animalcula monstrosa’.

¹⁸ Verwijs E. – Verdaem J., *Woordenboek* VIII col. 620.

¹⁹ Del Rio M., *Investigations into Magic*, ed. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester-New York: 2000) 112. On this passage in Martin del Rio’s treatise, see the contribution by Sven Dupré in this volume.

²⁰ The most complete discussion of the hellish landscapes by Jan Brueghel the Elder is by Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere (1568–1625). Die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog* (Cologne: 1979) 116–136 (on hellish landscapes); 378–84 (on allegories of fire). See also Ertz K. – Nitze-Ertz C. (eds.), *Pieter Breughel der Jüngere, Jan Brueghel der Ältere: Flämische Malerei um 1600, Tradition und Fortschritt*, exh. cat., Kulturstiftung Ruhr Essen and Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (Lingen: 1997) 171–82, 503–506.

²¹ For Jan Brueghel the Elder as the ‘last heir’ of Bosch’s pictorial creations see Silver L., *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York-London: 2006) 391–97.

²² See Guicciardini L., *Descrittione* 100: ‘Pietro Brueghel di Breda grande imitatore della scienza, & fantasie di Girolamo Bosco, onde n’ha anche acquistato il soprano di secondo Girolamo Bosco.’

(1564/65–1637/38), who was then dubbed 'Hell Brueghel' ('helse Brueghel'), while Jan became to be known as 'Velvet Brueghel' ('fluwelen Brueghel').²³ There is, however, no doubt that the hells were invented by Jan; and that the invention was most likely motivated by some of Jan's early patrons in Rome. The first record of Jan Brueghel's stay in Rome dates from 1593, when the artist, then in his twenties, scribbled his name as well as the year on the wall of the St. Domitilla catacomb, which had been discovered by the young antiquarian and archaeologist Antonio Bosio (1575–1629) that very same year.²⁴ The excitement these archaeological findings caused among humanist and artistic circles sparked a general interest in the subterranean world. By 1593, Brueghel had already met Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564–1631) who would become his lifelong patron and friend; in 1595, when Borromeo was appointed Archbishop of Milan, Brueghel followed his extended *famiglia* to Milan.²⁵ The protectors of Jan Brueghel the Elder also included the Cardinals Benedetto Giustiniani (1554–1621),²⁶ Francesco Maria del Monte (1549–1629),²⁷ and, most probably, Ascanio Colonna (1560–1608), the owner of one of the richest collections of books and manuscripts in Rome.²⁸ Federico Borromeo, Jan Brueghel's senior of four years, was the youngest among them.

But why this renewed interest in the representation of fires and spectres at the end of the sixteenth century, in a period characterised

²³ Duverger E., *Antwerpse Kunstinventarissen uit de zeventiende eeuw XIII* (Brussels: 2004) 64–65, and *passim*.

²⁴ Bosio, however, believed it was the catacomb of S. Callisto. Hoofewerff G.J., "De romeinse catacomben", *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, fasc. 4 (1961) 193–230, here 224.

²⁵ Bedoni S., *Jan Brueghel in Italia e il Collezionismo del Seicento* (Florence-Milan: 1983) 42, 48. For Borromeo's biography, see Prodi P., "Federico Borromeo", *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 13 (1971) 33–42. On Federico Borromeo's art patronage, see Jones P.M., *Federico Borromeo and the Ambrosiana: Art Patronage and Reform in Seventeenth-Century Milan* (Cambridge: 1995).

²⁶ For Benedetto Giustiniani, see Feci S. – Bortolotti L., "Giustiniano, Benedetto", *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 57 (2001) 315–25.

²⁷ For Jan Brueghel's clerical patrons, see Jones P., "Italian Devotional Paintings and Flemish Landscapes in the Quadrerie of Cardinals Giustiniani, Borromeo, and Del Monte", *Storia dell'arte* 107 (2004) 81–104. On Cardinal Del Monte's art patronage, see Wazbinski Z., *Il Cardinale Francesco Maria del Monte, 1549–1626*, 2 vols. (Florence: 1994).

²⁸ For Ascanio Colonna, see Petrucci F., "Colonna, Ascanio", *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 27 (1960) 275–78. For his possible relationship with Jan Brueghel the Elder, see Ertz K., "Jan Brueghel l'Aîné", in *Bruegel. Une dynastie de peintres*, exh. cat., Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Art (Brussels: 1980) 166.

by artistic and religious reform? By the mid-sixteenth century, nocturnal landscapes of hell featuring fires and lightning were almost mass-produced and often signed with Bosch's name, perhaps both as homage to the original inventor as well as with the aim of enhancing the aesthetic and monetary value of these artistic counterfeits.²⁹ The art lover and connoisseur de Guevara, however, dismissed, with one exception, the imitators of 'this kind of painting by Hieronymus Bosch' who, motivated by greed, 'fraudulently' signed with his name. According to de Guevara, such imitations 'are in reality the work of smoke and the short-sighted fools who smoked them in fireplaces in order to lend them credibility and an aged look'.³⁰ The harsh judgement passed by de Guevara on these pictures reveals an increasing awareness about artistic frauds.³¹ But de Guevara's description also points to the stylistic and iconographic features these compositions shared: these were paintings that needed to be viewed at close range; and, among other subjects, they also depicted fire and smoke.

