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Jan Brueghel the Younger belonged to the third generation of a famous dynasty of painters. He was baptized in the St George Church in Antwerp on 13 September 1601. His parents were Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), also known as “Velvet Brueghel,” and Isabella de Jode, daughter of the engraver Gerard de Jode.^[1] His father was a famous and exceptionally successful painter who purchased a splendid house on the Lange Nieuwstraat in 1604. By that time, though, Jan had lost his mother, who had died the previous year. Soon thereafter his father took a second wife, Katharina van Marienberghe (d. 1627). Among the couple’s children was Ambrosius Brueghel (1617–75), who would also become a painter, and Anna Brueghel (1620–56), the future wife of the famous artist David Teniers the Younger (1610–90). Jan Brueghel the Younger would father Jan Pieter (1628–78) and Abraham Brueghel (1631–97), who constituted the fourth generation of this remarkable family of painters.

Given his background it is hardly surprising that Brueghel became a painter. He received his first lessons from his father at the age of ten. That his training went well is proven by a letter his father wrote to Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564–1631) in 1616 stating his intention of sending his son to Italy.^[2] This trip, however, was repeatedly postponed. Brueghel did not leave until 7 May 1622 and arrived in Milan at the end of June to serve under Borromeo. He was supposed to travel from Milan to Rome, but in Genoa he met two brothers from Antwerp, Lucas (1591–1661) and the artist Cornelis de Wael (1592–1667), who proposed that he work for them, an offer Brueghel accepted entirely against the wishes of his father. In Genoa he also met Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), who convinced him to travel to Sicily. Palermo was a disappointment, so he set sail for Malta. In April 1624 he was already back in Sicily, where he met up again with Van Dyck. Upon learning of his father’s death the following year, he returned to Antwerp via Paris. After his arrival in August 1625 he joined the Guild of Saint Luke and took over his father’s workshop. He also became a member of *De Violieren*, a chamber of rhetoric.

A year later, on 5 July 1626, Brueghel married Anna Maria Janssens (1605–68) in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp. Her father was the famous history painter Abraham Janssens (1575–1632). Brueghel met with success and was generally considered an important artist. In 1632 “at least 1000 people”^[3] came to his workshop to admire *The Five Senses*, and even Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) did not consider it beneath him to paint the allegorical and religious figures in Brueghel’s floral painting, a task his father-in-law, Abraham Janssens, also regularly performed.^[4] Demand for his work reached a peak in the years after his marriage. His workshop grew steadily with many pupils and assistants, who made numerous copies of paintings by Brueghel’s father, grandfather, and even Brueghel himself, some of which were sold abroad. As of 1628 regular shipments of these copies—and other work bought by Brueghel—found their way to Seville in Spain, where his cousin Chrysostom van Immerseel headed a sizeable trading firm.^[5]

Brueghel’s success was likely one of the reasons why he was appointed dean of the painters’ guild in 1630 and 1631. However, the tide turned from 1632 to 1634, and he encountered financial difficulties. Payment for the paintings shipped to Seville was handled by Bernard Vermeurs, Van Immerseel’s agent in Antwerp. From letters by Brueghel to Van Immerseel it appears that this Vermeurs, for whom Brueghel worked exclusively for eighteen months, failed to honor their agreement. Vermeurs, in turn, complained about Brueghel to Van Immerseel and “wished to be rid of the man.”^[6] This dispute became so heated that Vermeurs stormed into Brueghel’s home, took some of his stock and then sold it at auction. Brueghel’s subsequent appeal to Van Immerseel seems to have convinced him to pay up, whereby Brueghel could meet his financial obligations.



Even though this particular incident was resolved, it nevertheless marked the beginning of the end of Brueghel's workshop. After 1630 demand for his father's work diminished, in part because the asking prices were deemed to be too high.^[7] In that year he still managed to sell for 600 guilders "four works, being the history of the Book of Genesis, or the life of Adam" to a nobleman of the French court.^[8] Notwithstanding this profit, he came to depend more and more on the production of inexpensive copies of his father's work and thus had to contend with less affluent clientele. He tried to counter these setbacks by developing a more personal style, however his talent did not warrant his high asking prices. The emphasis in his workshop increasingly shifted to the art trade and tapestry designs.^[9] Through the offices of his brother-in-law David Teniers the Younger (1610–90), court painter to Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614–62) as of 1647, he was granted a commission from the Brussels court in 1651. Brueghel subsequently moved to Paris, but was back in Antwerp in 1657. From then on he shuttled between the two cities, but his Antwerp workshop was never more than a shadow of what it had been in its heyday.

- Piet Bakker, 2017



Endnotes

1. For more on this artist, see the biography of Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564/65 –1637/38) in this catalogue.
2. Cardinal Federico Borromeo was a great art lover and patron of Jan Brueghel the Elder.
3. “Nochthans duysent menschen.” The quote is from a letter by Jan Brueghel to his cousin Chrisostoom van Immerseel in Seville. Jean Denucé, *Brieven en documenten betreffend Jan Breughel I en II* (Antwerp, 1934), 83.
4. Other painters with whom he collaborated, as can be deduced from the journal he kept from 1625 to 1651, include Joos de Momper (1564–1635), Lucas de Wael (1591–1661), Hendrick van Balen (ca. 1573–1632), Theodoor van Thulden (1606–69), Peter Gijsels (1621–90), Jan van Kessel the Elder (1626–79), Gonzales Coques (1614/18–84), Sebastiaen Franckx (1573–1647), David Teniers the Younger, Elias Voet, Abraham van Diepenbeeck (1596–1675), and Frans Wouters (1612–59). Jean Denucé, *Brieven en documenten betreffend Jan Breughel I en II* (Antwerp, 1934), 8, 139–60.
5. Jean Denucé, *Brieven en documenten betreffend Jan Breughel I en II* (Antwerp, 1934), 7–8.
6. “Wenste van den man ontslagen waer.” Jean Denucé, *Brieven en documenten betreffend Jan Breughel I en II* (Antwerp, 1934), 86.
7. For the dwindling demand for Brueghel copies in the 1630s, see the biography of Pieter Brueghel the Younger in this catalogue.
8. “4 stukkens, synde de Historie van het Boek Genesis, oft Adamsleven.” Jean Denucé, *Brieven en documenten betreffend Jan Breughel I en II* (Antwerp, 1934), 154.
9. Ebeltje Hartkamp-Jonxis and Hillie Smit, *European Tapestries in the Rijksmuseum* (Amsterdam, 2004), 139–41.

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