

Antwerp in the Early 1500s

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, artists from all over northern Europe, including many whose works hang in this gallery, were drawn to the booming prosperity of Antwerp, in modern Belgium. With the silting up of the harbor in neighboring Bruges and new alliances that brought the English cloth and Portuguese spice trades into the city, Antwerp became the mercantile hub of Europe, where goods from the East, the New World, and the Old World changed hands. The city's cosmopolitan population, wealthy as well as diverse, was a magnet for artists and encouraged experimentation. Painters were little constrained by tradition, since Antwerp had never before attracted important artists. To satisfy their patrons' varied tastes, painters explored new subjects and worked in many different styles, sometimes self-consciously borrowing from the past, at other times taking new inspiration from Renaissance Italy.

The art and humanistic outlook of the Renaissance was imported to the north through travel, printed books, and published prints. Antwerp painter Jan Gossaert accompanied a diplomatic mission to Rome in 1508. He was probably the first artist from the Netherlands to go there. Others soon followed, taking home sketchbooks filled with their drawings of Rome's ancient monuments and the works of Italy's greatest artists. In Antwerp and elsewhere, artists began to adapt the poses of antique statues in their paintings, giving their figures more robust physiques and sculpted muscle. They incorporated ruins and ancient architectural motifs, sometimes in purely fanciful and ambiguous forms, but they continued to paint these new compositions with the same minutely detailed manner of earlier Netherlandish painting. In blending these elements from north and south, they created a unique, eclectic style.

New Subjects: Moralizing and Landscape Scenes

Painters also began to depict new subjects. Men like Quentin Massys, for example, played an active role in the intellectual life of their cities and began to mirror the ethical concerns expressed by humanist thinkers with new paintings that used secular scenes to impart moralizing messages. Vivid tableaux warned against gambling, lust, and other vices.

Artists were also attracted for the first time to landscape painting. Its appearance coincided with exploration and a rekindled interest in mapmaking and geography. Although some earlier artists had turned particular skill and attention to their outdoor settings, the first painter we know of to specialize in landscape was Joachim Patinir, in Antwerp. He created something new and distinctly northern that nonetheless became greatly popular and influential in Italy and the rest of Europe. These works, usually called "world landscapes," often had religious themes, but the figures are diminished in scale and importance. They are dominated by the vastness around them and are glimpsed as if from a high vantage point. The unfolding panorama embraces, with craggy mountains and tidy towns, both the wild and civilized worlds. A wealth of detail invites the viewer to inspect these pictures at close range, to travel through them with the eyes.

The Guide in Gallery 38 describes many of the saints encountered here and in other rooms nearby.



Jan Gossaert
Netherlandish,
about 1478–1532

Saint Jerome
Penitent,
about 1509/1512

These two panels are painted with the subtly varied grays known by the French term "grisaille," a palette that mimicked the appearance of stone sculpture and was used most often, as here, on the exteriors of altarpiece shutters.

Seen in the desert where he lived for a time as a hermit, Jerome holds the stone he used to beat his chest in penance for the visions of pleasure that interrupted his meditations. He looks to a crucifix growing out of a gnarled and lifeless tree. The imagery suggests both death and salvation, and it would also recall for contemporary viewers medieval legends connecting the wood of the cross to the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Jerome is accompanied by the lion who, according to legend, became his faithful companion after the saint removed a thorn from its paw. In the distance unfolds the story of his false accusation of the lion—that it had devoured a caravan donkey—and their subsequent joyful reunion at the upper right.

Gossaert was apparently the first Netherlandish artist to travel in Italy, but it is unclear whether he painted Saint Jerome before or after his trip. Jerome's robust physique and beardlessness, uncommon in medieval representations, could have been inspired by ancient or Italian Renaissance works, but the darkly threatening landscape and the lion's unnaturally flat face seem more at home in northern art.

Oil on panel, 86.7 x 25.3 cm (34 1/8 x 10 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.40 a and b



Jan Gossaert
Portrait of a Merchant, about 1530

Occupational portraits like this were a northern tradition. The prosperous businessman is depicted with the tools of his trade: writing implements, sealing wax, scales, a pile of coins, and sheafs of paper labeled "letters" and "drafts." He may be Jeronimus Sandelin, later a tax collector in Zeeland, where Gossaert worked near the end of his life. In the 1500s merchants and bankers were eyed with suspicion and distrust despite their economic importance. Gossaert captures the man's cautious frugality without caricature. His large figure fills the picture frame, and the precision of painted detail gives his portrait presence and immediacy.

