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PIETER POURBUS AND THE FORGOTTEN MASTERS

Groeningemuseum Brugge, 13 October, 2017 – 21 January, 2018

EXHIBITION

PIETER POURBUS AND THE FORGOTTEN MASTERS

IN BRIEF

This autumn, come and acquaint yourself with the forgotten masters from 16th century Bruges. See what the Bruges art world was like during an economic recession and stand in admiration before the impressive oeuvre of Pieter Pourbus and forgotten masters, such as Marcus Gerards, Pieter I Claeissens and his sons Gillis, Pieter II and Antonius.

In the 16th century, Bruges experienced an economic recession, and the city became drained of life. Young artists left for Antwerp, which hailed itself as the new capital of art of Flanders. However, using its famous artistic past as a source of inspiration, Bruges soon developed a new style all of its own.

Pieter Pourbus is one of the artistic exceptions when he started to work in Bruges in 1543 with Lancelot Blondeel. Under the experienced eye of the Bruges master, Pourbus developed into the up-and-coming talent and managed to attract many prominent assignments. From the Last Judgement and the Annunciation to striking portraits of the leading families of Bruges.

The surprising highlight of the exhibition is the oeuvre of the Claeissens family. Recent research has identified and reconstructed their oeuvre, which has remained unknown for centuries. You will be able to acquaint yourself with the extensive collection of Pieter I Claeissens and his sons Gillis, Pieter II, and Antonius.

MORE INFO

By Anne van Oosterwijk

Source: Museumbulletin 3/2017

In 1998, the exhibition 'Bruges and the Renaissance, from Memling to Pourbus' was held in the Sint-Janshospitaal. The exhibition covered a period starting with the last decades of the glorious 15th century, with works by Hans Memling and Gerard David, and ended with 'the last of the Flemish Primitives', Pieter Pourbus. Artists who were active in the second half of the 16th century, such as the various members of the Claeissens family, were hardly mentioned. This effectively confirmed the existing view of the time that Pourbus was the only Bruges artist of importance during that period. As a result, the opportunity to interest a wider public in the art of Bruges in the second half of the 16th century was missed.

In the aftermath of the exhibition, a number of scholars took several important steps forward in the research of these forgotten Bruges masters. That research now forms the basis for a new exhibition, 'Pieter Pourbus and the forgotten masters', which will run from 13 October 2017 to 21 January 2018 in the Groeningemuseum.

Economic recession in Bruges

The story of the economic recession in Bruges, which started at the end of the 15th century, is well-known. In addition to the tense political situation following the death of Mary of Burgundy in 1482, the city was also becoming harder to reach by ship as a result of the silting-up of the Zwin tidal channel. At the same time, the protectionist policies of the guilds, which were intended to stimulate trade, actually served as a disincentive for foreign merchants and craftsmen, who began to leave the city in increasing numbers. In the following century, efforts to revive the economy only succeeded in making the poor sections of the population even poorer and more destitute. The wages of working people remained the same, but their living expenses increased dramatically. The remaining skilled craftsmen moved away, leaving behind a mass of unskilled labourers, living in abject poverty.

Bruges became a city with two faces. The contrast between the poor and the city's aristocratic elite and its prosperous middle class was striking. Although the elite was now smaller than in the past, it still possessed great wealth and intellectual life still thrived at a high level. This group included a significant number of humanists, such as Juan Luis Vives, Marcus Laurinus, Antoon Schoonhoven and Frans Goethals. In a letter Desiderius Erasmus even referred to Bruges as 'the Athens of the North'. It was this group that continued to commission works of art from Pieter Pourbus, Marcus Gerards and the members of the Claeissens family. And it was almost certainly a member of this same urban elite who commissioned 'The Seven Wonders of Bruges' by Pieter I Claeissens. Seven important buildings among the ruins express the majesty of the city's glorious past. From left to right at the front, we can see the Waterhuys, the Church of Our Lady, the Waterhalle and the Belfry. From left to right further back stand the Poortersloge, the House of the Seven Towers and the Oosterlingenhuis. The manner in which the buildings are depicted reflects the medieval perception of ancient Rome as a city that had fallen into ruin, but still reminded the world of its former glory through the magnificence of its timeless architecture. In one of the decaying buildings on the island in the foreground, a hermit dressed in humanist clothing sits next to a fire. In his isolation, he quietly contemplates the people on the Market

Square, some of whom are gathered around a group of quacksalvers and other charlatans.

