Painted in 1563, *The Flight into Egypt* (plate 1) is a curious picture within Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s oeuvre. The small, jewel-like panel (c. 37 × 56 cm), with a handful of miniscule figures, is executed in the banded landscape format more evocative of the previous generation of Netherlandish artists, such as Lucas Gassel and Jan van Amstel. While its size and highly finished style connect *The Flight into Egypt* with Bruegel’s *Landscape with Bird Trap* of 1565 (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum), here the artist is engaged in the representation of a biblical scene. Owned at various points in its history by such distinguished collectors as Peter Paul Rubens and Pieter Stevens, *The Flight into Egypt* is also one of the few paintings by Bruegel for which during the artist’s lifetime an attributable owner is known.1

In the bottom right-hand corner of this diminutive panel, there is a small wooden gabled box attached to a pollarded willow (plate 2). This peculiar structure is a shrine, holding a tiny grey figure that appears to fall forward at a jaunty angle. A casual viewer, at first glance, may almost entirely miss this modest construction, a peculiar detail nearly subsumed within a naturalistic landscape. The inclusion of a falling idol within the panel is not in itself unusual – the motif was a well-established part of the iconography of the Flight into Egypt, originating from the apocryphal gospel, the Protoevangelion of James.2 According to the text, when the Holy Family entered a pagan temple upon their arrival in Egypt, all the idols crumbled in the presence of the Christ child. This narrative, with its message of the false crumbling before the true, had already become hugely popular in artistic representations of the Flight into Egypt by 1500.

Netherlandish artists typically rendered the idol’s spontaneous destruction either by showing a piece of antique figural sculpture toppling from its pedestal or cracking in two, as the Holy Family passed by. In Simon Bening’s illumination of around 1525 (plate 3), for example, the golden idol in the right background is shown broken at the knees; the lower half of the statue remains fixed to its columnar base, while the upper body is depicted in the process of toppling. Bening’s idol is distinctly classical in appearance, positioned atop a freestanding column, both symbols of pagan antiquity.

The idol in Bruegel’s panel, seemingly carved from grey stone, similarly evokes classical statuary in its monochrome finish. Although both Bruegel and Bening depict the falling idol in the form of an antique sculptural figure, Bruegel’s idol differs markedly from that of Bening. The shrine within Bruegel’s *The Flight into Egypt* consists of two distinct components: an idol and its housing. Bruegel’s stone idol
topples not from a column or a pedestal, as in Bening’s illumination, but from a wooden gabled box attached to a tree. The shrine in The Flight into Egypt is thus a strangely hybrid object in both its facture and its origin. The shrine’s inner sculpture appears to be the product of a pagan antiquity; the form of the gabled shrine, however, is remarkably like that of the post shrine at the centre of Bruegel’s monumental panel of peasant labour, Haymaking (plate 4).³

Although the object in the lower right-hand corner of The Flight into Egypt is conceivably a pagan idol, the form of its wooden gabled shrine is also exactly the type of contemporary peasant devotional object depicted by Bruegel in Haymaking. The vernacular form of the shrine in The Flight into Egypt appears at odds with the tiny statue within. The idol of the pagan past is rendered as inhabiting a contemporary and, to its viewers, somewhat familiar shrine. This hybrid shrine in The Flight into Egypt is an amalgamation of materials (wood/stone), influences (local/foreign) and temporalities (present/past).

By examining the singularity of the broken idol depicted within a peasant shrine, this essay aims to investigate the ways in which Bruegel pictures the temporal implications of the relationship between
the historic pagan and the contemporary peasant. The connection between rural religiosity and pagan rite was one often cited by religious reformers of the sixteenth century – the painting’s provenance, however, as will be discussed below, seems to preclude a specifically doctrinal reading of the panel. Yet the hybrid shrine within *The Flight into Egypt* is also more than a documentary element, a straightforward reflection of the religious topography of sixteenth-century Europe.

In this essay, I will focus on this apparently odd detail, the idol cum shrine, in a picture rarely discussed in the literature devoted to Bruegel. My intention is to explore the ways in which Bruegel’s strange hybrid shrine operates as a site of cultural

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Rural Memory, Pagan Idolatry

memory, signalling the historic character of local rural custom, and indicating the perceived continuity of peasant practice in the Low Countries. In depicting the peasant shrine as a place where cultural memory was housed, Bruegel engaged with the intertwined problems of local history and identity, at a time when many within the Spanish-occupied Low Countries were beginning to craft a distinctly ‘Netherlandish’ identity for themselves.

Rural Religiosity, Pagan Idolatry

Local religious markers – images hung from trees, post shrines and rural crosses – feature repeatedly in Bruegel’s images. Bruegel’s frequent representation of these objects reflects the prominence of the rural shrine in Netherlandish provincial geography. Thousands of obscure religious markers, post shrines and crosses dotted pre- and post-Reformation Europe, and were often associated with particular neighbourhood rituals, such as the blessing of the fields, or with traditional accounts of healing and miracle-working. Crosses and shrines could also act as sites of remembrance, commemorating not only miraculous occurrences but also tragedies affecting individuals or the community at large. Some of these markers were part of local, regional or even international pilgrimage networks, acting as sign-posts to further pilgrimage destinations. Thus, while often intensely localized in origin and use, rural religious markers could also function as part of the sacred landscape of Christendom.

Bruegel was not the first to picture this kind of peasant shrine. Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Altdorfer and Hans Holbein all included rural religious markers
within images which foreground travel, indicating that such rural religious sites were aimed at a peripatetic populace.7 While previous representations of rural shrines accentuated the role these sites played for an itinerant population, Bruegel, in contrast, identified the physical connections between peasant, landscape and rural shrine. These sites were represented as functionally linked to rural communities, used and maintained by local people. The festive figures of Bruegel’s Peasant Dance (plate 5), for example, have placed flowers in the jug hanging below an image of the Virgin (plate 6), as part of their village celebration.8

Throughout his oeuvre, Bruegel presents the rural shrine as a working part of peasant culture. In Haymaking, Bruegel placed a shrine in a prominent position between the fields where the peasants work and a road filled with their fellow labourers who bear baskets of fruit and vegetables back to the village. Surrounding the shrine with peasants and the fruits of their labour, Bruegel reinforces the link between the fertility of the fields, the labour of the local peasantry, and the rural shrine. In Bruegel’s post shrine a tiny barrel is affixed below the devotional statue, where the community may place gifts in acknowledgement of a successful harvest. An abundant harvest was frequently acknowledged by a symbolic offering of thanks, typically a sheaf of wheat.9 The fertility of the field was thus specifically connected to the efficacy of the local shrine, while the peasant’s labour was firmly bound to the local landscape.