At times Gossaert chose, as he did here, to re-create the forms (the occupational portrait, for example) as well as the precision and craftsmanship of such earlier northern artists as Jan van Eyck (d. 1441). In other works he was influenced instead by the ancient statues and monuments he had sketched while in Italy. In Gossaert's small painting of the Virgin and Child nearby, Jesus' robust but ungainly pose, for example, recalls ancient statues of the baby Herakles. This eclecticism met the varied demands of Antwerp's diverse clientele and show an artist free to choose a self-conscious style.

Oil on panel, 63.6 x 47.5 cm (25 x 18 3/4 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1967.4.1



Joos van Cleve
Netherlandish, active 1505/1508–1541

Joris Vezeleer, probably 1518

Joris Vezeleer headed a small Antwerp company that sold wool, other commodities, and luxury items. He provided tapestries and gems to such clients as French king Francis I and Mary of Hungary, the Holy Roman Emperor's capable regent in the Netherlands. Diamond cutting, in particular, became an important industry of the Low Countries as new techniques enabled stone cutters to enhance the light reflected from gems by faceting them. Jews recently expelled from Portugal settled in Antwerp in the early 1500s and made it an important center of the diamond trade, as it continues to be today.

Vezeleer's gesture of pulling on a fine leather glove marks him as a gentleman of means. In her portrait, his wife holds a pink, a flower associated with fidelity and seen often in wedding portraits. (The Vezeleers' grandson was the famous Dutch poet and statesman Constantijn Huygens [d. 1687]; their great-grandson discovered the rings of Saturn.) In Joos van Cleve, Vezeleer, who was known as a collector of paintings, obtained the services of one of the finest artists working in Antwerp in the early 1500s. His skill with portraiture later led Van Cleve to Fontainebleau, where he painted Francis I and was exposed to the soft *sfumato* (from the Italian for "smoke") style of Leonardo da Vinci, who spent the last years before his death (in 1519) working for the French court.

Oil on panel, 58 x 40 cm (22 7/8 x 15 3/4 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1962.9.1



Quentin Massys

Netherlandish, 1465/1466–1530

Ill-Matched Lovers, about 1520/1525

Massys settled in Antwerp in 1491, soon becoming its leading painter and an influential citizen. His fame was enhanced by stories, probably exaggerations of the truth, that he had been a blacksmith and taught himself to paint. Among his acquaintances were several of the city's leading humanists. Perhaps his contacts with these men prompted Massys to take up the kind of moralizing secular subject seen here.

An old lecher, whom Massys modeled after a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, fondles a willing young woman. She meanwhile slips his purse to a gnomelike accomplice in a fool's cap. The large, brightly lit figures press close to the front of the painting, as if seen through a window. This separation makes us aware that we are witnesses of the scene, not participants, and therefore free to judge and make a moral choice. Messages like this one about the consequences of vice were familiar to audiences in Antwerp, not only from books like Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of Fools* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, but from a large body of popular poetry and from moralizing skits performed during city festivals. Massys's painting evokes these lines from an anonymous Dutch poet:

A rover—short, old, and free
With purse running over with gold,
Took a Venusberg lass for a spree
Who took clients like him in her hold.
That lass has her loose, lowly wiles,
Undoing his purse with its glut
While showing a face full of smiles
Like the grin of a flat halibut.

Oil on panel, 43.2 x 63 cm (17 x 24 ¹³/₁₆ in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1971.55.1



Hieronymus Bosch

Netherlandish, about 1450–1516

Death and the Miser, about 1485/1490

Of all fifteenth-century artists, Hieronymus Bosch is the most mysterious. His puzzling, sometimes bizarre imagery has prompted a number of false assertions that he was, for example, the member of a heretical sect, a sexual libertine, or a forerunner of the surrealists. What can be said is that he was a moralist, profoundly pessimistic about man's inevitable descent into sin and damnation.

In this slender panel, probably a wing from a larger altarpiece, a dying man seems torn between salvation and his own avarice. At the foot of the bed a younger man, possibly the miser at an earlier age, hypocritically throws coins into a chest with one hand as he fingers a rosary with the other. In his last hour, with death literally at the door, the miser still hesitates; will he reach for the demon's bag of gold or will he follow the angel's gesture and direct his final thoughts to the crucifix in the window?