Painting

In 1500 there were still many artists active in Bruges, some of whom, like Gerard David and Jan Provoost, had outstanding reputations. But by the time Pieter I Claeissens (1499/1500-1576) became a freemaster in the artists' guild in 1530, the art market in the city had changed dramatically. And by the time he established his studio in the street known as the Oude Zak in 1540, the famous turn-of-the-century artists had either died or left the city, so that artistic taste was now determined by painters like Adriaen Isenbrandt, Ambrosius Benson and Lancelot Blondeel.

For a long time, the role played by Pieter I Claeissens in this changing art market remained unclear. In part, this was due to the difficulty in identifying and constructing a coherent oeuvre. However, as a result of recent research in preparation for this exhibition, it has now been possible for the first time to gain deeper insight into his work. Some attributions had previously been made on the basis of deduction, such as the two panels painted for Abbot Antoine Wydoit. James Weale has also pointed out the signature OPVS PETRI NICOLAI MORAVLI BRUGIS IN FLANDRIA IN PLATEA QUAE DICITUR DEN HOVDEN SACK (A work by Petrus Nicolai Moraulus from Bruges in





Flanders in the street called the Oude Zak), which appears on five paintings and which he associates with Pieter I Claeissens. This attribution was not accepted by some art scholars, since the conservative style of this Petri Nicolai was difficult to rhyme with the period between 1530 and 1576 when Pieter I Claeissens was active, a period generally characterized by a more progressive style.

(the fifth painting has been missing since 1951) in preparation for this exhibition has allowed us for the first time to develop a coherent picture of this master and his style of composition. In addition, it was further possible to examine the underdrawing on two of the panels with infrared-reflectography (IRR). This first underdrawing on the primed panel was not intended to be seen by the commissioning patron nor by the modern-day viewer, but the style is known to be typical of Pieter I and therefore supports the attributions.

The matter was finally settled in 2003 by Didier Martens and Barbara Kiss, as a result of their detailed scrutiny of the registration lists and memorial book of the Image-makers and Saddlers Guild. These documents make reference to only a single artist who can be connected with the names Petri Nicolai, and that artist was Pieter I Claeissens.

The exhibition displays for the first time the newly established and extended oeuvre of this artist, who remains largely unknown to the wider public. It includes new attributions of paintings originally attributed to Ambrosius Benson, such as '*St. Ursula*'. The oeuvre of Benson is also largely based on reconstruction, since only





two monogrammed paintings have survived: *'The Holy Family'* in the Groeningemuseum and the *'St. Anthony retable'* in the Royal Museum of Belgian Fine Arts in Brussels. The similarity of some of the stylistic characteristics in these works and the resulting confusion with the oeuvre of Pieter I open up some interesting avenues of thought. Is it possible that during his period as a journeyman and until he became a freemaster - in other words, during the period circa 1520 to 1530 - Claeissens collaborated with Benson? This would certainly explain Pieter I Claeissens involvement in the Spanish art export market, in which Benson was the leading artist.

Pieter Pourbus

Shortly after Pieter I set up his workshop in the Oude Zak, Pieter Pourbus came to Bruges from Gouda (NL). Just 20 years old, he was

probably accepted into the studio of Lancelot Blondeel, whose daughter, Anna, he married in 1545. Blondeel probably regarded Pourbus as the ideal person to later take over his business. Although Blondeel helped Pourbus in many ways to establish a position for himself in Bruges society, Pourbus, through his own efforts, eventually became a member of the prestigious St. George's Guild of Crossbowmen. This gave him access to a large number of rich clients - wealthy merchants and members of the minor nobility - from which he was able to benefit for the rest of his career.

Working with his father-in-law, he painted the *'Seven Joys of the Blessed Virgin'* and also assisted in the decoration for the mausoleum of Margaret of Austria, for which he designed the cartoons for the stained glass and painted two of the panels for the altar piece. Of these two





panels, only the '*Annunciation*' has survived. It is a painting that demonstrates a high degree of technical ability combined with great finesse, as is evident from the stunning depiction of the fabrics in the composition. It demonstrates the remarkable quality of his art.

