

## Petrus Versmissen

The tale of a peasant Flemish painter in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

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The Peasant Dance (Kermesse) by Pieter Bruegel (16<sup>th</sup> Century)

Denver, Colorado

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## 1. The Canvas

The houses of the small Flemish town gathered around its tall church like chicks around a mother hen. Their ochre-tiled roofs lent on the strength of each other and the church. It was a warm little town poised on a small rise of ground.

There were just three main dirt streets, two leading to neighboring towns a few kilometers away and the third forming a triangle within which the church, the grass common and a small pond and its ducks lay. This was the meeting place of the village where children played, friends met, markets and kermesses were held, and, twice a year, the church parades took place.

A canal, connected in one direction with the coast and in the other with the capital, Brussels, passed below the town. Barges regularly brought outside goods like fish and kitchen pots and pans to a small quayside.

A short way out of town opposite to the canal, the Count's manor stood on a hill surrounded by his lands ... rolling horse pastures dotted with oaks and elms; home meadows for cows, walled gardens for produce, and a mill all surrounded by forests full of game. The Prince of Burgundy had given the lands to the Count's ancestors for their help in raising an army for the Prince's crusade many years before. Since then the lands had been at peace and the prosperity of the whole region had grown. In 1550 it seemed as though peace would reign for 'ever and a day.'

The Count not only owned his estates but he also owned most of the town and virtually all of its inhabitants (villeins) who worked for him. The only independent inhabitants of the town were a few 'free men' who made goods for sale in other towns. Several artists, a brewer, three cheese makers, and two jewelers were included in this group but even they lived in tithed cottages and, thus, paid rent to the Count.

The Countess paid for the church to be built and, because of its size, it was the pride of the town. The spire could be seen for miles around. The town's people loved the Countess although, sometimes, they weren't sure of the Count.

Within this town lived Petrus, son of Huybrecht Petrus Versmissen and Jenneken Wauwels both of whom worked for the Count -- in the gardens and in the kitchen respectively. They loved their town. Petrus, however, was not as contented with paradise

as one might think. He was fifteen and anxious to do something different. He was, therefore, like most fifteen-year-olds. He would either amount to something or nothing.

Petrus was a tall lean young man who walked like a cat. He had a shock of fair curls that attracted, without him knowing, all manner of women in the town. They ranged from ladies of wealth who wondered what they had missed to shy young girls who couldn't believe that any boy could be so beautiful.

Yet he didn't notice.

Petrus was an artist. At least he wanted to be one. He was forever making sketches on any scrap of paper that he could find and his friends thought some of them were good. "Petrus," they said, "you should be an artist." His Mother especially liked his sketches of flowers too but she wanted him to get a more useful job than what he was presently doing. Painting was just a harmless hobby.

Petrus had finished all the schooling that his father allowed... he could write and read a little and he knew some numbers and geography. Now he also had a job. The money would help his father and mother and his five brothers and sisters. At first, his parents had wanted him to be a market porter carrying fish from the canal boats to different stalls, or perhaps, they suggested, an assistant boatman on the canal so that one day he might own a barge. However, after many family quarrels, Petrus had elected to work for Hans Verhofstadt who ran his own artists' workshop.

Verhofstadt was well known in Flanders. He was a contemporary of Pieter Brueghel from Breda across the border in Holland and they had painted together. However, when he realized that Brueghel was collaborating more with his family of sons than with himself, Hans had gone his own way and his 'own way' had brought beautiful paintings to the world for the past 40 years..

His workshop was a barn converted to take advantage of light and shelter. There were easels and pigments for the use of his painters but they supplied their own brushes. His students, 'collaborators' he called them, were allowed to paint their own works or to cooperate in painting with him. In addition they were called upon to finish some of his paintings ... either the tedious portions or those at which they were more talented. Verhofstadt sold all the paintings through regular visits to Antwerp and he decided on the amount his painters were paid depending on their contribution to the different works. They also gained in reputation by having learnt from Verhofstadt.

Yet, Verhofstadt let Petrus do little more than sweep the floor in the workshop while the others painted. From morning to night he labored for a few cents and slept under the table on straw and shared in the food of the workshop. Twice a day they ate at a long wooden table. The peasant food was good: fresh white bread with parsnips and turnips in a thick broth with a little meat, and, of course, ale. The meal was eaten out of the single bowl while the painters clustered around Verhofstadt and talked while Petrus sat at the far end of the bench and listened.