Bruegel’s post shrines all have roughly the same form: a wooden post with a small gabled structure attached to the top in order to house a devotional statue. This is a manifestly different construction from that pictured in Bruegel’s design for the engraving Hope (plate 7 and plate 8).10 In this work, Bruegel depicts an ornately carved or cast shrine on a city street. Instead of resting on a wooden post, the shrine of Hope

5 Pieter Bruegel, Peasant Dance, 1568. Oil on panel, 114 x 164 cm. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
Rural Memory, Pagan Idolatry

is placed upon a column seemingly made of stone. The composite nature of Bruegel’s urban shrine, its columnar base and its more richly decorated top, reflects the fusion of forms and styles that characterize contemporary Netherlandish Renaissance architectural language. Analogy can be drawn, for example, with Antwerp’s town hall, under construction at the time, which typifies this adoption and manipulation of classically derived forms. The shrine depicted in Hope is the product of an urban culture and is both used and produced in the image’s metropolitan setting.

In contrast, the shrines of Haymaking and The Flight into Egypt are made of wood, echoing known vernacular building technique. Timber, according Vredeman de Vries’s treatise Architectura of 1577, was the natural building material of the Low Countries. While the small devotional statues placed within such shrines were often produced in cities like Antwerp and Mechelen for export to the surrounding countryside and even abroad, Bruegel’s rural shrines do bear some trace of local craftsmanship. Bruegel portrays the wooden shrines of Haymaking and The Flight into Egypt as simple, uncarved and unpainted, almost crude, objects – the product of peasant labour just like the jugs in Peasant Dance or the fences in Haymaking.

Bruegel represents all of these humble objects as bearing the marks of their facture: the uneven glaze on the peasant drinking vessel; the visible nails and joins of the rural fence or tavern table; and, in the Peasant Dance, in the costume of the young girl at lower left, whose dress has been visibly crudely altered to fit its diminutive owner. The artist’s application of thin layers of paint, often wet-on-wet, allows Bruegel to express these often minute details and subtle variations in texture. The shrine in Hope, though highly detailed, does not demonstrate its rough materiality in the same way as the jug hanging from the prisoners’ window at the left of the engraving, or as in the beehive that Bruegel perches atop Hope’s head. Bruegel appears to delight in depicting the worn and makeshift world of the everyday object. The coarsely constructed shrines of The Flight into Egypt and Haymaking belong in their rural environment, just as the stone or metal shrine of Hope corresponds within its urban surroundings.

Arboreal shrines, that is shrines specifically attached to or associated with trees, were also particularly linked with Netherlandish countryside practice. Tree shrines had a particular cultural resonance in the Low Countries as, by the sixteenth century, the region was home to a considerable number of arboreal shrines, including trees shaped like crosses, image- or statue-bearing trees, and even trees attributed with healing powers. The idol in The Flight into Egypt, itself attached to a tree, could also therefore have provoked recollection for its viewers of any number of these arboreal sites of veneration. The shrine in Bruegel’s panel, then, is a generic composite of familiar tree shrines and apocryphal textual source.
The popularity and ubiquity of rural religious markers, such as tree shrines, did not mean that such sites were always viewed positively. The connection between rural religiosity and pagan rite was one often commented upon by contemporary religious reformers; both Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli complained that the continued use of rural religious sites like tree shrines and field crosses represented an erroneous and superstitious turn to local authority and folk magic. For many Protestants, the continuation of such pagan practices under a Catholic aegis was symptomatic of the compromised and corrupted nature of the Church.

Rural crosses and shrines were often the first targets of iconoclasts eager to eradicate these perceived idolatrous symbols of the persistence of pagan memory. Though most documented instances of Netherlandish iconoclastic violence were directed at religious houses and urban churches, the countryside was not immune to reformist zeal. In the Low Countries, religious reformers often gathered in the countryside outside major towns to hear sermons. These Protestant speakers, called field or hedge preachers, attracted crowds in their thousands in the mid-1560s. Rural religious sites, like those pictured within Haymaking and The Flight into Egypt, were therefore not only sites of popular devotion, but also at the frontline of Reformist religious critique and the outbursts of iconoclasm that swept through Europe in the sixteenth century, first in Germany, then in Scotland, France and, in 1566, the Low Countries.

Painted three years before the Netherlandish iconoclasm or Beeldenstorm, Bruegel’s The Flight into Egypt has been read as an indictment of rural Catholic practice. It has been argued that, by using the form of a contemporary, peasant tree shrine to depict the

pagan idol of the Flight into Egypt, Bruegel embraced the critiques of Luther and others.21 The hybrid shrine – conflating rural religious marker and pagan idol – seems to connect the two modes of worship in precisely the same manner as those who were censorious of peasant shrines.

Undermining this reading, however, is the fact that The Flight into Egypt was owned by Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, a leading minister and political adviser to the Habsburg government, and (from 1561) the controversial archbishop of Mechelen. Granvelle, an established collector and patron of the arts, probably acquired the panel directly from Bruegel before the Cardinal left the Low Countries in 1564.22 After Granvelle had retreated to Naples, he attempted to retrieve a number of works of art plundered from his various Northern palaces in the subsequent Dutch rebellion, and had been particularly eager to have his paintings by Bruegel restored.23

While it is certainly possible that Bruegel agreed with some of the Reformers’ criticisms of rural religiosity, it is highly unlikely that The Flight into Egypt, owned by such a leading figure of the church, represented any direct condemnation of the veneration of countryside shrines.24 Bruegel’s livelihood was dependent on producing pictures for an open market and that meant avoiding the expression in his works of controversial views, at least openly.25 Bruegel had moved to Brussels the very year The Flight into Egypt was painted, in all likelihood to take advantage of the business prospects offered by the city as centre of the Habsburg administration.26 Granvelle was exactly the kind of patron that Bruegel sought to cultivate within his new setting – a wealthy and powerful member of the Habsburg elite, who could influence court tastes and could have brought the artist further business. But it would have been necessary for Bruegel, whatever his personal religious beliefs, to have exercised self-preservation through opacity.27 Any specific doctrinal implications of picturing the pagan idol as peasant shrine were subsumed by the more straightforward correlation between the two as different ways of representing the same fundamental concept: the presence and power of a deity in the rural landscape.

The Hybrid Shrine as Peasant Artefact

Bruegel was not the first to picture the falling idol of the Flight into Egypt housed within a rural tree shrine. In the 1540s, Lucas Gassel and his followers, as well as artists in the circle of Jan van Amstel, all represented falling idols in the form of gabled shrines in various depictions of the scene (plate 9).28 In doing so, Bruegel and these earlier artists all translated the tale of the falling idol into a distinctly Netherlandish vernacular idiom – a tree shrine. In drawing together the worship of pagan deities and the religious practice of the contemporary rural population, these artists did not level an implicit charge of idolatry at the peasantry. Rather, in translating the form of the pagan idol into that of the rural tree shrine, these artists followed an Erasmian model of imitation, substituting a known contemporary practice for pagan ritual.
In the Ciceronianus of 1527, Erasmus addressed the problem of the ‘correct’ imitation of antique rhetorical models and, in particular, the inflexible use of Ciceronian form. Erasmus argued that the vocabulary of Cicero could and ought to be adapted to fit the conditions of everyday life.29 Similarly, Bruegel, Gassel, and the other artists who used the tree shrine as an idol, selected a model of veneration known to their audience. These artists translated the entire biblical scene, set in the wilderness of Egypt, into the Netherlandish countryside. The pagan idol, rather than being placed atop a column, was thus housed in a comparable outdoor context, the wooden gabled shrine.