From the mass-produced and often anonymous Boschian inventions by earlier Flemish masters, Jan Brueghel's hellish landscapes were distinguished in three ways. (1) Rather than painting his fiery scenes on panel or canvas, Jan Brueghel the Elder adopted the practice of almost every Netherlandish artist working in Italy and used small-format copper plates. Applied on a polished metallic surface, colours appear with a certain lustre or glow; material and technique are thus well suited for the representation of fire. (2) Characterised by a rich and diverse brushwork and a meticulous attention to detail,³² Jan Brueghel's fiery

²⁹ Among the major contributions are: Silver, *Bosch* 316–98; Unverfehrt G., *Hieronymus Bosch. Die Rezeption seiner Kunst im frühen 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: 1980); Gibson W.S., "Bosch's Dreams: A Response to the Art of Bosch in the Sixteenth Century", *Art Bulletin* 74 (1992) 205–218; Aikema B., "Hieronymus Bosch and Italy", in *Hieronymus Bosch: New Insights Into His Life and Works*, exh. cat., Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, ed. J. Koldeweij – B. Vermet – B. van Kooij (Ghent: 2001) 25–31.

³⁰ Guevara F. de, *Comentarios* I 159: 'Ansi vienen a ser infinitas las pinturas de este género, selladas con el nombre de Hyerónimo Bosco, falsamente inscripto; en las quales a él nunca le pasó por el pensamiento poner las manos, sino el humo y cortos ingenios, ahumándolas a las chimeneas para dalles autoridad y anitgüedad.' According to de Guevara, Bosch's art consists of much more than 'monsters and various imaginary subjects' (*monstruos y desvariadas imaginaciones*). I cite from Stechow W., *Northern Renaissance Art 1400–1600: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: 1966) 19.

³¹ Nagel A., "The Copy and its Evil Twin: Thirteen Notes on Forgery", *Cabinet Magazine* 14 (2004) 102–105.

³² On Jan Brueghel's painting method when using copper: Isabel Horovitz, "The Materials and Techniques of European Paintings on Copper Supports", *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1575–1775*, exh. cat., Phoenix Art

landscapes were, in contemporary sources, primarily described as virtuosic exercises, particularly in the imitation of natural colour and the rendering of light and various forms of reflection – topics concerning painterly and representational techniques discussed both in Italy and the north. (3) While Bosch's fires are connected with the religious imagery of purgatory and hell, Jan Brueghel the Elder expanded the meaning and imagery of fire to include mythological, historical and allegorical themes. Next to representations of religious themes – such as *The Descent of Christ into Limbo* [Fig. 1] and *The Temptations of St. Anthony*³³ – Jan Brueghel depicted the most famous descents into the underworld undertaken by Orpheus [Fig. 2], Juno [Fig. 3] and Aeneas [Figs. 4, 5]. He made further pictures of burning cities showing spectacles of fires but no demons, devils or ghosts.³⁴ In about 1608, Jan Brueghel the Elder developed a series of allegories depicting the destructive power of fire as well as the benefits derived from fire and craft, some of which are painted on panel [Fig. 6].

My focus here is on Brueghel's depictions of descents into hell. While the theme of *Christ's Descent into the Limbo of the Fathers* has a long visual tradition dating back to seventh-century art, and is, in sixteenth-century northern art, closely related to a Boschian imagery of monsters and ghosts as well as to Pieter Bruegel's art [Fig. 7],³⁵ pagan descents into the underworld were, up to Jan Brueghel the Elder, not a common subject for cabinet paintings. These visits to the underworld figured, of course, in illustrations of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had an enormous impact on sixteenth-century

Museum (New York: 1999) 63–92, here 81f. Generally on Jan Brueghel the Elder's pictorial technique: Doherty T. – Leonard M. – Wadum J., "Brueghel and Rubens at Work: Technique and the Practice of Collaboration", in Woollett A.T. – Suchtelen A. van (eds.), *Rubens & Brueghel: A Working Friendship*, exh. cat., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (Los Angeles: 2006) 215–51. On the choice of copper as painting support by Netherlandish artists in Rome: Cappelletti F., "Il fascino del Nord: paesaggio, mito e supporto lucente", in *Il Genio di Roma 1592–1623*, exh. cat., ed. B.L. Brown, London, Royal Academy of Arts; Rome, Palazzo Venezia (Rome: 2001) 174–205.

³³ For various versions of the *Temptations of St. Anthony* by Jan Brueghel the Elder, see Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 131–35; Ertz K. – Nitze-Ertz C., *Brueghel – Brueghel* 171–73, cat. 39 (Ertz K.); 506, cat. 191 (Wied A.); Silver L., *Bosch* 394.

³⁴ For Jan Brueghel's depictions of the burning Troy and the burning Sodom or Pentapolis, see Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 130f.

³⁵ Orenstein, N.M., *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New York: 2001) 210–12, cat. 87–88. For the iconography of the theme, see Lucchesi Palli, "Höllenfahrt Christi", *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* II (1970) cols. 322–331.



Fig. 1. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Hans Rottenhammer, *The Descent into Limbo*, 1597, oil on copper, 26.2 × 35.4 cm. The Hague, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, inv. 285. Image: © Mauritshuis, The Hague.



Fig. 2. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Orpheus Singing before Pluto and Proserpina*, 1594, oil on copper, 27 x 36 cm. Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1298. Image: © Galleria Palatina, Florence.



Fig. 3. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Juno in the Underworld*, 159(6²), oil on copper, 25.5 × 35.5 cm. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 877. Image: © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.



Fig. 4. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Aeneas with the Cumaean Sibyl in the Underworld*, 1600, oil on copper, 22.5 × 35.5 cm. Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum, inv. 553 (645). Image: © Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest.



Fig. 5. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Aeneas with the Cumaean Sibyl in the Underworld*, shortly after 1600, oil on copper, 36 × 52 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. 817 (645). Image: © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 6. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Allegory of Fire*, 1608, oil on panel, 46 × 66 cm. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, inv. 68. Image: © Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.



Fig. 7. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Descent of Christ into Limbo*, 1561, pen and brown ink, contours intended for transfer, 22.3 × 29.4 cm. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, inv. 7873. Image: © Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

visual and literary culture;³⁶ Karel van Mander himself included in his *Schilder-Boeck* a commentary on Ovid, which he recommended as ‘very useful for painters, poets and lovers of art, as well as for teaching everyone’.³⁷ Virgil’s *Aeneid* enjoyed continuous popularity throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; later in the sixteenth century, in a climate of religious reform, book six (which includes Aeneas’s visit to the underworld) was occasionally cited in order to confirm Catholic or Protestant views of the geography of hell.³⁸ Sir John Harrington,

³⁶ Barolsky P., “As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998) 451–74.

