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Between Dying and Dancing Tales of the Early Modern Period

Highlights

Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), *The Triumph of Death*, dat. 1597

Oil on canvas

A panorama of terror, filled with death and violence, is set out here, a hellish spectacle, which Jan Brueghel has created based on the model of father, Pieter Brueghel the Elder. It is one of the most radical and gloomy works in the oeuvre of the Flemish family of painters, at once a reference to the impermanence of human existence, and a shocking anti-war picture. The hosts of death, who drive people around here like cattle, are also probably a reminder of the atrocities committed by the Spanish army in the Netherlands of the 16th century, where conflict was raging for religious freedom.

Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638), *Flemish Carnival*

Oil on wood

A Flemish village is here the location of a colourful, merry spring festival. A celebration and a dance take place around a village tavern that is bursting to the seams; a theatre troupe performs a bawdy tale. This painting documents the epochal role played by one of the most influential artist dynasties of 16th and 17th century Europe.

With the Graz painting, the son of its founder, Pieter Brueghel the Younger, created a high-calibre variation on the allegorical painting, whose original was produced in Antwerp, depicting the foolishness of the world with as much detail as drama.

Bartholomäus Spranger (1546–1611), *Mars, Venus and Cupid*

Oil on canvas

Spranger's painting represents the heyday of courtly Mannerism in the Prague of Emperor Rudolph II around 1600. Originally from Flanders, the painter, with remarkable technical subtlety, employed the typical, precious style of this era, as well as its preference for demanding, secular subjects. Behind the artfully staged love-making between Venus and Mars is hidden a serious truth, of which contemporaries were all to aware: it was not Cupid who ruled the day. Around 1600, Europe was plagued by religious wars and power struggles. Under these conditions, the triumph of love shown here is no more than a distant dream.

Giovanni Pietro de Pomis (1569–1633), *Archduke Ferdinand as Just fighter*

Oil on canvas

Emperor Ferdinand II, as he will become later, is presented here by his court painter de Pomis as a fighter for the true faith. Like a second Archangel Michael, supported by time and the truth, he plunges the exposed lie, the false faith, into the abyss.

This political, programmatic picture symbolises the struggle waged with the greatest bitterness by Ferdinand against Protestantism, which initially pushed the Habsburgs, who had remained Catholic, on to the defensive. Ferdinand's Graz court became the launch pad around 1600 for a great Catholic counter-offensive, in which artists became representatives in the struggle for souls.

Herri met de Bles (around 1510–around 1555), *Landscape with Mine*

Oil on wood.

Originally from the Maas region, Herri met de Bles is among the pioneers of post-medieval landscape painting, which arises in the southern Netherlands. This form of painting is characterised by the greatest precision in detail, and an almost visionary breadth in forming panoramic pictorial space, documenting at the highest level the essential contribution made by Flanders to the development of European painting.

Joos de Momper the Younger (1564–1635), *Flemish Village Street with View of Antwerp*

Oil on wood, on loan from the Kaiserschild-Stiftung

Thanks to a thriving workshop business, the Antwerp-born Joos de Momper the Younger belongs to the most productive representatives of Flemish landscape painting in the first half of the 17th century. Besides mountain, river and coastline landscapes, villages and towns as locations of pulsating life were soon the focal point of artistic interest, too.

Only a few European countries had a comparable density of cities like the Netherlands. Its trading metropolises became a favourite motif and bore witness to the hard-won renown and prosperity of the country, which had worked its way up to one of the continent's leading trading powers. Particularly Antwerp, already a centre of world trade in the 16th century, offered an impressive sight, over which the characteristic tower of the Cathedral of Our Lady soared.

Aert van der Neer (around 1603–1677), *River Landscape at Dusk*

Oil on canvas, on loan from the Kaiserschild-Stiftung

In its heyday around the mid-17th century, Dutch landscape painting always sets its sights on the actual appearance of the land. Yet a highly detailed representation of the same is not always delivered. Rather, this genre depicts a constantly varied reflection of an intensely observed reality.

Like no other artist of his time, Aert van der Neer, who was active in Amsterdam, formed the character of the night picture. His flat landscape at dusk, saturated with water, may remind us of the end of life, yet it radiates safety and calm, too. It symbolises in exemplary fashion not only the world as lived by the Dutch, but also their religiously reinforced awareness of having successfully resisted the dangers of the sea by technical inventiveness, and of having recreated anew their own country by land reclamation.