It was only at night that Petrus could pretend to be an artist by adding a few touches of paint to one of the half finished copies that had been left on the easels. At first no one realized in the morning that a painting had grown a little. Then once, when he had added a complete basket of flowers, someone complained that another had interfered with his painting. Fortunately no one suspected him ... the sweeping boy. However, he did notice that his basket of flowers was left in the painting as it was finished.

Despite his frustration, Petrus knew that he was learning. He watched while others sketched in charcoal, mixed the pigments, applied the paint, corrected errors and followed Verhofstadt's pernickety and detailed instructions. He knew that he had a great deal to learn when he saw one of the artists sketch a few flowing lines that suddenly became a fish left fresh on the market stall. How he wished to be able to do the same.

Even after two years Verhofstadt still said that he was good for nothing but sweeping and cleaning the room. The workshop was a large room, which had once been a barn but now had many north-facing windows and a wooden floor. The floor was Petrus's bane. It seemed to generate most dust even when he had just swept it and the artists were always shouting at him to keep the dust down.

Yet, sometimes he was able to escape the work to walk through the town and meet Neelke whom he had first seen in church. He saw the unveiled nape of her neck and fell in love.

Neelke was his love. She was young, dark and slim. Petrus discovered that she worked as a kitchen maid at a gabled house in the next square so sometimes he was able to speak to her at the market where she bought produce for her mistress. They would snatch a few words as she walked from the fish stall to the next to buy vegetables. He spoke of art and painting. She thought he was stupid wanting to be an artist. She said that he should try to become a craftsman, making furniture perhaps. "Everyone needs furniture," she said "but nobody needs a painting."

Neelke was very beautiful and he especially liked the way her hair curled around her neck. Often he would reach out to touch it. And he dearly loved visiting her especially sometimes when they sat to eat with her father and mother. Her father, Antonius Simons, was a game warden on the Count's estate so that venison and pheasant often appeared on his table. Petrus would take his knife and enjoy the food. Neelke's mother Cornelia, who made wondrous venison pies, had the gift of humor and she kept everyone laughing through the meal and well beyond over tankards of ale.

Unfortunately Antonius and Cornelia felt the same as Neelke ... a suitor in marriage for their only child had to be worth something more than putting a few daubs of paint on a piece of canvas.

Sometimes there would be a dance in the town when a fiddler came by, maybe on May Day when Petrus gave Neelke his hawthorn spray, or on any number of saints' days. They both particularly enjoyed St. John's Eve when everyone in town danced around a huge bonfire on the village green. Once when they were dancing, he trod on a burning twig and yelped aloud, sprang into the air, and found that the twig burned him through a hole in his shoe. Neelke almost fell apart laughing.

But yet, despite loving Neelke and enjoying and understanding her family, Petrus couldn't bring himself to abandon his connection with those who could bring ideas to life on a canvas at the touch of brush with a small palette of colors even if the money that he earned was very small.

Then one night when all the others had gone home and he was totally occupied at the easel in bringing a piece of forest undergrowth to life with vivid wild flowers that blossomed in the dim light of his candle, he forgot the time. He didn't even see the morning light creeping through the misshapen panes of glass. When he heard the wooden floor creak under heavy clogs outside the door, he dropped his brush and, scrambling, hurriedly tried to hide the borrowed palette.

Hans Verhofstadt suddenly appeared on the threshold.

"What are you doing, boy?" Verhofstadt shouted. "You are not a painter, you are a floor sweeper. You don't destroy the work of others in this workshop. You will leave this day."

Yet, even as he shouted the old master was looking at the additions that Petrus had made to the canvas and as quickly as he had shouted, he became quiet as he bent closely to peer at the damage that Petrus had done.

Petrus was already beneath his table cowering on his bed of straw and trying to forget that Verhofstadt had said, "You will leave this day." He tried to think where he might get a job ... any job ... to help his family.

Yet, the silence went on. Old Hans didn't saying anything as he crouched next to the easel. He was looking at the texture of the paint and the smooth and confident strokes of the brush as well as the different mixings of pigments for the greens of the forest and the colors of the flowers. He thought, *this boy knows how to paint even while he is adding to the previous brush strokes. His painting is better than the original.*

He rose. "Petrus Versmissen, come here."

And as Petrus crawled from the security of the table, Verhofstadt said, "You know that you have destroyed a painting and I can take the payment from your wages?"

"Yes, master," said Petrus, wondering why it mattered since he wasn't going to earn any wages after this.

Verhofstadt looked at the boy, cowering away expecting to be hit. "You know this is the end of my use of you in sweeping these rooms?" "Yes, Master," said Petrus quietly, dreading to think what Neelke would say.

