

Choosing “the Best Part”: Christian Death and Life in Bruegel’s *Death of the Virgin*

The original audience of *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* was most likely limited, as the painting stayed in the Bruegel family. By contrast, viewership of another grisaille, *The Death of the Virgin*, was much wider and exceptionally well documented. The picture was first owned and possibly commissioned by Abraham Ortelius.¹ A decade after the creation of this grisaille, Ortelius asked his and Bruegel’s mutual friend Philips Galle, a successful Antwerp engraver, to reproduce it as a print (figure 31). Ortelius also wrote a sophisticated inscription to accompany the image, which he then circulated among his humanist friends. Remarkably, the print is composed in the same direction as the grisaille—it is its direct translation—meaning that it must have been engraved in reverse.² The engraving was received and admired by, among others, Benedictus Montanus and Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert. Ortelius’s inscription and the correspondence with his learned friends testify to the artistic and spiritual appreciation of Bruegel’s inventiveness and his success in redefining the pictorial idiom of meditative images. More specifically, as I shall argue, Bruegel engaged in his grisaille with the tradition of *ars moriendi*, to ultimately reflect upon the didactic potential of those images and the rituals of “the good death.”

Bruegel imagines the chamber of the Virgin Mary’s death as a busy domestic interior, crowded with people and objects. Around Mary’s bed, disciples are attending to her bodily and spiritual needs: Mary Magdalene fixes the pillow behind her back as Peter gives her the “candle of death,” while several men, women, and children immersed in the darkness of the night hold vigil, pray, and weep. Someone has already arranged a crucifix at the other end of the bed so that the Virgin can look at the image of her crucified son. Against the front of the bed stands a chest with a small bucket of holy water and an aspergillum, placed next to two small jugs, possibly used to store oils of chrism for the Anointment of the Sick. The room is gently lit and warmed by the fireplace to

1 Manfred Sellink, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings, and Prints* (Ghent: Ludion, 2007), 194. The third known grisaille by Pieter Bruegel, which I do not discuss here, is *The Three Soldiers* from ca. 1568 in the Frick Collection in New York.

2 Sellink, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings*, 194.



FIGURE 31 Philips Galle after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Death of the Virgin*, 1574, engraving, 31.5 × 42.4cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet
PHOTO: RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

the left, adorned with a figure of a saint and an extinguished candle, with some books leaning against the upper wall of the mantel. Other elements of the grisaille are more firmly rooted in the earthly existence of Mary and the disciples: a small round table in the foreground is packed with plates, bowls, cups, jugs, and half-eaten meals and napkins; perhaps some of the containers hold restoratives for the sick and enfeebled Mary. This small, cramped table brilliantly captures the atmosphere of a dying person's room, where the fabric of mundane life is hurriedly abandoned for matters of eternity. Slippers have been left under the table, maybe by the Virgin, who would no longer need them, or by the barefoot apostle kneeling between the bed and the table. A cat warms itself in front of the fire, while a youthful man—traditionally identified as John—is napping to the left of the mantel, comfortably covered with a blanket and giving the impression of someone who was supposed to keep watch, but could not help falling asleep.