"In Their Houses": Domestic Space and Religious Practices in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Antwerp

The Procession to Calvary (1564) is one of sixteen paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder listed in the inventory of Niclaes Jonghelinck's collection prepared in early 1566. Alongside *The Tower of Babel*, this panel exemplifies Jonghelinck's predilection for large biblical narratives, which functioned as discursive exempla within the secular space of his suburban villa. Displayed alongside Bruegel's series of the *Months*, Floris's *Banquet of the Gods*, *The Labors of Hercules*, and allegories of the Seven Liberal Arts and the Three Theological Virtues, *The Tower of Babel* and *The Procession to Calvary* complemented those images' more universal meaning by kindling a conversation about Antwerp's current affairs. While *The Tower of Babel* addressed the socioeconomic transformation of the city, *The Procession to Calvary* registered the ongoing development of new types of religious practices, and the increasing dissatisfaction with official church and civic rituals. Bruegel's composition engages with those changes by juxtaposing two artistic idioms. The panel is dominated by a visually rich multifigured view of the crowd following Christ to Golgotha, assisted by soldiers in sixteenth-century Spanish uniforms and mixed with random passersby who happen to be taking the same route on their way to Jerusalem. These contemporary witnesses of Christ's passion contrast sharply with a group introduced by Bruegel in the foreground to the right. The fainting Virgin Mary, upheld by Saint John the Evangelist, and the grieving Mary Magdalene and Mary Cleopas imitate paintings by Rogier van der Weyden (figure 20) and Jan van Eyck, and exemplify a proper emotional response toward Christ's passion.[1]

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1   Mark A. Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*, Aemulatio and the Space of Vernacular Style," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996): 180–205. It should be noted in this context that Rogier van der Weyden is only one of several painters whom Bruegel follows here. The entire *Procession to Calvary* emulates motifs and compositional solutions introduced by other artists. Pieter Aertsen, in his version of the theme (n.d., oil on panel, 115.5 × 166cm, private collection), included the scene with Simon of Cyrene and his wife, figures dressed in Oriental costumes, and the wagon carrying the two thieves, also repeated by Jan van Amstel in his *Procession to Calvary*. Walter S. Gibson, *"Mirror of the Earth": The World Landscape in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 68. However, the most important sixteenth-century artist imitated by Bruegel, in *The Procession to Calvary* and the *Conversion of Saint Paul*, is Herri met de Bles. For a brief, informative summary of Bruegel's sources in this panel, see also Porras, *Pieter Bruegel's Historical Imagination*, 74.
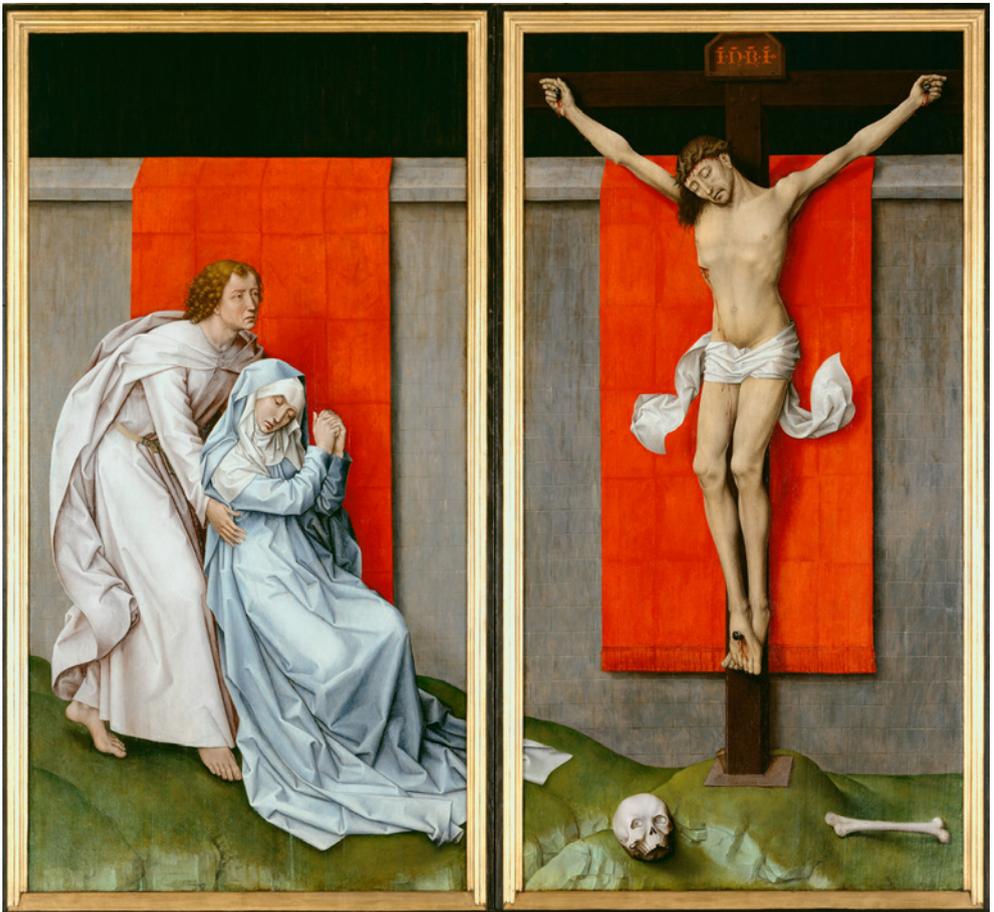
FIGURE 20   Rogier van der Weyden, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist Mourning*, ca. 1460, oil on panel, diptych, left panel: 180.3 × 93.8cm, right panel: 180.3 × 92.6cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection

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By including these two distinct groups, Bruegel offers his viewers an opportunity to engage with his painting on two different levels: to focus on the devotion stimulated by the anachronistic Marian group or, upon closer inspection of the copious narrative of the middle ground and background, to scrutinize the actions of individual figures and their interpretations. At first glance, Bruegel appears to have completely separated the Rogierian group from the contemporized crowd filling the composition. However, while the stylistic contrast between them is indeed striking, spatially they are not completely disunited.