"Yes," Hans Verhofstadt said, "from now on you will be one of my very least painters and you will take orders from any of the workshop painters who need oils or who need some trees to be completed or a horizon made clearer. You will stretch canvases, mix pigments, clean brushes, and," he said, pausing, "perhaps, one day, when we are very busy, and you have learnt enough, I will let you add to a painting."

Petrus couldn't believe his ears. Waiting for the ax to descend he had been offered the stars.

## 2. The Brushes

There were four other painters who gathered each morning in Verhofstadt's workshop ... three of whom had come from other towns because of Verhofstadt's reputation.

Rene, the youngest, was just old enough to sport a short red beard. He was tall and thin and when he stood straight from his painting his beard jutted out as if in defiance to the world. A drooping eyelid that gave the impression that he was winking at the same time offset the defiant beard. Rene had come from Brugge to learn from Verhofstadt.

Joris, the joker of the set, was a local man. He was round and fat and kept up a continuous laughing conversation with anyone who would listen. He had a wealth of jokes and would tell them to the whole studio while he painted.

Paul, the oldest painter, wore a long white beard and was mostly silent. His face was heavily wrinkled as if he had worked on the land at one time but no one knew whether that was so or not. He came from Woertel and had been painting with Verhofstadt for many years. He seemed to be content to be part of a workshop for always.

Finally, Hermann, the ablest painter, had come from Leuven where he had previously had his own workshop but couldn't make it pay. He was probably in his forties but his smooth skin gave him a much younger appearance.

Each of the painters had their own specialty when it came to contributing to the workshop's paintings: Hermann could paint almost anything but he loved to paint architectural details and the columns and porticos of Greek settings. Paul specialized in figures, while Joris loved painting anything that could be sold in a market from fish to fowl, from meat to melons and everything in between. Finally, Rene knew how to make green things and flowers come to life.

They were the 'brushes' that Verhofstadt wielded.

On hearing that the mysterious night painter had been Petrus and that he had been promoted to their ranks, the four welcomed him in the traditional manner by each giving him a brush.

"You can have all my older brushes," laughed Joris, "as soon as I have worn all the bristles away, but for the moment here's a 'Petrus' brush." He lent close and tickled Petrus's nose with a bristle brush.

Paul stretched across the easel and pressed a hog brush into Petrus's hand, "It will fare you well," he said, and Rene offered a different sized bristle.

Hermann tapped Petrus on the shoulder and handed him a sable brush, smiled and went off to his easel next to the window to continue a reproduction of one of Verhofstadt's altarpieces.

Now, Verhofstadt had one more 'brush' in his workshop.

He allotted Petrus one of the spare easels and gave him a new large sable brush, allocated a shelf on which Petrus could keep his brushes, and then told him to help Paul who needed some tempera mixed.

Verhofstadt's workshop had been using oil-based paints in place of the old egg-albumen tempera from its start but occasionally they received a church order for tempera and since it dried very quickly, a mixer was needed to work closely with the artist. Paul was painting an icon on a wood panel for a church in Ghent so Petrus would be of great assistance. Paul showed him what he needed and the icon, a picture of Mary and some angels, would now get finished all the quicker.

That day, and the days ahead, went by easily. Petrus was used more and more often once the four other 'brushes' came to know how capable he was. Occasionally, they even competed for his help and that gave him confidence.

"I have some vegetables that need to be painted on this market stall - cabbages and parsnips," Joris argued while Hermann wanted some background completed behind the cherubs in his painting. Verhofstadt made the choice and Petrus sat back and felt that he had arrived.

Verhofstadt ran the business, taking in orders, sketching the original paintings, making sure that everything was progressing, adding fine details to hands and faces, which were his forte, and finally selling the paintings at the Antwerp market. The Antwerp visits took four days. He seemed to have so many things going on at any one time it was a relief to him to be able to sit at an easel and lose himself in painting: the worn face of a farm laborer or the unlined ecstatic face of an angel.

Verhofstadt, of course, knew of the problems in the North following the spread of Martin Luther's reformation through the churches. The reformed church in Holland considered images to be sinful, especially within their churches but also within other churches as

well as in the open market, so buyers in Holland had become wary of what they could buy. Fortunately, the reformation ideas had not yet spread as far south as Antwerp.

The business, Petrus found, was not one of painting something that one liked and then selling it. Despite the easy atmosphere of the workshop and the town, there were unwritten rules in painting images that would sell or those that would not, and written rules for those that the church would allow.