This translation is fitting not only because of the functional similarity between pagan idol and peasant shrine (representing God’s presence in nature), but also due to the fact that peasant life was increasingly viewed as archaic at the time that Bruegel painted his panel. While I have argued that Bruegel’s images of rural religious sites do not point towards doctrinal disparity between the religion of peasants and that of Bruegel’s audience, I believe that they make manifest a growing sense of cultural difference between urban and peasant cultures at the time, as well as pointing towards a new understanding of Netherlandish history.

While the pagan remained the extreme Other, the peasant was also increasingly represented as culturally distinct from the urban and/or courtly society of early-modern Europe. Rather than viewing Bruegel’s peasant scenes as either uniquely moralizing satires on the sins of the peasantry or as comic relief, it is more
useful to view peasant imagery as symptomatic of a larger cultural shift, one that distinguishes between the culture of the ‘primitive’ and that of ‘civilization’. The peasant, whether seen in a positive or negative light, was a representative figure of difference in Netherlandish culture. The cultural separateness of the peasantry could be conceptualized in a variety of ways, ranging from idealization to negative self-definition. Indeed, Bart Ramakers has described the Janus-like character of the peasant in sixteenth-century Netherlandish culture as a continual dialogue between an internal exoticism and self-reflection. Bruegel’s peasants were not only socially distinct from the viewer, with the potential for both pastoral and satiric readings, but, crucially, were increasingly historicized, affording them a status as ‘Other’.

Cornelius Aurelius, in his Latin histories of the Low Countries and in his vernacular Divieskroniek of 1517, described the historic Batavians, the supposed first inhabitants of the Low Countries, as an agrarian, peasant-like people. These historic Netherlanders, like the contemporary peasant, lived off the land, subsisting on a diet of predominantly bread, dairy produce and beer; similarly, both the ancient Batavian and the contemporary peasant were renowned for their festivity. The antique foundation for this characterization of the Batavians was a short passage in Tacitus’s Germania of 98 CE concerning the tribes of the Northern Rhine. In 1502, Aurelius found a stone near Leiden bearing an abbreviated inscription, which he expanded to read as ‘Gens Batavorum amici et fratres Romani imperii’ (The Batavian people, friends and brothers of the Roman Empire), a quotation from the Germania referring to the pagan peoples of the Low Countries. This would be Aurelius’s most famous contribution to the Batavian myth.

Though the stone is now thought to be a later forgery, in 1530 Aurelius’s archaeological ‘discovery’ was taken as proof by another historian of the Batavians, Gerard Geldenhauer, of their origins. What is more, the inscription was unproblematically cited as late as 1610, in Hugo Grotius’s De antiquitate reipublicae Batave. Though later sixteenth-century scholars such as Erasmus may have doubted the authenticity of the inscription as reflecting the political motivations of the author, there would be no direct criticism of the outline of Batavian society found in Aurelius’s Divieskroniek until well over a hundred years after its publication.

Compared to the civilization of ancient Rome, the Batavians, as described by Aurelius, were relatively primitive. A classical epigram by Martial referred to those who did not understand his poetry as having a ‘Batavian ear’, underscoring
the ancient perception of Northern peoples’ ignorance of cultural refinement. Erasmus, in his 1508 adage ‘On the Batavian Ear’, however, turned Martial’s epigram on its head, transforming the Batavian’s supposed ‘cultural barbarism’ into an asset. Despite their historic love of feasting, Erasmus claimed, the contemporary Netherlanders were both kind and honest.

In the course of the sixteenth century, Netherlandish historians and scholars repeatedly invoked the historic, peasant existence of the Batavians, equating the contemporary and the historic peasant. Ludovico Guicciardini claimed that the costume of the Netherlandish peasant had scarcely changed since the time of Caesar, while Sebastian Münster and Abraham Ortelius used remarkably similar images of rural thatched buildings to illustrate their respective views of both contemporary and antique Northern European populations (plate 10 and plate 11). The Netherlandish peasant was increasingly described as being the historical ‘root’ of the Dutch people, for contemporary peasant culture was often used to describe the world of the ancient Netherlanders. The peasant-like Batavians were linked to the great classical civilization of Rome, but also to the contemporary Netherlandish peasant. It was the contemporary peasant who had inherited the diet, costume, building materials and other cultural characteristics of the Batavians. These customs, seen as largely unchanged, took on this mythic history, recalling a time when Batavians and Romans had met as equals. Thus, the pagan past was accessed via the imagined antiquity of peasant culture.

Early collections of customs, like Joannes Boemus’s Omnium gentium mores, leges & ritus of 1520, or Sebastian Münster’s Cosmographiae universalis of 1544, reinforced the
links between the local peasant, tradition, and history. These works relied on the commonplace alter natura, as used by Aristotle, Cicero and Quintillian, to describe the intimate connection between a people and their physical environment. Custom then was both second nature and the foundation of cultural history.

Bruegel’s peasant pictures and these contemporary histories and collections of customs all share a focus on particular elements of cultural life: childhood, feasts, religious customs, costume and weddings. The peasant culture envisioned by Bruegel concentrates on the exact cultural territory explored by Ortelius, Münster and Boemus. These perceived loci of cultural tradition were in fact derived from classical history, particularly the Histories of Herodotus.43 The conception of peasant culture as historic was also rooted in antique thought. The proverb ‘Nemo sic mores vetustos estimat ut rusticus’ (No one keeps old customs like a peasant), which had been used by Ovid was also a long-established motif in Netherlandish culture.44

There was also the sense, however, that the contemporary peasant lacked something of the nobility of the ancient Batavian farmer. According to Lodovico Guicciardini, the inhabitants of the Low Countries were tall and well proportioned, yet also shorter than they had been in the time of Caesar or even of Charlemagne.45 Guicciardini attributed this change to the decline in the discipline of the Netherlandish people and to their changing manner of life. Sixteenth-century cosmographers esteemed the unpolluted vertical transmission of culture as one of the better indicators of societal integrity.46 Guicciardini’s comment implies, therefore, that variants to the traditional, agricultural Netherlandish view of culture were seen as a form of cultural decay.

The undeniably urban character of the later sixteenth-century Low Countries, dominated by the international mercantile centre of Antwerp, was decidedly different from that of the supposedly rural Batavian past. Yet the production of a mythic Batavian history reinforced the integrity of cultural transmission throughout Netherlandish history by playing upon what Homi K. Bhabha has termed ‘a continuous, accumulative temporality’ – a conception of history defined by the notion of a long durée.47 This vision of history as a continuous force contrasts with Guicciardini’s allusive vision of cultural vicissitude. Peasant existence, tied to the land, was perceived as slower to adapt and thus the last to succumb to this kind of change.