Avarice was one of the seven deadly sins and among the final temptations described in the *Ars moriendi* (Art of Dying), a religious treatise probably written about 1400 and later popularized in printed books. Bosch's painting is similar to illustrations in these books, but his introduction of ambiguity and suspense is unique.

This panel is thinly painted. In several areas it is possible to see in the underdrawing where Bosch changed his mind about the composition. His thin paint and unblended brushstrokes differ markedly from the enamellike polish of other works in this gallery.

Oil on panel, 93 x 31 cm (36 ³/₈ x 12 ³/₁₆ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.33



Follower of Pieter Bruegel the Elder

about 1525–1569

The Temptation of Saint Anthony, about 1550/1575

Pieter Bruegel, the preeminent artist of the mid-sixteenth century, was described by his friend, the mapmaker Abraham Ortelius, as "Nature's own rival," and is best known for powerful and evocative scenes that combine landscape and views of peasant life.

This panel was painted by one of his followers but incorporates elements from Bruegel's own landscapes, the broad silvery river, for example, and a drawing he made of the same subject, Saint Anthony. We see the saint twice. In a foreground hut he resists the devil's temptations, a motif copied from Bruegel's drawing. In the upper left, Anthony is tortured and carried aloft. Fantastic demons and bizarre images recall the work of Hieronymus Bosch (d. 1516), who was extremely popular in the later sixteenth century. In those years, northern Europe endured warfare and religious violence. Perhaps these monsters reflect a view of a world gone mad.

While most northern artists traveled to Italy to study the remains of ancient Rome and the masterpieces of high Renaissance art, Bruegel was the first to go simply to experience the scenery. To most travelers of the time, mountains suggested only peril: brigands and bad weather. Far from avoiding the Alps, however, Bruegel seems to have gone out of his way to cross back and forth over them. They often appear, snowcapped, in the backgrounds of his works.

Oil on panel, 58.5 x 85.7 cm (23 x 33 ³/₄ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.19



Maerten van Heemskerck

1498–1574

Rest on the Flight into Egypt, about 1530

Heemskerck spent several years in Italy, where he supported himself at times with the particularly northern specialty of landscape painting. But this picture was produced before his first trip there. It shows the influence of his teacher, Jan van Scorel, who had already brought back to the Netherlands an Italian feeling for large, sculptural figures and a landscape repertoire that included fanciful ruins and idyllic motifs copied from ancient art. This panel was long thought to be the work of Van Scorel; if Heemskerck painted it while in Van Scorel's studio, it may have been sold as such.

The story of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt to avoid Herod's legions became a popular vehicle for landscape painting. Here, the exotic locale is reminiscent of sacred groves in ancient Italy.

Against this ambiguous panorama, the large image of the Virgin and Child takes on the quality of an icon. The crystal globe on which Jesus rests suggests his dominion over the world, the butterfly his resurrection. Because they are painted in rich colors and with distinct clarity, they seem quite near to us. Features in the distance, by contrast, are obscured by a progressive shift to blue that mimics the intervening haze of the atmosphere.

Oil on panel, 57.7 x 74.7 cm (22 ³/₄ x 29 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.36

TIMELINE

- 1426 Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*
- 1431 Joan of Arc burned at stake
- 1441 Death of Jan van Eyck
- 1453 Gutenberg prints the 42-line Bible
Constantinople falls to the Ottoman Turks
- 1464 Death of Rogier van der Weyden
- 1465 First printed music appears
- 1477 The Netherlands come under Hapsburg control
- 1479 Marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella unites Spain
- 1495 Printer Aldus Manutius begins publication of a series of Greek authors
- 1507 A German cartographer first proposes the name "America"
- 1516 Death of Hieronymus Bosch
Erasmus' Greek and Latin New Testament
- 1517 Luther's posting of Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenburg launches Protestant Reformation
- 1519 Magellan begins circumnavigation of the globe
- 1528 Death of Albrecht Dürer
- 1532 Rabelais begins publishing *Gargantua and Pantagruel*
- 1534 Henry VIII declares independent Church of England
- 1543 Vesalius publishes revolutionary book on human anatomy
- 1544 Sebastien Münster's atlas *Cosmographia generalis*
- 1545 Catholic church convenes Council of Trent to meet the Protestant challenge
- 1555 Peace of Augsburg divides Germany between Lutheran and Catholic states
- 1528 Protestant iconoclasts smash religious images in the Netherlands
- 1569 Death of Pieter Bruegel the Elder