The Antwerp market like all others was a Flemish church market. The church reaped income from each stall on church property and it set rules for the merchants that used those stalls. For the longest time a merchant was considered to be simply someone who supplied produce that buyers needed. The merchant provided a service. The problem of 'profit' was one that troubled the church. Usury, to take profit on lending money, was definitely a sin so shouldn't taking profit on supplying goods that people needed also be a sin? Should a merchant be allowed to charge a profit above his expense?

The artists in Verhofstadt's workshop certainly wanted profit so they found that a certain kind of painting complied with both the ethical rigor of the market and of the church. An acceptable painting consisted of a homely picture, perhaps of a dance or of the market itself, but with a religious or moral meaning. Verhofstadt, like Pieter Aertsen before him, specialized in market paintings with a religious scene, perhaps the presentation of Christ to the multitude, Christ's defense of the adulteress, or even the flight to Egypt in the background. Then action in the foreground would be constructed to point to the message in the background. These paintings sold.

These were the practical business messages that Petrus learnt on his occasional visit to the Antwerp with Verhofstadt to carry new paintings to the market.

He was becoming a more valuable 'brush.'

His parents were pleased that he had been promoted – the additional money came in handily, but Neelke still didn't see that being an artist would lead to any secure home. When they were able to speak to each other, however much he compared her hair and her eyes to the flowers that he was painting, the conversation always returned to same question. "When are you going to get a real job?"

One day, Verhofstadt called him to a corner of the workshop.

“Petrus,” he said, “I am pleased with the way you have fitted into the workshop, with how you have helped Rene, Hermann, Paul and even Joris. Also, I have been watching your painting and you have learnt much. In fact, so much that you are ready to paint for yourself. In addition to helping to complete my paintings, occasionally I will give you a theme and you will paint an original that we will sell under your name.”

Petrus gasped. He was to be a true artist and he was certain that his paintings would sell. He got so much joy out of painting that surely others would also get the same joy out of viewing his paintings. He was still only seventeen.

He couldn't finish that day quickly enough to be able to tell his parents and Neelke. His parents were glad of course but they were practical people as all Versmissens were. The proof of the pudding would be in the eating.

Later, when he and Neelke were leaning on a bridge over the canal and looking at the dark green of ever widening ripples from the stone that he had dropped, she kissed his cheek and said, “I'm so pleased for you and I'm sure that your paintings will sell too, I would buy all of them if I could, but would you promise me that if they don't sell, you will take another job? We need much more than you earn now to get married.”

So, he promised.

At first everything went well. Verhofstadt was pleased with everything that Petrus painted in helping the other brushes in the workshop and he purposely left more and more of his own paintings for Petrus to complete. He even sold some under the joint name of Verhofstadt and Versmissen as a double masterpiece. This was a custom in Antwerp at the time.

Petrus's own paintings sold well within the confines of what was acceptable to the church. He even won his first personal commission for an altarpiece in Ghent Cathedral where his painting would be hung with those of Rubens and van Eyck.

His painting was fresh and original even within the best that the best market in Europe could offer. His vegetables seemed to gleam within the opalescence of the oil and one could see the crispness of the cabbages. The fish in Petrus's paintings were real. He became a master in portraying fish lying wet and still soft and slippery on the slab. One could feel the fish's plumpness. Steaks of salmon entranced the viewer's palette and one could taste the shrimp and lobster even before it was cooked. He even seemed to be able to include the smell of fresh fish in his paintings.

But more ... each part of Petrus's paintings related to the next. He told stories in paint. The stall owner eyeing the young lady who is helping him and to whom he is offering onions is not an innocent. The onions indicated that he is a suitor. She offers plump round cabbages in return that are followed by long turnips. They could make a match. The final stall helper has a basket of eggs and a cockerel – signs of maleness and copulation. The entire painting is a story in sexual attraction and fulfillment. The fact that the final cockerel is placed directly below the adulteress standing before Christ in the background points to the moral of the religious story at the same time. The issue dealt with in the religious story was copulation – the cockerel.

So Petrus's paintings sold because they were real and they read like a different book each time one looked at them. How could a buyer resist?

As Verhofstadt got older, Petrus found himself taking on more of the marketing negotiations in Antwerp and more of Verhofstadt's role in the workshop as well. His talents and his likeability made it easy for his fellow brushes to follow his ideas. None seemed jealous of his extra responsibilities even though he was so young.

Eventually, with the increasing sales, it was easier for him to visit Neelke's parents and ask for her hand. The painting that he brought for them showing the traditional egg dance and it took their minds away from simple money and even if they couldn't appreciate all the nuances of what he had painted, they could enjoy the story in it.