Aert van der Neer (around 1603–1677), *Winter Landscape with Fun on Ice*

Oil on wood, on loan from the Kaiserschild-Stiftung

In the course of the 16th century, a spectacular fall in temperature caused a change in Europe's climate, which was to continue throughout the whole of the 17th century: a 'mini-Ice Age' with long, icy winters and short, rainy summers. The ripening time for crops and wine shortened, with crop failures and winters of starvation the dramatic consequence. They intensified the suffering of a population that long since had been cruelly tested by war and privations.

In art, too, this climate change found its expression, with a genre of its own emerging, the 'winter landscape.' In countless variations, it has been handed down to us how people not only learn how to defy the all-penetrating cold, but also even how to invent new amusements on ice.

Jan Steen (1626–1679), *Love Scene*

Oil on wood, on loan from the Kaiserschild-Stiftung

We find ourselves inside a Dutch town house. According to the strict moral concepts of the time, strictly ordered relations would have had to prevail here. However, the young couple in this picture is far removed from that. The woman points to the parrot's cage, symbol of her being caged in the marriage with an older man, who sits in the garden to the side. Her young suitor, in contrast, sees himself close to achieving his goal, as the cracked nut on the floor hints at.

Warnings of an immoral way of life are a core element of Dutch painting of the Golden Age. With the aid of a range of symbols and codes, paintings warn of the dangers of the mortal sins, of gluttony, fornication and wrath. Such hints have become proverbial precisely for the works of Jan Steen. The Leiden-born painter also ran a tavern as a 'side-line.' It appears thus that he was highly familiar with the prevailing morals of the day.

Dirk Valkenburg (1675–1721), *Hunting Still Life with Hare*

Oil on canvas, on loan from the Kaiserschild-Stiftung

In the Golden Age of Dutch painting, a flower and still life genre reached its apogee, which delivers a new image of nature with an as yet unprecedented degree of virtuosity and love of detail. The exuberant splendour of the paintings evokes the notion of limitless wealth and paradise-like conditions, which are far removed from reality, however. In this conflict-filled era, a carefree life without hunger and adversity was a distant dream, which was conjured up in paintings of this kind. Animal still lifes also belong in this category, such as this masterly painting by the specialist concerned, Dirk Valkenburg. A hunting still life such as this reflects a yearning for luxury, as typified the upper echelons of Amsterdam society during the Golden Age. The enormous wealth from overseas trade enjoyed by these patricians allowed them to assume an aristocratic lifestyle, which was expressed in magnificently furnished houses.

Pieter Claesz (um 1598–1661), *Still Life with Glass Trophy*

Oil on wood, on loan from the Kaiserschild-Stiftung

Pieter Claesz, who hailed from Berchem near Antwerp, moved to the Protestant north of the Netherlands, like many of his Flemish compatriots. In 1621 he moved to Haarlem, where he developed another distinctive variety of still life.

Sparsely depicted in muted shades of grey and ochre, a simple yet vivid ensemble is formed by means of just a few food items, together with dark drinking glasses that are highlighted by subtle reflections of light; moreover, religious references are made through the inclusion of fish, bread and wine. This austere-seeming composition represents in exemplary fashion the category of the monochrome banketje (small meal in Dutch), which indicates the special place held by Pieter Claesz in the evolution of the Dutch still life. The sparing deployment of a few colours of little luminosity is a long way from the luxuriant, splendid still lifes, with their exuberantly glorious colours, which at the same time contain warning about an excessive lifestyle. Such messages were readily understood in the strictly Protestant milieu of the Netherlands, which conceived of itself as Biblical in its foundations, indeed as a chosen people.

Dosso Dossi (1490–1542), *Ercole d'Este as Hercules*
Oil on canvas

Portraits are meant to help preserve the memory of those persons who wish to retain a permanent space in the minds of their fellow-beings and that of posterity. Frequently, it is their social or political status, or their personal merit, which results in their appearance being captured in portrait form.

This witty portrait of a Renaissance prince is as unusual as it is misleading. At first glance, it creates the impression not of a portrait, but of a mythological tale. The demigod Hercules is resting in the shade of a tree and is suddenly besieged by a brightly-coloured host of dwarves with scaling ladders and ropes. However, it is the Italian prince, Ercole II d'Este, who slips into the role of Hercules here; the similarity between the prince's and the hero's name makes it easy for all viewers to get the reference. In the role of the ancient super-hero, Prince Ercole effortlessly overcomes all his opponents, who have been relegated to ridiculous dwarves.

Johann Georg Platzer (1704–1761), *Götterfest mit Apoll und Bacchus*
Oil on copper

The Tyrolean Johann Georg Platzer is the most important virtuoso of Austrian cabinet painting of the reign of Maria Theresa. His religious and mythological paintings, mostly in small format on copper, signify a maximum of subtle colouring with an almost excessive degree of detailed description, as uniquely found in Rococo art.