In contemporary collections of customs and Netherlandish histories, it was the supposedly primitive quality of the peasantry – their resistance to change – that made them the perfect custodians of cultural memory. The peasant can be viewed, therefore, as a living embodiment of Europe’s own cultural past, an observable historical memory. Bruegel’s pictorial interest in customs and practices that were specifically discussed in contemporary accounts as being ‘historic’ (peasant costume, games, weddings, and so forth) appears to indicate his shared interest in peasant culture as a repository of tradition. In this light, it is perhaps not so surprising that Bruegel turned to the forms of contemporary peasant religion in order to render a convincing portrayal of the distant past. Not only could the contemporary rural shrine serve as a Ciceronian translation of the pagan idol but also as a comparable historic artefact.

Central to the conception of the peasant as a temporally immobile figure is the construction of the cultural and social difference between the peasant subjects of Bruegel’s images and their middle-class audience.48 Peasants, with their bodily exuberance and crude manners, were to be distinguished from the clean, composed and decorous manners of the urban middle and upper classes. In his landscapes, Bruegel’s regular tendency to obfuscate and distort the heads of his figures – as in
Haymaking (plate 4) where nearly all of the foreground figures’ heads are covered by hats or even apparently visually replaced by baskets of fruit—reinforces the connection between the peasantry and the land, at the expense of the figures’ autonomous individuality. In the large-scale peasant pictures, the often doll-like bodies of Bruegel’s peasants, with their loose limbs (as in the case of the couple rushing in from the right to join the dance in Peasant Dance), small heads and large feet, accentuate the peasants’ lack of grace and bodily refinement.\textsuperscript{49}

Bruegel underscores the apparently disjointed, angular movements of the dancing peasants in Peasant Dance by arranging his composition into pairs of figures who mirror each other: the raised foot of the woman at far right and the rear foot of her partner neatly parenthesize the space in between them, just as the raised limbs of the dancing couple in the centre echo one another but do not overlap. The disjointed individual figures of the peasant are skilfully arranged by Bruegel for maximum contrast and visual interest.\textsuperscript{50} The round faces, distinct noses and often crude countenances of the peasants in Peasant Dance are rendered in Bruegel’s individual style of painting, where the visible brush strokes of the flesh tones add to the apparently craggy and rough nature of these facial expressions.

In contrast, the face of the Virgin in The Flight into Egypt, with her downcast eyes and small mouth, is delicately rendered though minute in scale. Bruegel at times extended this more refined facial type to non-biblical characters. The female peasant who gazes out towards the viewer from the centre of a row of three women at left in Haymaking, for example, has more refined features than either of her companions. Yet even in this case, her costume and rake make her social position abundantly clear; she could not be mistaken for a middle-class woman. The forms of urban and rural shrines—as I have argued differing in their nature—in Hope and in Haymaking operate in a similar fashion, providing just such a clear manifestation of cultural difference in their pictorial form.

Yet despite the fact that Bruegel describes peasant culture as coarse and primitive, the artist also appeals to the mythology of an ageless peasant existence, playing off the tension between ethnic identification and social difference. No one in Bruegel’s audience would have wanted to become a peasant. The agricultural labour and lively festivity depicted by Bruegel would have reaffirmed the expectations of the traditional social hierarchy of the three estates (with the peasants firmly at the bottom).

Bruegel’s peasants are also specifically Netherlandish, recognizable to middle-class observers from their own forays into the countryside. Both Bruegel and the early Netherlandish historian or collector of custom compiled a wealth of particular details in their accounts of the contemporary and historic peasant population. Bruegel’s attention to the specific construction of peasant costume—the way a bell is fixed to an infant’s sleeve in Peasant Dance, or the way the butter is held in a curious oblong mound at the table—are comparable to Ortelius’s description of the Batavians dairy-rich diet, or the author’s representation of the peculiar Batavian way of knotting the hair on the top of the head. The inclusion of this kind of specific detail allowed the reader/viewer to recognize continuities with local and contemporary practice, and must have been part of these texts’ and images’ appeal.

The rise of a social tourism meant that middle-class citizens frequently came into contact with the peasantry, on ventures to local villages on Sundays and holidays.\textsuperscript{51} The influx of middle-class visitors looking for cheap beer and peasant entertainment in villages like Hoboken, as depicted in a design by Bruegel himself (London: Courtauld Institute of Art), meant that peasant customs became
increasingly performative, projecting to their urban visitors an image of unchanging rural identity. At the same time, historians and collectors of customs described the antiquity of these same practices (weddings, festivals, peasant costume) to the educated middle classes. Bruegel’s middle- and upper-class, urban audience consumed both pictures of peasants performing their own peasantness and texts describing the historic continuity of peasant practice. With the advent of this form of social tourism – both first-hand and through texts and pictures – the ‘reality’ and ‘authenticity’ of peasant scenes became increasingly undermined as both forms of representation attempted to give a permanence, and a degree of homogeneity, to such transient phenomena.

The socio-economic reality of peasant life in Bruegel’s lifetime, however, was not fixed, as many sought to leave the countryside for the employment and material gain offered by work in towns and cities. Those that remained in the countryside combined newer forms of labour (piece-work, woodcarving, linen processing) connected to urban economies, alongside their more traditional agricultural tasks. The fact that urban visitors began to frequent rural hamlets on Sundays and holidays may even have led to further diversification of labour. Netherlandish peasant communities were in some ways complicit in their own objectification, performing traditional dances and offering amusement, refreshment and even souvenirs to urban visitors. In the far right background of Peasant Dance, for example, Bruegel depicts such retail stalls selling pilgrimage banners and other items.

The middle-class urban audience for Bruegel’s prints and paintings was also part of a colonization of the countryside through the construction of suburban pleasure villas (a speelhuys or hof de plaisance). Roughly 370 such villas existed within 25 kilometres of Antwerp. Rural retreats, as well as acting as shrewd capital investments, allowed urban residents to escape the city. Yet the establishment of these urban colonies in the countryside in no way reflected increased social proximity to the peasantry. The peasant, and images of peasants, functioned to remind urban visitors to the countryside of their social differences, as manifested in dress and behavioural codes. While the countryside villa was a place of relaxation for its urban owners, peasants laboured in the same rural environment, in a manner viewed as unchanged since antiquity. The peasant was at once an unfamiliar, socially removed figure and a non-contemporaneous, symbolically charged representative of Netherlandish history and identity.

The hybrid shrine of The Flight into Egypt mimics this complex relation between past and present, foreign and familiar. In its style and composition, The Flight into Egypt was part of an established ‘world landscape’ tradition in Antwerp, already fifty years old by the time that Bruegel executed the panel. Within this epic landscape, the tiny figures of the Holy Family move away from the shrine at far right, as Joseph leads the group over a seemingly drastic precipice at the centre of the panel. The danger of the Holy Family’s journey is reinforced by the subsidiary narrative at bottom left, where two heavily laden travellers cross a perilously thin rope bridge over a crevasse. The Holy Family are departing the world that they know, and entering a fantastical landscape which combines a Flemish coastline with a series of quasi-Alpine mountains. This is clearly not a completely Netherlandish setting, but a mixture of familiar Netherlandish elements and extraordinary ones, rendered in a traditional landscape model.