³⁷ Mander C. van, *Wilegghingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ovidij Nasonis. Alles streckende tot voordering des vromen en eerlycken borgherlycken wandels. Seer dienstich den Schilders, Dichters, en Constbeminders, oock yeghelyck tot leering by een gebracht en gheraemt* [Harlem: 1604] (New York: 1980).

³⁸ Kallendorf C., “From Virgil to Vida: The *Poeta Theologus* in Italian Renaissance Commentary”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995) 41–62.

poet at the court of Elizabeth I, in his 1604 commentary on the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, states:

Though this part of the booke for the lytterall & historycall sence ys meerly and apparawntly fabulous, yet the morall thearof contayns so many excellent points of Christianitye, as I thinke yt very fit to be noted though I must doe the same with more brevyty then so highe a matter requyreth to be handled.³⁹

In all of Jan Brueghel's compositions the underworld is crafted in a similar fashion: a hero or a heroine – Orpheus, Juno, Christ and Aeneas – visits, breaks into or rushes through an entirely artificial and foreign world [Figs. 1–5]. In each case the view is from a distant and high perspective into a rocky landscape with caves, abysses, tunnels and underground streams. Burning cities, fortresses and ruins are visible against a far horizon; rising flames and smoke colour the sky. Giant wheels indicate a world of eternal torment. In the foreground a plateau cut by deep canyons or a fragile bridge set on wooden posts provides a brightly illuminated stage. Upon this stage the main actors make their appearance, separated from but surrounded by a multitude of shades, demons and ghosts showing an extraordinary variety of human and hybrid forms. Next to Boschian monsters, figural inventions by Michelangelo and Tintoretto are also cited. Associated by Vasari and others with the 'gran maniera' of Italian art, the heroic figures are here adjusted to suit Jan Brueghel's crowded compositions of diminutive size. Brueghel's paintings on copper are further made distinctive through the use of various painterly techniques; while valued for the fine and accurate brushwork they also include passages that are more loosely worked.⁴⁰

Dated 1594, *Orpheus Singing before Pluto and Proserpina* depicts Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X 40–46, and is generally seen as the first hellish land-

³⁹ *The Sixth Book of Virgil's Aeneid. Tranlated and commented on by Sir John Harington (1604)*, ed. S. Cauchi (Oxford: 1991) 71.

⁴⁰ For the two manners of painting, 'rouwicheyt' and 'netticheyt', see Mander K. van, *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, ed. H. Miedema, 2 vols. (Utrecht: 1973) I 258–261. See the commentary by Miedema in Mander K. van, *Grondt* II 599–600. On the central importance of 'netticheyt' (*diligence*), see Melion W.S., *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck* (Chicago-London: 1991) 60–63; Cutler L.C., "Virtue and Diligence: Jan Brueghel I and Federico Borromeo", *Virtus: virtuositeit en kunstliefhebbers in de Nederlanden, 1500–1700, Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 54 (2003) 203–27. On the use of the 'gran maniera' in miniature painting, see Norgate E., *Miniatura or the Art of Limning*, ed. J.M. Muller – J. Murrell (New Haven-London: 1997) 74, 146f.

scape created by Jan Brueghel the Elder [Fig. 2].⁴¹ Orpheus has left the realms of the upper world and, after having wandered 'through the insubstantial throngs and the ghosts' (*leves populos simulacraque*), arrives before the king and the queen of 'unlovely realms' (*inamoenaque regna*) (X 11–15).⁴² Singing while striking the chords of his lyre, he moves the shades (*umbra*) and 'bloodless spirits' (*exsanguis animae*) to tears. Even the furies 'wet their cheek with tears', and both Pluto and Proserpina feel pity and compassion in their hearts. Yet the cessation of movement caused by Orpheus's song is translated in Brueghel's painting as a visual noisiness that both attracts and challenges the attention of the viewer. Sisyphus, however, momentarily uses his rock as seat to enjoy the music, rather than pushing it up the mountain. Standing in front of the enthroned rulers, Orpheus turns his head toward the beholder, alerting the audience to the effect of his art on the inhabitants of the other world whose wondrous shapes are the actual theme of Brueghel's painting. Delicately sketched over the dark *imprimatura*, a small lapdog, a beast resembling a dragon, and a red-eyed diabolical creature regurgitating reptiles bare their teeth at the spectator.

Another painting on copper, created about two years later, shows Juno in her carriage descending into Hades in order to ask the furies to drive Athamas mad [Fig. 3] (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV 451–560).⁴³ Although present in all of Brueghel's depictions of mythological descents, here, the furies – the infernal avenging spirits – play an especially prominent role. It has been noted that the group of women thrown by devils into a fiery furnace was copied from Tintoretto's large canvas painting of the *Murder of the Innocent Children* in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice. The corpses heaped up in the left foreground recall some of the figural motifs in the *Battle of the Amazons*, a work Jan Brueghel the Elder executed in collaboration with Rubens at about the same time.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 122, 557–8, cat. 5; Woollett A.T., "Two Celebrated Painters: The Collaborative Ventures of Rubens and Brueghel, ca. 1598–1625", in Woollett A.T. – Suchtelen A. van, *Rubens & Brueghel* 7; Ertz K., "Some Thoughts on the Paintings of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625)", in *Jan Brueghel the Elder: A Loan Exhibition of Paintings*, exh. cat., London, Brod Gallery (London: 1979), 14f.; Zoege von Manteuffel K., "Bilder flämischer Meister in der Galerie der Uffizien zu Florenz", *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* 14 (1921).