Neelke and he were married in the town church with all the finery and kindness that the church and the village could manage. They were carried to church on a garland-bestrewn cart and the whole village turned out to see them married. Even the Count and his lady, Isabella, came by in their carriage to acknowledge their most famous artist, Petrus Versmissen.

As a wedding gift, Hans Verhofstadt took Petrus on as a partner.

### 3. Another Canvas.

Then in 1555, the canvas changed.

Verhofstadt had just come back from an Antwerp visit and he had bad news for them. They set down their brushes and listened.

“Remember that I told you last year about the play that was given by some Hollanders at the Landjuweel in Antwerp about the immorality of having paintings in churches? Well now it has got worse. Extreme reformist preachers have been preaching the same message from the pulpits in the north. They said that all churches should be “cleansed” of images. They even managed to get people aroused enough to meet and call for action in town squares in towns like Arnhem and Breda.”

Hermann asked, “What does it have to do with them if one church and its congregation in Ghent want a painting?”

Before Verhofstadt could answer, Rene chipped in. “I heard about a person named Marnix (Philips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde) who preached last month in Woertel. He spoke of the sin of idolatry and that paintings should not be allowed to exist anywhere, inside or outside the churches.” He emphasized “anywhere.”

There was a gasp from the others there. “What is the world coming to?” asked Hermann.

All that day, their indignation gave their painting an unusual passion and the discussion ranged backwards and forwards. Petrus felt a little worried because he knew that things like this don’t end peacefully ... *once the cart is let loose down the hill, it is difficult to stop.*

It turned out that he was right because the following month when Verhofstadt returned again from the market he had worse news.

Verhofstadt sat down panting on the bench in front of them still dressed in the ruff which he wore on market days. “Those radical priests managed to rouse the rabble to the extreme,” he started.

“Last month iconoclasts from Holland invaded our Catholic churches in Antwerp, Ghent, Mechelen and other cities and destroyed all their altarpieces and paintings in one night. They were dangerous people carrying weapons and no one dared stand in their way.

Bands of them went from one church to the next slashing canvases and taking some out to burn them. Nothing was spared. Even Aersten's great altarpieces, which were his legacy to the church, were destroyed in the Cathedral in Ghent. It was terrible."

He sat with his head in his hands while the others were struck dumb. Hermann glanced over at the religious painting that he was finishing by the window as if he felt someone might attack it now.

"Now," continued Hans, "altarpieces will have no market. Even our Catholic churches that had been proud to buy and hang beautiful things to lighten the dark recesses of the church dare not buy since no painting is now safe from the radical Hollander reformist. We will have to find new markets for our paintings ... although yesterday," he went on, "when I made enquiries I found even good private collectors in Antwerp were worried."

These are black days.

Then his old face cracked in a grin. "There was one good piece of news at the market. Apparently, an artist ... I mustn't mention his name ... who had painted some of the hangings in the Mechelen Cathedral went inside at night with the iconoclasts, as one of them. When they came to his finest canvas and were about to destroy it, he spoke up and said. 'Let's not slash the painting; let's paint it over with our message to the clergy and the congregation ... *There shall be no sinful images*. That will make the message clear.' After a little talk, he was able to persuade them to do that, covering half the canvas with their message and they left it hanging for everyone to read in the morning. Our friend came back quickly the next day and, as he knew he could, cleaned the paintings of the new paint. So his paintings are as good as new. He saved them."

They all laughed at the story but there was a tinge of sadness behind the laughter.

In the weeks ahead, many artists that Petrus knew left Antwerp and the surrounding districts for other markets in Frankfurt and beyond. Others decided to paint without any connection to religion.

The canvas had changed.

That suited Petrus of course because he had found the need to teach moral strictures within his paintings as a stricture in itself. Now he could paint a vase of flowers for what it was ... just a vase of flowers to be admired, or not.

Joris said, “Why don’t we paint just what we like to paint and see whether anyone would also like the same thing? I’m not a teacher. I’m an artist. Verdammt! I want to paint ... to hell with politics.”

Petrus felt exactly the same way but Rene, Paul and Hermann were careful men and didn’t want to risk spending time on a painting that might be rejected or, worse, destroyed. Hans too felt that he should err on the side of caution ... it had taken time to build up his workshop, but his individuality wanted to believe that the value of art lay outside iconoclasm, religion and politics. Yet he knew that it would take time for the current violence and disturbances to die down.

Then Petrus spoke, “Why should I think of more than beauty when I look at a flower? Why should I see more than a leaf when I am shown a leaf? Why should I not smell the fish when I see a stall full of salmon and cod? Should someone in a pulpit be entitled to read my thoughts, smell what I smell, feel what I feel and then dictate what I do and how owners of my art should feel?”