There is more, however, to Bruegel’s vision of the episode. The arboreal shrine is not the only idol in the panel. Bruegel includes another vision of idolatry: a broken column, standing on a prominent rocky outcrop, halfway up the fantastic mountain
at the left of the panel. Rendered in similar pigments, the broken column and the arboreal idol are positioned across from one another, forming a visual pairing, a downward diagonal across the panel. The two idols are separated by a deep valley, with the Holy Family poised between them.

These two artefacts – the column and the tree shrine – appear to represent two very different versions of the pagan idol. The ruined column is a remnant of classical Antiquity, a version of the falling idol closer to that of Bening (see plate 3), who depicted an antique statue falling from atop a column. The arboreal idol is a more complicated hybrid of forms, combining antique statuary with a wooden encasement like that of local rural shrines. The column appears to be a straightforward rendering of a pagan form, while the arboreal idol cum shrine functions as a vernacular translation of the pagan idol, much like the idol/tree shrines of Gassel and the earlier generation of Netherlandish artists. Yet why does Bruegel include both models of the pagan idol – one classical and one vernacular – in his depiction of the Flight into Egypt? In what remains of this essay, I will argue that the two versions of the idol within The Flight into Egypt represent two versions of history: one derived from classical Antiquity, and the other from vernacular history.


Picturing Vernacular History

The anachronistic model of representing an historical moment is one where the past is depicted as if it had taken place in the present. This is the model used by Gassel and other artists who represented the falling pagan idol as a contemporary arboreal
peasant shrine in their versions of the Flight into Egypt. Yet if Bruegel had simply accepted this model, and translated the entire narrative into a contemporary rural setting, there would have been no need for the column. Its inclusion draws attention to the anachronism of the idol as tree shrine, and thus exposes the vulnerability of the picture’s historical model as a straightforward translation of the past into the present. By making both the antique referent and the contemporary source visible, Bruegel represents two seemingly incompatible systems for the representation of history – one based on the substitution of comparable forms, and the other based on an archaeological approach. The inclusion of the column and the shrine simultaneously both promotes and denies the importance of the physical survival of antiquity. Christopher Wood, in his account of the German Renaissance, has described how early archaeological thought balanced a similar tension between the exploitation and the outright destruction of notional thinking about the artefact. Examining another painting by Bruegel, The Tower of Babel (plate 12) – executed in the same year as his The Flight into Egypt – can help us to consider this problem further. In The Tower of Babel, Bruegel again juxtaposes classical architectural forms with local building techniques. The classical facade of the tower replicates the Colosseum, perhaps the greatest surviving architectural monument of Antiquity and a subsequent symbolic locus for the cultural achievements of Antiquity. Bruegel’s tower is faced with stone and its internal structure is constructed of brick, mimicking both the material structure as well as the architectural appearance of the ancient Colosseum. The symbolic link between Rome and the city of Babel (or Babylon) was well established by the sixteenth century. As early as the fifth century, Augustine named Rome ‘the Babylon of the West’, an epithet that would be taken up a millennium later by Luther, Calvin and other religious Reformers to describe the Roman Church. Given this link to Reformist polemic, Bruegel’s use of the Colosseum as model, and his placement of the tower next to a recognizably Netherlandish cityscape, have been read as a critique of Roman dominion (via the Habsburgs and the Roman Church) over the Low Countries. Yet in a recent article, Joanne Morra has complicated this vision of The Tower of Babel as a straightforward indictment of the contemporary political and religious situation, arguing that by placing the tower in a contemporary Flemish town, Bruegel configured the present as a continuum of the past. I would like to follow Morra’s model, exploring the Colosseum as, specifically, a symbol of the past, more than as an overt reference to Habsburg oppression. Bruegel transforms the Roman ruin into a gargantuan construction site. The viewer, familiar with the biblical account that explains the diversity of human language as the result of divine punishment for hubris, knows that the project will fail. The monumental scale of the panel and its phenomenal specificity are a statement of Bruegel’s own artistic ambitions. Yet the ingenuity and detail of Bruegel’s design, the artist’s remarkable precision in the rendering of the tower’s architecture, as well as the ships, machinery and processes of construction around the edifice, conceal the structure’s doom. Bruegel’s tower has been carefully designed with a fundamental flaw: the outside and inside of the structure do not and cannot align. The tower’s vertical elements rise perpendicularly to the slowly rising base, implying that the entire structure is lopsided and will grow dangerously so as the tower rises. Bruegel’s own representative skill masks this illusion in its complex display of materials, its references to contemporary building practices and to antiquity. The tower evokes the ruin of the Colosseum, and it too is destined to become a ruin. Still in the process
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of being built, the tower is shown as – inevitably – already falling. Like The Flight into Egypt’s hybrid shrine, Bruegel’s tower is also shown in the process of its own collapse.

Bruegel’s Tower of Babel also mirrors The Flight into Egypt’s hybrid shrine in its composite form. Thatched cottages, wooden and brick subsidiary buildings, have been built into the very fabric of the classically derived tower, including several ledges transformed into improbable gardens (plate 13). These structures involve different materials and techniques from those that Bruegel so fastidiously displays as taking part in the construction of the tower’s stone-faced body. In fact, most of these structures employ vernacular, predominantly wooden, construction materials, typically associated with the local rural population. Thatched roofs had been forbidden in many Netherlandish towns and cities as a fire risk since the start of the sixteenth century, furthering the association of wooden, thatched architecture with countryside practice. Bruegel plays upon the striking juxtaposition between the quotidian reality of the labourers’ cottages and the grandeur of the tower’s classical architecture in a number of engaging vignettes: women and children gathered around an outdoor cooking pot; clothes laid out on one of the tower’s buttresses; laundry hanging from a line suspended between one of the tower’s magnificent arches.

In the hybrid shrine of The Flight into Egypt and in The Tower of Babel, Bruegel combines materials and influences associated with both the city and the countryside, Antiquity and the contemporary everyday. In both cases, the resulting image brings pagan civilization into dialogue with rural, peasant culture. An antique stone statuette is housed in a gabled vernacular shrine; a stone building inspired by the architecture of the Colosseum is littered with cottages built by the contemporary Netherlandish peasant. Bruegel allows space for the more humble and familiar in his manipulation of the architectural and formal language of Antiquity. In The Tower of Babel, Bruegel takes an historical, biblical structure and renders it as a hybrid form.

Both the hybrid shrine of The Flight into Egypt and the Tower of Babel attest to the power of cultural memory. Each refers respectively to well-known contemporary sites in their articulation of the past. While the tower evokes the Roman Colosseum, the hybrid shrine evokes local arboreal shrines. Despite their disparity in size and consequence, both operate as a link to a pagan past. In both cases, however, the juxtaposition of the past and present results in a paradox – the anachronism of the pagan idol as peasant shrine, or the witnessing of the construction of a ruin. The claim to the past is held in balance with an attention to materiality, to the contingent nature of culture as a human product.
Bruegel’s inclusion of the more mundane, local, rural architecture alongside his representation of a magnificent classical edifice mirrors the increased attention paid by sixteenth-century historians and cosmographers to the perceived historical origins of peasant culture. Both Bruegel and the historian turned to the peasant as source material for their representation of the past, responding both to the specific claims made for the antiquity of Netherlandish peasant custom and to a broader understanding of the peasant as historic remnant. If the peasant building is itself an historic survival, then Bruegel’s integration of peasant homes into a structure derived from antique architecture makes sense. Both the Colosseum and the vernacular building of the peasant represent historic structures. One is an archaeological survival from the pagan past, and the other a traditional mode of building envisaged as unchanged since Antiquity. The thatched buildings of the peasant workers belong alongside the classical architecture of the colossal building because both forms of building practice are of antique origin.