⁴² I am citing from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. F.J. Miller, 2 vols. (London: 1925) II 65–71.

⁴³ Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 122, 129–30, 562–63, cat. 32; Ertz K. – Nitze-Ertz C., *Brueghel – Brueghel* 174–77, cat. 40 (Neidhardt U.).

⁴⁴ Woollett A.T. – Suchtelen A. van, *Rubens & Brueghel* 44–51, cat. 1.

There are further comical figures and visual jokes reoccurring in other depictions of descents into hell: an athletic winged devil seen from the back hissing and spewing at the heroine or the hero; variations of froglike, bat-like, or birdlike creatures spreading their arms and legs; a devil crouching next to a fire; a giant head positioned on a crab-like body. Particularly alluring are those shapes, shades and spectres in the foreground of the compositions, often hardly perceptible against the dark brownish tones in the foreground with which they merge.

The three versions of *Aeneas with the Cumaean Sibyl in the Underworld* show how Brueghel varied his inventions to compose a fiery and dark place swarming with monsters [Figs. 4, 5].⁴⁵ The most innovative painting is in Vienna where Aeneas, ready to draw his sword against some of the ghosts, is mocked and ridiculed by a large bearded face attached to a kind of tree whose branches partially morph into human hands. Executed in collaboration with the German artist Hans Rottenhammer (1564–1625), the Mauritshuis *Descent into Limbo* of about 1597 features many of the same monsters in a hell characterised by underground caves, cliffs and a dark river. Here, Brueghel's inventions are made more precious through the contribution by Rottenhammer who painted the main figures [Fig. 1].⁴⁶

The Stygian Regions and the Realm of Vulcan

It was thus in Italy that Jan Brueghel the Elder 're-invented' a manner intimately linked with the art of Hieronymus Bosch as well as his own father. How were such fires and hellish inventions valued and described in the literature on the visual arts around 1600? In accordance with previous authors, van Mander, in his *Schilder-Boeck*, considers Pieter Bruegel the Elder as the most accomplished imitator and successor of Bosch: Pieter Bruegel 'had practiced a lot after the works of Hieronymus Bosch and he also made many spectres and burlesques (*spoockerijen/en*

⁴⁵ Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 116, 130, 568, cat. 65 (Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum, inv. 551 (640); 568, cat. 66 (Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum, inv. 553 (645); 130, 568, cat. 67 (Vienna); Ertz K. – Nitzke-Ertz C., *Brueghel – Brueghel* 177–180, cat. 41 (Budapest, inv. 551 (640, Ertz K.); 503, cat. 190 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wied A.); Silver L., *Bosch* 294–96.

⁴⁶ Woollett A.T. – Suchtelen A. van, *Rubens & Brueghel* 132–35, cat. 15 (Suchtelen A. van); *Copper as Canvas* 155–58 (Komanecky M.K.); Broos B., *Intimacies & Intrigues, History Painting in the Mauritshuis* (The Hague: 1993) 79–87.

drollen) in his manner so that he was called by many Pier den Drol'.⁴⁷ In van Mander's words, the sight of these spooks is enough to amuse even the most serious spectator:

This is why one sees few pictures by him which a spectator can contemplate seriously and without laughing, and however straightfaced and stately he may be, he has at least to twitch his mouth or chuckle.⁴⁸

The expression 'practiseeren nae de handelinghe' is important since it elevates Bosch's work to a model worthy of imitation and emulation, like the art of classical antiquity. Combining the friendly and the ghastly, Pieter Bruegel's Bosch variations thus provoke a contagious chuckle or smile. Remarkably, the hostile or antagonistic elements van Mander perceives in Bosch's art seem to have been transformed into less-threatening 'drolleries' by the most gifted imitator of Bosch's 'science and fantasies'; the 'enmity' associated with Bosch's art has turned into a facetious, festive mood that engages the beholder.⁴⁹ This also applies to other artists who are viewed by van Mander as working in the manner of 'their' Bosch. Among them, Jan Mandijn from Harlem was 'clever at spectres (*ghespoock*) and drolleries (*drollerije*) very much in the manner of Jeronimus Bos'.⁵⁰ 'Veel ghespoock' and 'vreemde spoocken' are also to be found in the works of Frans Verbeeck who was 'clever at making works in watercolour in the manner of Jeroon Bosch' ('was fraey van

⁴⁷ According to Kilianus C., *Etymologicum* 98, 'drol' can refer to 'trullus, drollus', 'homo facetus, festivus, lepidus', and 'gesticulator'.

⁴⁸ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 190f. (f. 233r22–25): 'Hy hadde veel ghepractiseert/nae de handelinghe van Ieroon van den Bosch: en maeckte oock veel soodane spoockerijen/en drollen/waerom hy van velen werdt geheeten Pier den Drol. Oock sietmen weynigh stucken van hem/die een aenschouwer wijslijck sonder lacchen can aensien/ja hoe stuer wijnbrouwigh en statigh hy oock is/hy moet ten minsten meese-muylen oft grinnicken.'

⁴⁹ For the hostility, by which Bosch's works address their spectators, see Koerner J., "Bosch's Enmity", in *Tributes in Honor of James H. Marrow: Studies in Painting and Manuscript Illumination of the Late Middle Ages and Northern Renaissance*, ed. J.F. Hamburger (London: 2006) 285–300.

⁵⁰ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 79 (f. 205r17–18): 'Noch was te Haerlem eenen Ian Mandijn, die seer op zijn Ieronimus Bos fraey was van ghespoock en drollerije'. Van Mander mentions Mandijn on two other occasions: Mander K. van, *Lives* I 232f. (f. 243v31): '[...] was very deft at burlesques in the manner of Jeroon Bos' ('welcken seer aerdich was van drollerije op zijn Ieroon Bos'). See also *Lives* I 332f. (f. 268v35–36): 'Ian Mandijn, van Haerlem in Hollandt/welcken op zijn Ieronimi Bos, aerdich was van so drolligheden te maken'. On Jan Mandijn (active c. 1530–1559), see Silver, L., *Bosch* 372–79.