The argument again went on well into the night, enlivened by several pitchers of ale. It was the same argument that had occupied a vast number of people in Northern Europe since Martin Luther had pinned his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenburg almost 50 years before.

Verhofstadt said, “There is no one solution ... people come in all shapes and colors and beliefs. The problem arises when a someone want to dictate to everyone.”

The reformed church didn’t want idols in their churches and neither did they want other churches to have them. These were days when churches could try private individuals and even put them to death if the answers to the interrogation were wrong. Care was indicated.

Thus painting changed.

Throughout the first half of the sixteenth century the morality of painting and its profits was the subject of public debates and of public plays. An Antwerp publisher, Hans de Laet, introduced the idea of ‘good faith’ in the sale of goods. Unfortunately, as Verhofstadt had found out, this was very much a matter of judgment that could be exercised by both the church and the secular authorities, often with different results. Legality, morality and common sense were sometimes at odds.

In the 1560s, crowds in the Grote Markt often witnessed the execution of heretics. Now no one knew clearly whether a heretic might be the painter of the wrong painting or the buyer who had bought it. Selling paintings would not be easy and it had to be done with great care.

Verhofstadt knew the quagmire that he was treading in by selling their paintings.

Consequently, he played it safe, he decided that the workshop would produce a mixture of paintings ... some with a religious message with Hermann taking the lead, and erotic paintings in the manner of Jan Steen with Joris leading the way. *That would be an outlet for his humor*, he felt. Then he, Verhofstadt, would market both kinds ... very carefully.

Hermann's response to the idea was a nod while Joris broke out in laughter,

"Watch what I paint. They will be so erotic that customers will have to keep them out of view of the wife. They'll sell for twice what the religious paintings bring."

He paused, "... and I suspect many will be bought by our churchmen customers."

Petrus felt left out while these assignments were being handed out. Verhofstadt hadn't mentioned his name once.

#### 4. Southern Pigments

“So? What about me?” Petrus wanted to know. “What do I paint?”

“You have special journey to make, Jo,” Verhofstadt said. “When I went to Brugge last month I met with some of our friends including Pieter Brueghel who had just come back from Florence in Tuscany. Peter Paul was planning to go. They had some wonderful things to say about painting there. The Italians are using something called ‘point perspective’ that shows exactly how large objects in the distance are compared to those in the foreground. It isn’t a matter of guessing any more ... they just imagine, or even draw in, a point in the distance where things came together and paint from that.”

He continued enthusiastically, “and there was more. Da Vinci has pioneered a new way of looking at landscapes from above as if one was on a cloud but painted from the same level, the land just falls away. Then there is ‘chiascuro,’ which is what they call using one point of light to convey emotion. There is a great deal to learn if we are to keep our paintings selling.”

“And so, Petrus,” he said pausing for breath. “I want you to go to Florence, Venice, Rome and Milan to see how things are being done. Learn as much as you can of their techniques and bring them back to us. It will probably take you at least six months maybe more.”

Egad! Petrus was set back. His village was one in which even travel to Antwerp, 40 kilometers away, might be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Now he was being asked to travel across the known world. On one hand he was thrilled ... new places, new ideas, and a chance to improve his own painting, which he felt had got a little stale recently. But on the other hand it meant leaving Neelke and she had just become pregnant.

That evening they discussed the idea and Neelke decided immediately that he should go. “I have voka and moeka here to help me and, anyway, you will be back before the little one comes. It’s important for you to find out what the other great painters are doing and then you will be able to be even greater, maybe even the greatest.”

Petrus noticed that she had stopped asking him to consider a real job.

And so it was decided, Petrus would travel south and leave the uncertain market in Antwerp while Verhofstadt kept things going, so that by the time he returned the market

would have settled down and they would, hopefully, have new techniques to astound the buyers.

The journey was not without its dangers. Petrus would have to travel where he had never gone before ... through countries that didn't speak Flemish ... through forests full of brigands. Yet he never hesitated. He knew that travel would bring him different vistas and things to paint and he knew that Tuscany would teach him techniques far beyond those in which he was capable. He never hesitated.

He left for Venice the following month with a letter of introduction from Pieter Brueghel to Tiziano Vecellio, who was also known as Titian. Titian was elderly but Verhofstadt hoped that he would introduce Petrus to other Italian artists as well. Verhofstadt has also got Italian lire from a banker in Brugge.