This returns us to the problem of the two idols in *The Flight into Egypt*. I propose that the existence of the two idols reflects a similar tension, again between two different models of history: an archaeological model founded on the survival of artefacts (such as the ruined column); and a cultural model that allowed peasant practice (such as the rural shrine) to stand in for the pagan past. The inclusion of the column equates the historic past with the archaeological record of the pagan idol. The hybrid shrine indicates the continuity of peasant practice, like the use of rural religious markers, as an historic phenomenon. Peasant culture is described as historic, a living link to the pagan past. It is the peasant artefact – his costume, diet or home, his rural religious site or wedding customs – that offers access to the past. This view of the past folds folklore into the production of history.65

In a recent article, Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel have discussed the ‘substitutional’ nature of artefacts in the Renaissance period, stating that: ‘to perceive an artefact in substitutional terms was to understand it as belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously.’66 In this essay, I have argued that the figure of the peasant is the ideal vehicle for this type of temporal substitutionality. While Wood and Nagel have limited their description to the substitutional nature of primarily religious objects, I maintain that peasant artefacts and customs could be treated, and might be seen, in a similar fashion. The supposed continuity of peasant culture allowed for the collapse of temporal distance between the contemporary Netherlandish peasant and the pagan past.

The hybrid shrine in *The Flight into Egypt* demonstrates how peasant practice is subject to temporal collapse. The vernacular tree shrine is depicted as an historic, pre-Christian construction, yet it recalls the numerous historic tree shrines/chapels dispersed throughout the Low Countries. The tree shrine of *The Flight into Egypt* plays upon the memory of these cults and upon their supposed historicity. The contemporary peasant shrine is connected, via a chain of memories, replications and substitutions, with the pagan idol. This does not mean that the peasant is seen as a contemporary pagan, though a certain moral charge remains. However, it is the peasant custom’s antiquity, rather than its idolatry, that is alluded to in the panel’s hybrid shrine.

Bruegel pictures the rural shrine of the peasant as historic in character, an antique product of a local culture, a vernacular equivalent to the ruined column of the other fallen idol. The peasant object is pictured as a vehicle for cultural transmission through time, just as the classical architectural form of the column survives from antiquity. Whereas the column evokes the presence of the classical past, the hybrid
shrine recalls the more prosaic historic presence of vernacular rural culture. Positioned across from one another on the panel and painted in a similar mix of greys, greens and browns, both artefacts are used to embody the pagan past.

Wood’s most recent book on the German Renaissance describes this re-figuring of antiquity as re-enacted during the sixteenth century as a process of *translatio*. While fifteenth-century Italian culture interpreted contemporary cultural products as a repetition or renewal of classical antiquity, the Germans, according to Wood, stressed the idea of *translatio*, continuity between the Emperors of ancient Rome and the Holy Roman Emperors of sixteenth-century Germany.67 The *translatio* from antique to contemporary Empire embodied the transfer of political power and granted this shift historical authority. But, if political legitimization lay behind the *translatio* between Rome and the Holy Roman Empire, what then was the function of the supposed continuity of ancient peasant custom in later sixteenth-century Netherlandish culture?

I have pursued here one possible answer to this question. The peasant provided access to historic behaviour precisely where there was an absence of texts or of physical remains. In a similar fashion, the Dutch language, and oral traditions such as songs and proverbs, were collected and manipulated as having been historic. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, there was an explosion of published Dutch dictionaries and grammars.58 Johannes Gropius Becanus, in his 1569 history of Antwerp, *Origines Antwerpianae*, claimed to prove the antiquity of Antwerp’s local dialect as having been descended directly from the language of Adam.69 Jan van der Werve, in his 1553 legal dictionary *Het Tresoor der Duytsscher Talen*, compared the vernacular tongue to an architectural find, lying ‘concealed in the earth like gold’.70 If the Dutch language itself originated in an ancient past then such a past could have been accessed not only through the discovery of physical remains, but also linguistically. The growing appreciation of Dutch as a valid language for the transmission of culture and history also led to an increase in etymological research. A number of historians, including Becanus, Aurelius and Petrus Divaeus, used the etymology of place-names, for example, to argue for the antiquity of Netherlandish towns and cities.71

Tylman Susato, in the preface to his collection of song-books published between 1551 and 1561, wrote that he wanted to celebrate ‘our Netherlandish mother tongue’ as well as ‘our fatherland’s music’.72 The music included in Susato’s collection often had peasant origins; some of the song titles indicate the particular village or *kermis* where the song or dance was performed. Collections of vernacular proverbs such as Symon Andriessoon’s *Duytsche Adagia ofte Spreecwoorden* of 1550, or Susato’s collection of popular songs, furthered an appreciation of the traditional value of language.73 As discussed above, historians and geographers assembled an array of customs ‘typical’ of both the historic and contemporary inhabitants of the Low Countries. The collection of words, proverbs, costumes and customs all contributed to an image of Dutch culture as historic and therefore worthy of study and collection. Ordinary experience, vernacular language and peasant practice were not only of interest as a source of practical knowledge, but also as indicative of the authority of such customs and of local tradition.74

In establishing the antiquity and, thus, the authority of local tradition and custom, peasant practice was useful not only to historians and collectors of customs, but could also be manipulated for political ends. When *The Flight into Egypt* was painted, the Low Countries was at the start of a period of extreme political and religious unrest, which would culminate in the full-scale outbreak of the Dutch Revolt in 1572. In Bruegel’s lifetime, ‘Dutchness’ was increasingly defined in contrast, or even in opposition, to foreign powers. The writing of histories, the praise of the Dutch
language and the collection of local customs all contributed to an emerging sense of unique cultural identity. The peasant seemingly provided access to the behaviour and customs of the historic Batavia and in so doing became a tool in defining a distinctly Netherlandish identity.

The hybridity of Bruegel’s idol cum tree shrine in The Flight into Egypt can also be seen as a model for this developing cultural identification. The apparent continuity between the shrine of the peasant and the pagan idol signals the historical role of the Netherlandish peasant as a custodian of local cultural traditions. Yet by inserting a classical sculpture into a vernacular shrine, Bruegel creates a pictorial equivalent of the contemporary image of the historic Netherlander as a hybrid race, indebted both to local tradition and classical culture. The very idea of a ‘Batavian’ historic identity, from Aurelius onwards, was one of a hybrid culture at the frontiers of the ancient Roman world. The hybridity of contemporary Netherlandish peoples was reflected in the various appellations given to the Low Countries by Ortelius in his production of maps, which reflect the region’s liminal character: ‘Germania Inferior’ and ‘Gallia Belgica’ were used interchangeably to designate the same geographic area. Geographically and culturally, the Low Countries were seen as straddling the threshold between French and German cultural and linguistic spheres of influence, as well as providing an historic bridge between Roman and Germanic peoples.