Waternverwe te maken dinghen op zijn Ieroon Bos’); these spooks were ‘very inventive and well executed’ (*seer versierlijck en wel ghedaen*).⁵¹

In the preface of *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, the first part of the *Schilder-Boeck*, van Mander lists ‘nachtstukken’ and ‘branden’ among the possible subjects available to a (Netherlandish) painter.⁵² Artists specialising in this subject matter are mentioned throughout the *Lives*. Among them, the painter, architect, cartographer and engraver Lanceloot Blondeel (1488–1581) had a ‘wonderfully great knowledge of architecture and antique ruins’ and excelled in the depiction of ‘fires in the night and suchlike’.⁵³ ‘Fires’ (*branden*) were also painted by Lodewijk Jansz. van den Bos from ’s-Hertogenbosch whose works were in the possession of art-lovers.⁵⁴ Hans Soens from ’s-Hertogenbosch painted ‘smaller landscapes on panel and a few little fires’ (*brandekens*).⁵⁵ The Antwerp painter Gillis Coignet, too, had ‘a subtle way of painting little night scenes (*historikens in den nacht*) very inventively’.⁵⁶ In the *Grondt*, van Mander cites Coignet’s *branden* among the best examples in the representation of candle-light and other artificial light sources: Coignet ‘can perform miracles with paint, making the realm of Pluto burn or destroy Troy’.⁵⁷ Chapter seven on various forms of reflection (‘Van de Reflecty/Reverberaty/teghen-glans oft weerschijn’) in the *Grondt* contains indeed the most extensive discussion of ‘branden’ and ‘poetic hells’ (*poetsche Hellen*):⁵⁸

Those who depict well with colours Vulcan’s wrath – such horrible misery – demonstrate mastery in art: This is because they take on colours – red to purple, blue, or green – according to the food or matter by which he feeds his vehement flames, so that they soar heavenward, impossible to tame. But not only the flames, also vapours fill the air with different colours. Yes, this seems to be horrible Stygian smoke where, with many other ugly spooks, Hydra and Cerberus scream and cry. Painters need

⁵¹ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 170f. (f. 228r20–25).

⁵² Mander K. van, *Grondt* I 46f. (f. 6r).

⁵³ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 77–79 (f. 204v–205): ‘Hy was een wonder verstandigh Man in Metselrije/en Antijcke ruinen/en van branden in der nacht teekenen/en dergelijcke.’

⁵⁴ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 126f. (f. 217r16)

⁵⁵ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 412f. (f. 288v38).

⁵⁶ Mander K. van, *Lives* I 306f. (f. 262r25–26): ‘Hadde oock een aerdighe manier van te maken Historikens in den nacht/seer versierlijck.’

⁵⁷ Mander K. van, *Grondt* I 196f. (f. 32v): ‘Met verwen can hy te wonder doen bernen | *Plutonis* stadt, oft *Troyen* doen te nieten [...]’

⁵⁸ For an extensive discussion of ‘reflexy-const’, see Melion W.S., *Shaping* 72f.

to see to that in order to make a fire look dreadful or to kindle a fire in the poetic underworld.⁵⁹

Van Mander further comments on depictions of the forge of Vulcan, advising the painters to consider the effects of the light of the fire and the blazing metal on the appearance of the half-naked men working at the anvil. While Jan Brueghel's poetic hells are not mentioned by van Mander, there is little doubt that these small paintings on copper were understood by contemporary beholders in similar terms: as skilful renderings of poetic underworlds; and as a demonstration of Brueghel's mastery in painting.

In about 1608, Jan Brueghel the Elder began to paint a series of allegories of fire that more closely link the Stygian regions to the realm of Vulcan as suggested in van Mander's treatise. A particularly splendid example is the *Allegory of Fire*, sent to Archbishop Federico Borromeo in December, 1608 [Fig. 6].⁶⁰ In an architectural ruin partially formed by natural rock, the uses and destructive effects of fire are shown in impressive painterly detail. While the background presents various techniques of heating, refining and shaping metals, the foreground shows a rich and magnificent collection of artefacts produced by fire. Two tables display all types of jewellery as well as an assortment of vessels wrought in silver and gold or made of porcelain. On the edge of the larger table Jan Brueghel the Elder has signed his name. Next to these luxury items indicative of aristocratic pretensions various pieces of armour are piled atop each other. Scattered across the floor are pincers, mallets, chisels as well as other tools used by goldsmiths for decorative techniques. A charcoal fire burns in a small tripod; anvils and hammers line a round

⁵⁹ Mander K. van, *Grondt I* 192–93: [Marginal note: 'Dat het Const is, wel branden te schilderen. Dat de vlammen gedaente hebben nae de stoffe, dar sy van voetsel hebbben. Dat niet alleen de vlammen van versheyden verwen en zijn, maer oock de roocken. Van Poetsche Hellen te schilderen.'] 'Sy hebben in de Const al groot impery/ | Die wel uytbeelden Vulcanus vergrammen/ | Met veruwe/sulck grouwelijck misery: | Want nae t'gheen dat de spijs' is oft matery/ | Daer hy med' opvoedt zijn heftighen vlammen/ | Die ten Hemelwaert vliegghen/quaet om tammen/ | Daer nae hebben sy oock t'coluer ghecreghen/ | T'zy tot root/purper/blau/oft groen gheneghen. | Niet alleen de vlammen/maer oock de roocken/ | Van versheyden verwen de Lucht vervullen/ | Jae dat t'schijnen d'afgrijselijcke smoocken | Stygij, daer met veel leelijcke spoocken/ | Hydra, en Cerberus, tieren en brullen: | Dus van de Schilders hier op achten sullen/ | Om eenen brandt schrickelijck uyt te stellen/ | Oft t'vyer te stoken in Poetsche Hellen.'