Petrus's horse was an immediate problem. The Duke of Alba, fighting Calvinists for Phillip II, had commandeered most good horses in the locality on his way north but he hadn't taken this poor swayback. Petrus thought he knew why. The horse had a very evil bloodshot eye when it lifted its head to look at him.

Moreover, despite having been brought up in a small rural town, he had never viewed a horse as a friend, and it's certain that the horse found and bought by his father never considered Petrus as a friend either. They were enemies at first sight and it never got much better. Five times the horse, which Petrus knew by unrepeatable names, ejected him from the saddle in the first week of their journey and then managed to evade him for hours. Only the oats that the mule carried would bring him back.

Still, with an uneasy truce, Petrus proceeded south through the forests that covered the land, sometimes traveling with the protection of merchants, mercenaries and monks against bandits, and sometimes making fast dashes alone to reach towns on the way: Brugge, Paris, Lyons, Assisi, Milan and finally, the island city of Venice. His journey took five weeks and by the time he reached his destination, he had filled three notebooks with sketches of towns along the way, bridges, scenery, travelers, and even the horse. Most times the horse was portrayed with a singularly evil eye.

The journey was something that Petrus had never contemplated in his wildest dreams. Each day was filled with wonder, new scenes, new people, dangers and trials. It was so far removed from his Father's manorial service that Petrus had difficulty reconciling their two so different lives. He was blessed to have this chance.

When he finally arrived at a Venetian inn, Petrus was dirty, tired, very sore and very poor. Verhofstadt had given him just barely enough so now he would have to earn his living. He spent his last coins on a bowl of soup, a pitcher of ale, and the directions to Tiziano Vecellio's house.

Titian, on reading Brueghel's introduction in Latin, took Petrus into his workshop. There, for the next few months, he painted at Titian's instruction. The paintings were his and they not only paid his keep with a little over for wine but he painted in a different *métier* with enthusiasm. He found it a wonderful experience ... he eventually learnt all those things that Verhofstadt had told him about and many more besides.

Sometimes, because Petrus couldn't speak Italian he was slow to understand but Titian patiently demonstrated his techniques as he was explained them. Perhaps because of his age Titian proved to be a wonderfully tolerant teacher.

Petrus lived in Venice just a block away from the Grand Canal at Ca' d'Oro but after spending time with Titian he later moved on to Florence where even more artists painted. There he lived on Via Della Terme half way between the Duomo and a couple of streets from the Ponte Vecchio over the Arno. He had a cot in a large and light attic where he could also paint.

When he had enough money he bought fresh meat from butchers on the Ponte Vecchio but generally he ate with the family of Fillide Minniti. She was an excellent cook and he enjoyed her *papardelle*, ribbons of meat-seasoned pasta with Parmesan cheese, followed *fritellate sambucate*, elderberry pancakes. She thought he was too thin so he ate well.

Besides Venice and Florence, Petrus traveled also to Rome and Milan. It seemed as though the cities were full of artists. In Rome, he visited the Sistine Chapel and stood open-mouthed looking up at Michelangelo's ceiling as well as *The Last Judgment* painted over the altar. That was only just finished. In Milan, he visited The Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie to see Da Vinci's *Last Supper* painted almost a hundred years before. The colors were still vibrant and Petrus enjoyed the scene of countryside behind the group.

Petrus also met the dyer's son, Tinteretto, as well as young Guercino, Paulo Veronese and Michelangelo Merisi who came from Caravaggio: all of whom had different talents. It was like delving into a palette of different ideas and abilities. Tinteretto made dramatic

use of color, Guercino managed to include movement even in his youngest sketches, Paulo Veronese had perfected a new way of preserving pigments, and Caravaggio of course was the master of reality. Petrus learnt something from each one.

Under Titian he learnt again that in setting the scene he needed first to consider from where the viewer might see it ... and whether it was from below when the viewer might feel less, or from above when the viewer might feel greater but less involved. The vanishing point of perspective could be high or low or on one side or the other. Petrus was made to try them all and discover again what the viewer felt.

He was taught that in painting the viewer is more important than the painter – the customer is king.

Previously in Antwerp, each person in a picture was painted as a single individual, but now Petrus learnt from Caravaggio that in a single painting everyone is all lit by the same light and that where that light is set alters the dramatic effect of the painting. If the light is from below then high drama results, but if the lighting is from above the mood is innocence. From the side, lighting could even suggest movement. Petrus found how to move the light around in tune with his own moods.

This was the new *chiascuro* canvas that had to be designed in the mind before even one drop of pigment was applied.