Only with the onset of protracted war with the Spanish would the Batavians be recast as a fiercely Dutch, anti-Roman people. The hybrid shrine, with its clashing of cultures and epistemologies, reflects the complexity of the debate about Netherlandish identity in the 1560s, as local history, custom and tradition were increasingly the subject of intellectual and political interest. Crucially, Netherlandish culture and cultural history remained a fluid entity in the period, and had not yet ossified into dogmatic clarity. The Flight into Egypt, with its hybrid shrine, embodies the tensions between local and foreign, urban and rural, past and present, at work in the production of these competing Netherlandish cultural identities.

Notes
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2 The Protoevangelion of James was probably written about 150 CE and is also known as one of the apocryphal Infancy Gospels. See J. K. Elliott, A Synopsis of Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives, Leiden and Boston, 2006.
3 Haymaking is part of the six-panel series of The Months, originally owned by Niclaes Jonghelinck. Haymaking represents early summer, most likely the months of May and June. On the series, see Ian Buchanan, ‘The Collection of Niclaes Jongelinck II: The “Months” by Pieter Bruegel the Elder’, Burlington Magazine, 130: 1049, 1990, 102–13; and Rutger Tijssen, ‘De twaalfmaandencyclus over het land leven van Pieter Bruegel als interieurdecoratie voor het huis van playsantie en Memory’. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
4 Post shrines appear in Haymaking and the drawing Wooded Landscape (now at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge). Field or way crosses (Veldkruis or Wegkruis) can be seen in the background of a number of Bruegel’s landscape prints and in the 1568 painting Magpie on the Gallows (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt).
5 For the complicated question of their survival, maintenance, and development, see Walter Giraldo, Volksdrolte in West-Vlaanderen, Bruges, 1989, 65–71.
6 On the uses of such rural shrines, see Richard van Dülmen, Kultur und Alltag in der frühen Neuzeit, Munich, 1994, vol. 3, 57.
7 Shrines appear in Altdorfer’s 1522 watercolour Landscape with Woodcutter (Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin), one of the woodcuts from Hans Holbein’s 1523–26 series the Dance of Death, and in the background of Hieronymus Bosch’s The Wayfarer, on the outer wings of The Haywain triptych (Prado, Madrid). Christopher Wood has argued that Altdorfer’s woodcutter is likely a shepherd by occupation; Wood therefore sees the arboreal shrine as primarily addressed to the rootless population of shepherds, peddlers and pilgrims. See Wood, Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape, London, 1993, 179–97.
9 Besides these agricultural rites, Stephen Wilson also mentions the use of rural field crosses in a number of fertility and marriage rituals; see Wilson, The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe, London and New York, 2000, 14, 46.
10 A recent bibliography on the drawing and print can be found in...
Krista De Jonge, ‘Antiquity assimilated: Court architecture 1530–1560’, in Krista de Jonge and Konrad Ottenheym, eds, Unity and Discontinuity: Architectural Relations between the Southern and Northern Low Countries 1530–1700, Turnhout, 2007, 55. Hans Vredeman de Vries’s 1577 work Architecturae adaptata Serlio’s version of the classical orders, allowing for more extensive decoration; Vredeman de Vries specifically acknowledged the difficulties of adopting a strict classicism in the Low Countries, where building plots were smaller and more expensive, and stone more difficult to procure.

11 See, for example, Holm Bevers, Das Ruthuis van Antwerpen, 1551–65, New York, Zurich, and Hidesheim, 1985.


13 Katherine Kamerick, Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry, New York, 2002, 71.

14 Katherine Kamerick, Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry, New York, 2002, 71.


16 Arnold van Gennep, Le Folklore de la Flandre et de Hainaut Francais, Paris, 1935, vols 1–2, 476. On the history of sacred trees in Belgium and their continued appeal in the nineteenth century, see Jean Chalon, Les arbres sacrés de la Belgique, Antwerp, 1912. See also Giraldo, Volkskunde, 65–71. Giraldo names a number of sites that are still the focus of local devotion. In Jacques Toussaert’s catalogue of late medieval Netherlands shrines, one is struck by the number of Marian cults associated with trees, a partial list of which includes: Our Lady of the Lime Tree; Our Lady of the Cherry Tree; Our Lady of the Alder; Our Lady of the Elm; Our Lady of the Vine; Our Lady of the Hazel; and Our Lady of the Dry Tree. See Toussaert, Le sentier religieux en Flandre au fin du Moyen-âge, Paris, 1963, 15, 76, 216, 42. Hugo van der Velden also includes a list of tree-related Marian shrines in Hugo van der Velden, ‘Petrus Christus’s “Our Lady of the Day Tree”’, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 60, 1997, 98.

17 See Luther’s publication Ad den christlichen Adel Deutscher Nation, Leipzig, 1520, which included a criticism of ‘die wilden Capellen und Feldkirchen’ (wild chapels and field churches).

18 Margaret T. Hooglen, Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Philadelphia, PA, 1964, 327. For example, Luther famously voiced his objections to the cult of the Schönem Maria in Regensburg, a pilgrimage site famously represented in a woodcut by Michael Ostendorfer, by comparing the contemporary practice of dance, procession, and worship directed at the standing statue of the Virgin to that of pagans dancing around an idol.

19 Indeed, the first martyr of the Reformations, Klaus Hottinger, was exiled, tried for blasphemy, and eventually burnt at the stake after destroying a wayside cross in 1523. Joseph Leo Koerner tells the story of Hottinger, who destroyed a wooden wayside crucifix in Stadelhofen near Zurich in The Reformations of the Image, London, 2004, 129.


21 Margaret A Sullivan, Bruegel’s Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance, Cambridge, 1994, 137.


24 The fact that such a prominent Catholic possessed the picture has not stopped scholars from attributing a secret Reformist agenda to Bruegel’s panel. Sullivan has written: ‘Bruegel’s friends and associates were in a position to know that “the flight into Egypt” had become a secret watchword, a warning to religious dissidents who were trying to escape the Cardinal’s persecution’ (Sullivan, Bruegel’s Peasants, 137). I am inclined to agree with Walter Gibson, who criticizes Sullivan’s statement thus: ‘We can only hope that if Ortelius or his friends ever viewed this painting, they refrained from blurring out its “secret” meaning in the cardinal’s presence’ (Gibson, Peter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter, 190, n. 28). This is not to say that Bruegel and Ortelius necessarily agreed with the political decisions made by the archbishop, but that the work, which appealed to Granvelle, is not likely to have contained criticism of orthodox Church policies.

25 By the mid-sixteenth century, artists in the Low Countries often sold works directly from their studios or from dedicated sales agents who had stalls in the permanent markets (like the Bourse or the Schilderspand in Antwerp). On the painting market in Antwerp, see Filip Vermeulen, Painting for the Market: Commercialization of Art in Antwerp’s Golden Age, Turnhout, 2003. This is not to say that The Flight into Egypt could not have been a particular commission from Granvelle – further deteriorating any potentially Reformist reading of the picture.