⁶⁰ *Fiamminghi e Olandesi. Dipinti dalle collezioni lombarde*, exh. cat., Palazzo Reale, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan, ed. B.W. Meijer (Milan: 2002), 137–39, cat. 81; Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 374. Jones P.M., *Borromeo* 79, 237, no. 34; Crivelli G., *Giovanni Brueghel pittor fiammingo o sue lettere e quadretti esistenti presso l'Ambrosiana* (Milan: 1888).

bench. To the right, an alchemical laboratory with instruments both for metallurgy and distillation is shown at close range. Some of the bottles, phials and small glasses are labelled ‘mercuria corafatus’, ‘salmonia’ and ‘acqua’ – the represented substances referring to the alchemist’s trade (water as the opposite element of fire), and, one may assume, to the transformative quality of Jan Brueghel’s own art. A splendid chandelier of gilded copper with a single burning candle is suspended from a cavernous and indistinctly defined ceiling. The theme of fire is further developed in the landscape: Fire and smoke rise into the air; people flee from a house in flames; witches and devils gather in front of a brightly lit cave; demons take to the air.

The *Allegory of Fire* is the first painting in a series of *Four Elements* executed for Cardinal Borromeo between 1608 and 1621. In a letter dated June 3, 1608, Brueghel informs Ercole Bianchi, Borromeo’s agent, that he has now ‘the painting of fire at hand, which will be about various diabolical invention and very laborious’.⁶¹ Four months later Brueghel writes of the painting: ‘one can see all kind of armour, metal, gold, silver and fire, also alchemy and distillation, everything done from nature with outmost diligence’.⁶² From Brueghel’s correspondence with Bianchi we further know that he also executed a series of elements for him, which might be identical with the works now in the Galleria Doria-Pamphilj in Rome. While many of the motifs of the Milan *Allegory of Fire* are repeated in the Doria-Pamphilj version, the general theme of that painting is Venus visiting Vulcan’s forge; therefore, a smoking volcano is added to the scene.⁶³

The Owners of Jan Brueghel’s Hells

Several scholars have suggested that these small copper images were exchanged as gifts among a few art-loving cardinals in Rome linked to each other through friendship. Both the Colonna and the Giustiniani

⁶¹ ‘[...] che ha in mane il quadro del fuoco qual sera de vario invencion diabolica peina de lavor.’ I cite from Bedoni S., *Brueghel* 115.

⁶² Letter dated September 26, 1608: ‘[...] e de vedere ogni sorte d armeria, metalli oro argento e fuoco, ancho l’alchimio et distillationi, tutti fatti del natural con grandismo diligenc’. I cite from Bedoni S., *Brueghel* 116.

⁶³ Woollett A.T. – Suchtelen A. van, *Rubens & Brueghel* 140–45, cat. 17; Ertz K., *Jan Brueghel der Ältere* 599–600, cat. 251.

families hosted Federico Borromeo during his various visits to Rome;⁶⁴ Borromeo's palace in Rome was close to the residence of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte.⁶⁵ Since Jan Brueghel was invited to live with Borromeo's family both in Rome and Milan, the cardinal may well have presented his friends with some of the artist's works. Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, who had a particular liking for nocturnal scenes, owned seven of Jan Brueghel the Elder's small copper paintings which must have entered the collection in 1601 or shortly thereafter. Six of these are referred to as pairs, a *Judgement* and a *Deluge*, a *Paradise* and a *Hell*, an *Adoration of the Magi* and a *Fire of Troy*.⁶⁶ The *Judgement* and the *Deluge*, both images of crises and catastrophes as well as turning points in the history of salvation, are explicitly listed as 'compagni' or pendant pieces; an additional *Fire of Troy* is listed separately.⁶⁷

With ten works, all of them very small and painted on copper, Jan Brueghel the Elder was among the best-represented artists in the collection of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte.⁶⁸ Among these copper images were two *Temptations of St. Anthony* and one 'fable of Euridice' which has been tentatively identified with the *Orpheus* in the Palazzo Pitti [Fig. 2].⁶⁹ Another possible owner of Jan Brueghel's hells may have been Cardinal Ascanio Colonna (1560–1608), protector of Flanders, who, in the winter of 1605–06, appointed Peter Paul Rubens's brother Philip as his personal secretary.⁷⁰ It is, however, not clear when

⁶⁴ Danesi Squarzina S., "The Collections of Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, part I", *The Burlington Magazine* 139 (1997) 766–791, here 771, 772; Jones P., "Devotional" 89–90. For Borromeo's Roman sojourn in 1599, see also Orbaan J.A.F., *Documenti sul Barocco in Roma* (Rome: 1920) 95, note 1.

⁶⁵ Gilbert C.E., *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals* (University Park: 1995) 128f.

⁶⁶ Danesi Squarzina S., "Collections I", 771–72, 781, nos. 74: 'Un quadretto in rame dell'Adorazione de Magi, con molte figure piccole e paesini, di mano di Brugo, con le sue cornice d'ebano'; 75: 'Un quadro simile in rame del Incendio di Troia'; 91f: 'Doi quadri di rame di mano di Brugo con cornice di ebbano uno del Giuditio et uno del dilvio, compagni e simili alli doi scriti di sopra della doratione di maggi et del Incendio di Troia'; 99–100: 'Doi quadretti in rame con cornice di ebbano di mano di Brugo, uno del Paradiso e laltro del Inferno, con molte figure della grandezza delli quatro scriti di sopra'. Danesi Squarzina S., "The Collections of Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, part II", *The Burlington Magazine* 140 (1998) 102–118.

⁶⁷ Danesi Squarzinio S., "Giustiniani I" 781, no. 87: 'Un quadretto mezzano in rame del incendio di Troia con cornice di pero tinte negre'.

