Virtue and Diligence

Jan Brueghel I and Federico Borromeo

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'What little virtue that Almighty God has given me will always be in the service of your Excellency', Jan Brueghel (1568-1625 fig. 1) assured his patron Federico Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, (1564-1631 fig. 2) in a letter dated 12 March 1610.1 This article will examine how virtue and diligent service are entwined in Brueghel's relationship with and work for his patron. The first half of the paper will consider how Brueghel's relationship with his patron is based on the mutual acknowledgement of virtue through friendship, and how Brueghel's role in this virtuous exchange is to offer diligence or loving service. Brueghel, I shall argue, adopts a mode of courtly behaviour that emulated van Eyck and Apelles, both models of the diligent court artist. The second half of this article will focus on the paintings, examining how Brueghel's style was understood as an emulation of Apelles' virtuosity. It will then consider how diligence was understood by both men to be manifest and visible in Brueghel's paintings. Finally, it will look at how the virtue of the paintings lay in their constituting a diligent mode of address by the artist both to his patron and to God.

Jan Brueghel, following in his father Peter Bruegel I's footsteps, made the journey to Italy in the early 1590s. By 1595 he was in Rome where he met Federico Borromeo.2 The young Cardinal Borromeo, cousin to San Carlo Borromeo, and protégé of San Filippo Neri and Gabriele Paleotti was at the centre of a group of clerics for whom the regeneration and defence of Catholic art against Protestant attack was a central concern.3 Borromeo through his writing, collecting and patronage adopted the cause of counter-reformation art.4 Brueghel entered the Cardinal's household in 1595, travelling with him to Milan when Borromeo went to take up his position as Archbishop of Milan.5 In 1596, Borromeo travelled back to Rome and Brueghel returned to Antwerp. Between 1596 and 1625, Brueghel and Borromeo continued their friendship and patronage relationship through the exchange of letters. Seventy-six of Brueghel's letters survive, twenty-three of which were written to Borromeo and the remainder to their mutual friend, a Milanese nobleman, Ercole Bianchi.6 These letters together with the twenty nine paintings he made for the Cardinal and Borromeo's own writings in particular the book he wrote about his collection Musaeum constitute the materials through which the patronage relationship can be examined.7

It appears from his letters that Brueghel uses the word virtue (virtu), to mean two slightly different things. When he begs Borromeo to intervene on