26 Writing more than forty years later, Karel van Mander offers a more fanciful account of Bruegel’s move to Brussels, stating that the relocation was the result of an ultimatum issued by his new mother-in-law to remove him from the corrupting presence of a former lover. See K. van Mander, The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters from the first edition of the Schilder-boek (1603–1604), ed. Hessel Miedema, trans. Michael Hoyle et al., Doornspijk, 1994 [1624], fol. 233v. On Brussels in the period, see R. De Peuter, ‘Industrial development and de-industrialisation in pre modern towns: Brussels from the sixteenth to eighteenth century’, in Herman van der Wee, ed., The Rise and the Decline of Urban Industries in Italy and in the Low Countries, Leuven, 1988, 213.


28 See Walter S. Gibson, Mirror of the Earth: The World Landscape in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting, Princeton, NJ, 1989, 94, n. 6. Outside of the iconography of the Flight into Egypt, gabled shrines also turn up in a variety of paintings executed by the same circle of artists: in genre scenes (Gassel’s Landscape with Shepherds in The De Pret-Roose Collection in Vordensteyn); Old Testament and New Testament scenes (Gassel’s Judith and Thamar in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), as well as images from the lives of the saints (Cornelis Massys, St Jerome in the Wilderness, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp).


30 Moving away from the famous 1970s scholarly debate on Bruegel’s comic peasants between Svetlana Alpers and Hessel Miedema in the pages of Simiolus, Bruegel scholarship since the late 1980s has evolved into a wider consideration of the ways in which the figure of the Netherlandish peasant could function in humanist culture and in the evolution of entrepreneurial, communal and political identity. See, for example, Mark Meadow, Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric, Zwolle, 2002; Ethan Matt Kavaler, Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise, Cambridge, 1999; Margaret D. Carroll, ‘Peasant fertility and political identity in the sixteenth century’, Art History, 10: 3, 1987, 287–314; to name but a few.

31 After the circulation of Jacopo Sannazaro’s manuscript Arcadia in the 1480s and the subsequent emergence of the pastoral genre, perhaps the most famous example of the ‘idealization’ of the peasant can be found in Antonio de Guevara, Memorias de cortes y caballos de aldea, Pamplona, 1579. The term ‘negative self-definition’ has been given currency in the art-historical consideration of sixteenth-century Netherlandish culture through the work of Paul Vandenbroeck. See Paul Vandenbroeck, ‘Verbeek’s peasant weddings: A study of iconography and social function’, Simiolus, 14: 2, 1984, 79–124; and Paul Vandenbroeck, Beeld van en anders, vertoog over het zelf. Over wilde en naren, boeren en bedelaars, Antwerp, 1987. I would expand Vandenbroeck’s argument to retain a more flexible understanding of cultural formation in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, where
the peasant could also act as a rural penguine to the urban inhabitant. This is a point also raised by Larry Silver in Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genre in the Antwerp Art Market, Philadelphia, PA, 2006, 108.


39 On the adage, see Phillips, Erasmus on His Times, 32. On Erasmus and the Batavians see Mout, ““Het Bataafsche Oor””, 77–102; Ari Wesseling, ‘“Are the Dutch uncivilised?” Erasmus on the Batavians and his reference to Netherlandish costume’, Ludovico Guicciardini, Description de tout le Puis bas, Antwerp, 1567, 36. While Pieter van der Borch provided the illustrations for Abraham Ortelius’s Aurei Seculi Imago sive germorum verum viae, moris, ritus & religio, Antwerp, 1581, the artist of the woodcut illustrating a German village from Sebastian Münster’s Cosmographiae universalis, Basel, 1550, is unknown.


43 Hogden, Early Anthropology, 23.


45 Guicciardini, Description de tout le Puis bas, 33.

46 Hogden, Early Anthropology, 257.


48 Thinking about the constructed relationship between temporal and cultural difference, I have been particularly influenced by the work of Reinhart Koselleck; see Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, trans. Keith Tribe, New York, 2002, 165.

49 Hans Seidlmayr, in a prescient yet disturbing article of 1934, described the faces of Bruegel’s figures as being mask-like, expressing the estranged vision at the heart of Bruegel’s art. Although Seidlmayr’s dubious use of hierarchical anthropomorphism in his description of Bruegel’s interest in ‘lower’ forms of humanity reveals the art historian’s Nazi sympathies, Seidlmayr’s analysis of Bruegel’s painting style, in particular his use of patches of colour (mochia) and dynamic compositions, remains acute. See Seidlmayr, ‘Bruegel’s Macchia’, in Christopher S. Wood, ed., The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1910s, New York, 2000 [1934], 323–76. Edward Snow has offered a convincing rebuttal of Seidlmayr’s interpretation of Bruegel’s pictures as chaotic, demonstrating that Bruegel carefully composed his scenes with pairs/groups of figures arranged for maximum contrast, in a kind of conceptual dialectic of form. See Snow, Inside Bruegel: The Play of Image in Children’s Games, New York, 1997, 15–17.

50 Snow discusses the panel’s compositional complexity in detail, Inside Bruegel, 43–57.

51 Walter Gibson’s recent book on Pieter Bruegel, Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter, foregrounds the actual practice of middle-class Antwerp citizens visiting peasant festivities on Sundays and holidays in his interpretation of Bruegel’s paintings. Ethan Matt Kavaler cites the fact that the 1579 costume book of Abraham de Bruyn includes specific costume entries for women going outside of the city (given the designation Muler Antwerpiana extra muros probundam), as evidence of how conventional this practice had become by the later sixteenth century. Kavaler also cites a 1515 treatise on deportment written by Thomas van der Noot acknowledging the attraction of the peasant kermes for his urban readers while cautioning them to be prudent in their behaviour. See Kavaler, Pieter Bruegel, 153, n. 9, 196, 314; and Abraham de Bruyn, Omnium pene Europae, Asiorum, et Africæ utique American gentium habitus, Antwerp, 1581 [1577].


53 On the role local cultures may have in their own objectification by tourists, see Katherine Borland, ‘Marisma: Dance of the revolutionaries, dance of the folk’, Radical History Review, 84, 2002, 79.


55 On the world landscape tradition, with its all-encompassing vision of the earth, from mountain peak to seascape, see Larry Silver, Peasant Scenes and Landscapes, 26–52; Walter Gibson, Mirror of the Earth.

56 Bruegel often uses mountains as the staging point for historical dramas: the momentous appearance at the heart of The Conversion of Saul, and the pitched battle and the private bloodshed of the Suicide of Saul all occur high in the imposing peaks of Bruegel’s imagination. These mountainous landscapes contribute to the significance of these occasions. However, from the perspective of the mountaintop, human action, no matter how spectacular, is also rendered insignificant. The scale of human history is minute in comparison to the physical environment of the earth. See Christopher Wood, Fogery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art, Chicago, IL, 2008, 269.