In the same year (1552), he was awarded the prestigious commission to paint a '*Last Judgement*' for the courtroom in the Brugse Vrije (Palace of the Liberty of Bruges). The design drawings have been preserved and show how Pourbus developed the composition using coloured grounds, probably as a preliminary study to convince his potential patrons to grant him the commission in the first place. The designs, together with the underdrawing (established by IRR) and the finished masterpiece, give a fascinating insight into Pieter Pourbus's working method. The comparison between the underdrawing and the paint show a number of changes in the composition. For example, Pourbus deviates away from his original source of inspiration - Michelangelo's '*Last Judgement*' in the Sistine Chapel - by giving his angels wings and leaving out the ruins. He also corrected Christ's arms, so that one is pointing up toward the saved and the other pointing down towards the damned.

However, the most remarkable discovery in the underpainting is a 19-word text written in French in a humanist script in the sky at the top of the panel. This kind of text was highly unusual in the Bruges art of the period, as was the use of this type of script and the use of the French language. It suggests that Pourbus did not add the text himself, but was probably the result of an intervention by one of his commissioning patrons. This in turn implies that the patron's visited Pourbus in his studio to check

up on the progress of the work during the underdrawing phase, so that they could approve the final composition.

Throughout the rest of the 1550s, Pourbus continued to produce works of outstanding quality, including the '*Van Belle triptych*' and the panels for the '*Noble Fraternity of the Holy Blood*'. His ability as a portraitist is also clear from his depictions of *Pieter Dominicle and Livina van der Beke*, as well as his magnificent and recently discovered *Portrait of an unknown woman*

The studio in the Oude Zak

Pieter I Claeissens was the pater familias of an artistic family consisting of seven artists over three generations, the first two of which are dealt with in this exhibition. During the period 1560 to 1576 he worked intensively with his sons Gillis, Pieter II and Antonius in the studio in the Oude Zak. Antonius is the only one of the Claeissens who temporarily left the studio during the 1560s, when he went to work with Pourbus. This complex situation has made it difficult to ascribe works to the individual members of the family. For example, the '*Triptych of the de Ontañeda-de Hertoghe family*' has until now been ascribed to Antonius and Pieter I, although the recent IRR investigation points more in the direction of Pieter II or Gillis. As an added complication, the close collaboration between the four different family members means that a horizontal and vertical division of work is also a possibility.

Until recently, Gillis Claeissens had no clearly established oeuvre of his own. It was only in 2008 that four paintings in Budapest could be connected with a contract in the OCMW (Public Welfare) archive between Claeys van de Kerchove and Gillis. Even more recently – in



2015 – it was also possible to establish that the talented painter of three late 16th century portraits, previously known only by his monogram 'G/E.C.', was, in fact, Gillis. This discovery sheds interesting light on another unknown aspect of art in Bruges during that period, since until now it had been generally assumed that Pieter Pourbus was the only artist active in the portrait genre at that time. While Pourbus painted his portraits in keeping with humanist principles and depicts the sitter in an active pose, Gillis preferred to concentrate more on a style that suggests wealth through his manner of depicting fine clothes and jewellery. Perhaps for this reason, his portraits also found favour with the aristocracy of the day and even took him to the Farnese court and the court of Albrecht and Isabella. The portrait of the young nobleman is of exceptional quality and have rightly been chosen as the image for the promotional campaign for this exhibition.

All the Claeissens brothers found their own niche in the market. Pieter II made extensive use of compositional styles from the early part of the 16th century, such as his *Mary Magdalen* from 1602. If this delightful little painting had not been signed and dated, it would unquestionably have been attributed on stylistic grounds to half a century earlier, copying as it does a composition by Isenbrant. The painting shows that at the beginning of the 17th century there was still a market in Bruges for high-quality 'archaic' compositions that hark back to the days of the Flemish Primitives.

Antonius Claeissens worked closely with his brother Pieter at what might be called an administrative level. Following the death of Pieter Pourbus, they regularly exchanged positions with each other as dean and *vinder* or inspector of the Painters Guild. But in terms of art, the brothers followed different paths. The oeuvre



of Antonius can be separated into two parts: a number of progressive compositions and iconographies, which sometimes seem clumsy in their execution, and a series of small paintings of moderate quality. From the first group, the *'Feast of the City Officers'* from 1574 is worthy of mention.