⁶⁸ Gilbert C.E., *Caravaggio* 128f; Frommel C.L., 'Caravaggios Frühwerk und der Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte', *Storia dell'Arte* 9–10 (1971) 5–52, here 33, 34, 37.

⁶⁹ Frommel C.L., "Caravaggio" 33: 'Un Rame del Brucolo ne quale vi è la Favola di Euridice con cornici d'Ebano di palmi uno, e mezzo.' Gilbert C.L., *Caravaggio* 129.

⁷⁰ For Peter Paul Rubens's *Lamentation* on copper (Cummer Gallery of Art in Jacksonville, Florida), which was possibly presented to Cardinal Ascanio Colonna in late 1605

the landscapes with fires, now in the Palazzo Colonna, Rome, entered the collection. The 1714 inventory of the Colonna collection lists two pairs of paintings: an *Adoration of the Magi* is mentioned together with a *Descent of Christ into Limbo* ‘with many and diverse original figures by Brueghel’; a *Fire of Troy* is listed with a *Scene of Witchcraft*. Another *Scene of Witchcraft with Fire* is further ascribed to the ‘school of Brueghel’.⁷¹ Finally, Federico Borromeo, in addition to the *Allegory of Fire*, owned two other fiery images by Jan Brueghel the Elder: a *Hell*, featuring the traditional punishments of a Christian hell in a vast burning landscape,⁷² and the so-called *Fire of the Pentapolis*, showing Lot and his daughters fleeing from a Sodom in flames.⁷³

As I hope to have shown, in both northern and Italian treatises of art fires, hells, nocturnal scenes and scenes of witchcraft, dreams, fantasies, and imaginations are often mentioned together and treated as similar or comparable themes. While the subject matter is indeed very diverse, all these images challenge the artists to show their skills in the representation of light sources other than the sun: the moon, candlelight, torches, natural fire, and the fires of hell. Karel van Mander considers, as we have seen, the representation of fires ‘in a dark night’ and ‘with reflections’ among the most challenging artistic tasks, which require exceptional skills. Around 1600, artists, humanists, scientists and religious reformers shared an interest in shadow and light and the rules of reflections.⁷⁴ In his *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (*Considerations on Painting*) from the early 1620s, the physician and art collector Giulio Mancini (1558–1630), a contemporary of the cardinals Borromeo, Colonna, Del Monte and Giustiniani, praises a small landscape with the burning mount Etna by Jan Brueghel the Elder:

or in 1606, see Göttler C., “Affectionate Gifts: Rubens’s Small Curiosities on Metallic Supports”, in *Munuscula Amicorum. Contributions on Rubens and His Colleagues in Honour of Hans Vlieghe*, ed. K. van der Stighelen (Turnhout: 2006), 47–62.

⁷¹ Safarik E.A., *The Colonna Collection of Paintings: Inventories 1611–1795*. Documents for the History of Collecting, Italian Inventories 2 (Munich: 1996) 302, [858], [859], [864]. A pair of paintings, one representing ‘Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld’, the other one ‘Aeneas in the Elysium’ are mentioned in the 1783 inventory and ascribed to ‘Bruguel Infernale’: Safarik E.A., *Colonna Collection* 647, [442]. See also Safarik E.A., *Palazzo Colonna* (Rome: 1999) 218–19.

⁷² Jones P.M., *Borromeo* 235, cat. IA.30.a–15; Meijer, *Fiamminghi* 122f., cat. 65 (Pijl L.).

⁷³ Jones P.M., *Borromeo* 234, cat. IA.29.d–28; Meijer, *Fiamminghi* 129, cat. 74 (Pijl L.).

⁷⁴ Rzepinska M., “Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and its Ideological Background”, *Artibus et Historiae* 7 (1986) 91–112.

He worked very well in the small format. In particular, for a gentleman he made out of pleasure a landscape representing the fire of Mount Etna, with city, villages and a number of men of various nations; most of the figures were just the size of an ant, nonetheless they represented and expressed what he wished. And even more importantly, he considered here the reflections of light, which are to my taste a very artful thing and worthy of viewing.⁷⁵

But what was it that made these cardinals and art lovers delight in these poetic hells? It has been proposed that Borromeo started to collect landscapes by Jan Brueghel and other Flemish masters because his increasing duties wouldn't allow him to refresh his mind in the contemplation of nature and the creation of God; the painted landscapes would then have served as substitutes for a direct experience of nature and as meditation tools. Jan Brueghel's 'poetic hells', however, reveal views into completely artificial and fictional worlds; many of the motifs and elements can also be found in his depictions of the *Temptations of St. Anthony*, a theme the artist developed in the very same years. In the *Wilegghingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ovidij Nasonis (Interpretation of Ovid's Metamorphoses)*, the last part of the *Schilder-Boeck*, Karel van Mander defines 'poetic hells' in the following way:

Concerning poetic hells, these are nothing else than various sins, as well as the calamities and catastrophes that seize the vicious and frivolous because of evil deeds, and the gnawing and biting conscience, which torments and judges.⁷⁶

A poetic hell, thus, is the interior hell of the gnawing conscience rather than the hell of eternal punishment that awaits the sinner after death. Jan Brueghel's crowded images of hells with their monstrous and frivolous details have an interesting parallel in contemporary Jesuit meditations on the inner faculties of the soul, in particular on one's own imagination. Around 1600, it had long become fashionable in

⁷⁵ Mancini G., *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, ed. A. Marucchi (Rome: 1956) I 260: 'Doppo questo vi fu [...] Broglo, di nation [...], nato in [...]. Fece in picciolo molto bene et in particolare ad un gentiluomo di diletto fece un paesaggio che rappresentava l'incendio del monte di Ethna con città, villagi et numero di huomini di diverse nationi che le figure le maggiori ero quant'una formica, nondimeno rappresentavano et esprimevano quello che desiderava; et quel ch'è più, in esse vi riservava quei reflexi dei lumi ch'a mio gusto era cosa molt'artificiosa et degna di esser vista.'