Painting dynasties

The exhibition tells the story of two painting dynasties. The studio of Pieter Pourbus was famous for its collaboration between different painters of the same family over a number of generations. Pourbus senior took over the studio from his father-in-law, Lancelot Blondeel, and in the early 1560s personally supervised the initial artistic training of his son, Frans I. Frans completed his artistic education in Antwerp and was referred to by Karel van Mander as the most talented pupil of Frans

Floris. Sadly, Frans I died at the age of 36 and in 1580 his son, Frans II, was entrusted to the care of his grandfather in Bruges. Pieter also educated his grandson in the artist's craft, until his own death in 1584. The works of Frans I and Frans II display a clear awareness of the legacy they inherited from their famous father and grandfather, but each managed to give their own individual twist to what they had learned from him. In other words, it was their roots in Bruges that helped to establish their international fame.

In collaboration with the Gouda Museum, where the exhibition 'Pieter Pourbus, master-painter from Gouda' will be held from 20 February to 17 June 2018.

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MULTIMEDIA

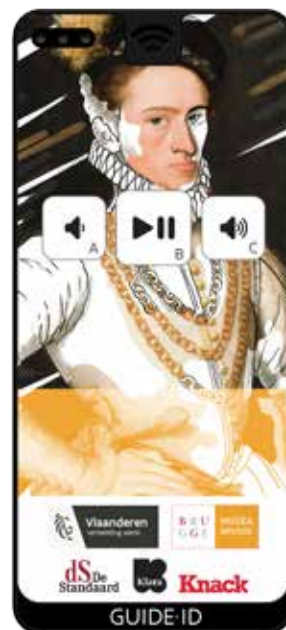
Much of the scientific work that was carried out prior to this exhibition will be made more accessible for visitors through the use of multimedia technology. Amongst other things, it will be possible to study contract drawings, designs and IRR images of the *'Van Belle Triptych'*, the *'Last Judgement'* (both by Pieter Pourbus) and the *'Crucifixion Triptych'* (by Pieter I and Gillis Claeissens). Visitors will be able to compare these documents on the screen with the finished works of art in the gallery. In this way, it is possible to see what changes were made during the painting process and also to explain why these changes were made.

To complete their exhibition visit, visitors can explore Bruges using Marcus Gerards' famous map of the city on a multitouch table. In this way, the close connection between the works in the exhibition and the history of Bruges will become even clearer.

ADDITIONAL

AUDIOGUIDE

Cost: 2 euros
Language: NL/FR/EN
Can be downloaded free of charge via www.xplorebruges.be



THE GREEN FEATHER

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LECTURES

Conservatie en nieuwe montage van het Brugse stadsplan van Marcus Gerards by Ann Peckstadt on 3rd December

Schilders en rederijders in het Brugge van omstreeks 1550 by Samuel Mareel on 21st January

The lectures take place in the Vriendenzaal, Dijver 12, at 10.30 a.m.

Cost: € 5; free for members of VSMB

More info: www.museabrugge.be

MAGIS

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PUBLICATIONS



This exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated **catalogue**:

Forgotten Masters. Pieter Pourbus and Bruges painting from 1525 to 1625

Snoeck Publishers

€ 45

Hardback, 320 p,

Available in Dutch and English (from mid-november)

Anne van Oosterwijk (ed.)

OKV theme issue: Pieter Pourbus and the Forgotten Masters

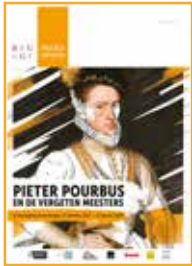
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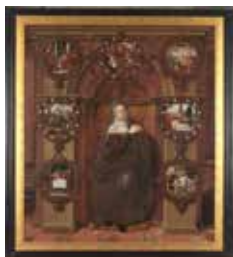
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1. exhibition poster
2. Lancelot Blondeel, Saint Luke painting the Virgin, 1545, oil on panel, Groeningemuseum, 0000.GR0018.I. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Hugo Maertens.
3. Antonius Claeissens, 'Feast of the City Officers', 1574, oil on panel, Groeningemuseum, 0000.GR0023.I. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Dominique Provoost.
4. Pieter Pourbus, Portrait of Jan van Eyewerve, 1551, oil on panel, Groeningemuseum, 0000.GR00108.I. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Hugo Maertens.
5. Pieter Pourbus, Portrait of Jacquemyne Buuck, 1551, oil on panel, Groeningemuseum, 0000.GR00109.I. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Hugo Maertens.
6. Pieter Pourbus, Last Judgement, 1551, oil on panel, Groeningemuseum, 0000.GR00110.I. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Hugo Maertens.
7. Pieter Pourbus, Last Judgement, 1551, coloured underdrawing, black pen, Providence, Rhode Island School of Design. © Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art, Providence: Erik Gould.
8. Pieter Pourbus, Annunciation, 1552, oil on panel, Gouda, Museum Gouda. © Museum Gouda / Tom Haartsen.
9. Pieter II Claeissens, Mary Magdalen, 1602, oil on panel, private collection. © private collection.
10. Pieter Pourbus, Madonna with Saint Luke and Saint Eligius, 1551, pen-and-wash drawing, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York
11. Pieter I Claeissens, Madonna of the Seven Sorrows, 1562, oil on panel, private collection. © private collection.
12. Pieter Pourbus, Van Belle triptych, with the seven sorrows of Mary, (middle panel) 1556, oil on panel, Brugge, Sint-Jakobskerk. © Matthias Desmet and Jan Termont.
13. Pieter Pourbus, Shutters of the Van Belle triptych, with the seven sorrows of Mary (outside). © Matthias Desmet and Jan Termont.
14. Pieter Pourbus, Portrait shutters of the Noble Fraternity of the Holy Blood, (right panel) 1556, oil on panel, Brugge, Noble Fraternity of the Holy Blood. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Dominique Provoost.
15. Pieter Pourbus, Portrait shutters of the Noble Fraternity of the Holy Blood, (Linkerluik) 1556, oil on panel, Brugge, Noble Fraternity of the Holy Blood. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Dominique Provoost.
16. Pieter I Claeissens, Saint Ursula, ca. 1560-70, oil on panel, Oviedo, Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias. © Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias.
17. Pieter II or Gillis Claeissens, Triptych of the de Ontañeda de Hertoghe family, ca. 1570-76, oil on panel, Brussels, Koninklijke musea voor Schone Kunsten van België. © Brussel, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten / photo: J. Geleyns – Ro scan.
18. Marcus Gerards, De Warachtighe Fabulen der Dieren, 1567, etching, printed on paper, 2012.GR00008.III. © Jan Termont & Dirk van der Borght, Brugge.
19. Gillis Claeissens, Portrait of an unknown nobleman, ca. 1575, oil on panel, Stockholm, Hallwylska Museet. © Hallwylska Museet, Stockholm.
20. Pieter Pourbus, epitaph portrait of Zeger van Male and his family, 1578, oil on panel, 2017.GR00015.I-BL. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Dominique Provost.
21. Pieter I Claeissens, Moses Breaking the Pharaoh's Crown, ca. 1560, oil on panel, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario. © Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
22. Pieter I Claeissens, Triptych of the Salamanca, ca. 1567, oil on panel, 0000.GR01469.I. © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW, photo Dominique Provost.
23. Gillis Claeissens, Portrait of an unknown noblewoman, ca. 1575, oil on panel, Stockholm, Hallwylska Museet. © Hallwylska Museet, Stockholm.
24. Pieter Pourbus, portraits of Pieter Dominicle and Livina Van der Beke, 15.., oil on panel, Belfius Art Collection.
25. Gillis Claeissens, Portrait of an unknown woman, ca. 1575, oil on panel, private collection. © private collection.
26. Frans II Pourbus, Portrait of a 56-year-old man and his 54-year-old wife, 1591, oil on panel, private collection and San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. © The Weiss Gallery / © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

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PRACTICAL INFO EXHIBITION

Title:	Pieter Pourbus and the Forgotten Masters
Location:	Groeningemuseum, Dijver 12, 8000 Bruges, Belgium
Dates:	from 13th October, 2017 until 21st January, 2018
Opening hours:	Tuesday to Sunday from 9.30 to 17.00.
Tickets:	€ 8 (26-64 y.) € 6 (>65 y. & 12-25 y.) [incl. permanent collection] free -12 years
Audioguide:	€ 2 available in NL/FR/EN Can be downloaded free of charge via https://www.xplorebruges.be
More information:	www.museabrugge.be

MORE INFO

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The **press file** can also be consulted online and texts can be transcribed, again via www.museabrugge.be, under the heading 'press'.

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