⁷⁶ Mander C. van, *Wilegghingh* f. 32r: 'Nu aengaende de Poeetsche Helle/die en is niet anders/als alderley zonden/en de ongevallicheneden en rampen/die den roeckeloosen ondeugende Menschen door quade wercken overcomen en treffen/en de knagende wroegende Conscientie diese pijnight en veroordeelt.'

elite circles to practice prayer and meditation at home, and there is little doubt that our cardinals were intimately familiar with Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* and other meditation treatises that began to appear in these years. The most unique element of the *Spiritual Exercises* is the 'composition of place', which is acquired through the 'five senses of the imagination' and particularly through the 'sight of the imagination' – or the 'imaginative sense of sight', as Ignatius also calls it. The 'composition' or 'forming' or 'figuring of place' was understood as a mental activity of the soul's image-making faculty.⁷⁷ The meditation on hell, which concludes the first week of the *Exercises*, is the most powerful example of this form of meditation by application of the senses. However, there were ambivalent views about Ignatius's meditation on hell. On the one hand, imagination of that place of horror was promoted as a safeguard against the vagaries of the imaginative faculty of the soul. On the other hand, spiritual beginners were advised to avoid the uncanny, the grotesque, the frivolous and the curious, since this could easily take them to dangerous grounds.

The picture-producing imagination itself served as topic of a meditation in the *Meditaciones de los Misterios de nuestra Sancta Fe* (*Meditations on the Mysteries of Our Holy Faith*) by the Spanish Jesuit Luis de la Puente (1554–1624), first published in Valladolid in 1605, but soon translated into Latin and other European languages.⁷⁸ The imagination is one of the themes of chapter 27 treating the sins of the interior faculties of the soul. The meditation first considers vices having their seat in the understanding (ignorance, imprudence, temerity, inconstancy, perverseness and pertinacity, subtlety and curiosity); then those springing 'from myne owne will'; and finally those of the soul's interior faculties, the imagination and sensitive appetites. Here, the faithful are instructed to

⁷⁷ The literature on the Jesuit 'composition of place' is vast. Recent studies include: Fabre P.-A., *Ignace de Loyola: Le lieu de l'image. Le problème de la composition de lieu dans les pratiques spirituelles et artistiques jésuites de la seconde moitié du XVI^e siècle* (Paris: 1992); Endean P., "The Ignatian Prayer of the Senses", *The Heythrop Journal* 31 (1990) 391–418; Erdei K., *Auf dem Wege zu sich selbst: Die Meditation im 16. Jahrhundert. Eine funktionsanalytische Gattungsbeschreibung*, Wolfenbütteler Abhandlungen zur Renaissanceforschung VIII (Wiesbaden: 1990). For Jesuit discussions of the 'composition of place' in the meditation on hell, see Göttler C., *Last Things: Art and Religious Practice in the Age of Reform* (Turnhout: 2008, forthcoming).

⁷⁸ *Bibliothèque des écrivains de la Compagnie de Jésus*, ed. A. de Backer – C. Sommervogel VI, col. 1274.

ponder that my imaginative faculty, is like a hall painted with many images and figures, some foule, some prophane, and others ridiculous, monstruous, and deformed, entertaining it selfe in painting them; taking pleasure to beholde them, soliciting the understanding to gaze upon them, and oftentimes, drawing it after it to cogitate upon them.

Puente thus likens the *vis imaginativa* to both a picture gallery and an artist engaged in painting, beholding and copying the many 'monstrous' and 'ridiculous' pictures displayed in a hall. It is in this context that Puente mentions the sin 'which they call *delectatio morosa*, a continuing, or lingering delight, in matter of carnallities, revenges, ambitions, and avarices, delighting my selfe with the imagination of these things, as if they were present'.⁷⁹ Immediately followed by the examination of conscience in chapter 28, the meditation on the profuseness of pictures in the imagination was meant to have almost an iconoclastic effect in that it cleansed and emptied the mind.

Populated with ant-like spectres, monsters and shades, Jan Brueghel's fiery landscapes must have provided these cardinals both devotional and recreational experiences. The ever-changing shapes, forms, lights and reflections of Jan Brueghel's poetic hells made visible and motivated the crafting and figuring of mental images in the beholder's mind. Around 1600, Bosch's figural inventions, perceived as wondrous spectres, fancies, imaginations and inventive designs, had become collectibles among European lovers of arts. A nocturnal sky vividly coloured by smoke and flames or a dark landscape inhabited by spirits and ghosts functioned as emblems of mastery of the most aesthetic aspects of the visual arts, the representation of optical phenomena and reflections. It was, finally, the subtlety and ingenuity of Brueghel's art that lit a fire in the poetic underworld, made mountains and cities burn and incited the minds of his viewers.

⁷⁹ I cite from Puente L., *Meditations upon the Mysteries of Our Holie Faith, with the Practise of Mental Prayer Touching the Same*, trans. J. Heigham (St. Omers: 1619) I 194. See the room of the counselor Phantastes in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*: 'His chamber was dispaunted all within, | With sundry colours, in the which were writ | Infinite shapes of things dispersed thin; | Some such as in the world were never yit, | Ne can devized be of mortall wit; | Some daily scene, and knownen by their names, | Such as in idle fantasies doe flit: | Infernall Hags, *Centaurs*, feendes, *Hippodames*, | Apes, Lions, Aegles, Owles, fooles, lovers, children, Dames | [...] All those were idle thoughts and fantasies, | Devices, dreames, opinions unsound, | Shewes, visions, sooth-sayes, and prophesies; | And all that fained is, as leasings, tales, and lies.' I cite from Harvey E.R., *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: 1975) 1.

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