Caravaggio was a character. He had come to Rome to be at the center of art, yet he had alienated others artists by painting better and differently. It was the 'differently' that the established artists couldn't stand. He chose models from the street for different roles in his religious paintings but painted them, as they were, pimples, scars, dirty feet and all. Other artists tended to avoid embarrassing blemishes. Moreover their faces exhibiting anger, sorrow, or hurt, showed exactly those emotions. Petrus liked Caravaggio and sometimes went to a tavern with him. Unfortunately, his friend would often lose his temper and since he carried a sword, out of character with his station, he could quickly get into trouble. So Petrus wisely stopped going out to taverns with him and met him only in the studio. Years after he got back to Flanders he heard that Caravaggio had killed a man in a tavern-room brawl, so he felt lucky.

Oils were relatively new to the Italians. Oil painting had been popularized in Antwerp by van Eyck and adopted by Bellini to replace the stolid tempera that the Italians had previously used. However the Flemish artists had longer experience in using oils

effectively. So Petrus was able to repay his teachers for their techniques by demonstrating his own expertise in overlaying transparent paints to highlight even the emotions of the characters in a painting.

Italy had none of the problems that the Reformation had wreaked in Flanders. The main market for their paintings was the church and the style was either to paint straightforward biblical stories or to paint portraits of church officials: cardinals and princes. The Medici family, now Dukes of Tuscany, no longer bankers but still very rich, also bought religious paintings in which they starred as characters, such as the Magi in *The Adoration of Christ*. Petrus had no difficulty selling what he painted ... there were no iconoclasts here ... there seemed to be an unending market throughout Italy.

It wasn't all work for Petrus of course. When he was not painting in Lombardy and Tuscany he also learnt the beauty of Italian rolling landscapes as he moved from town to town and he resolved to bring them home to the flat country of Flanders in his paintings as Brueghel had done.

He also came to know the Tuscan girls who hired out as models: sometimes elegant, sometime sluttish, but always dark, mysterious and warm. He learnt to transfer their mystery to paintings as if they were on the streets of ancient Rome or as the temptresses in of history. Often he painted them as simple unclad beauty. These nudes could not be sold openly unless he called them *Venus* but he treasured them himself.

Petrus didn't know much Italian but he smiled a lot and that seemed to work. He enjoyed the models' company especially over a glass of vino after the painting was done. "Ciao, Petrus," they would say, as they snuggled up to him. They loved his mop of unruly fair hair and never seemed to tire of ruffling it. One, Angelina with tousled jet-black hair, reminded him of Neelke. He painted her often and one night when they both had a little too much wine they no longer needed a mastery of any language but love.

The Tuscan words, when they came, were inadequate in describing his feelings so he painted them. He painted Angelina combing her hair when she had first risen. He painted Angelina when she was smiling and laughing after a good meal and a glass of wine. He painted Angelina when she was sleepy ... half asleep and half awake. He painted Angelina when she was angry. The portraits were so different from Flemish religious prescriptions and even Flemish market prescriptions that he knew that, finally, he was becoming a painter. He was both conveying reality and his own feelings

intertwined. Even Caravaggio approved of his paintings of Angelina. “Sono reali, (*They are real*)” he said. Petrus knew that this was the highest of compliments because Caravaggio had invented reality in painting.

It was sad when Petrus came to leave. Angelina cried and shouted and begged him to stay and cried again. He was almost persuaded. Yet leave he must. He had already been away nine months and this was neither his land nor his life.

The months had passed so quickly but he was anxious to see Neelke and to demonstrate all that he had learned to Verhofstadt, Hermann, Paul, and the others.

He said good-bye to all his new friends ... often with tears. Many wanted to send good wishes to Pieter Brueghel who had made a good impression a few years earlier. Fillide Minniti packed so much food for his journey that it was almost more than his mule could carry along with a number of his small canvases. Petrus felt he was leaving home.

There was still one problem. He quickly recognized that the only available horse to take him north was the devil that had brought him south in the first place. So it was. The horse and he had their battles again and Petrus was often surprised again to discover that he was himself on his back on a muddy trail through the forests. The horse always managed to catch him unawares. However this time the journey was quicker because Petrus was returning home with something valuable ... knowledge ... and the desire to teach it to his friends.

Several times bandits accosted him and sometimes he and his group evaded them. Once when he had left his fellow travelers to make a few more miles that evening, he could not evade their sudden emergence from the forest. The ruffians knocked him off his horse, held a knife to his throat, and rifled through his belongings. When they found that all he seemed to be carrying on the mule were a few small pictures they held them up and laughed at them. They mocked him for wasting time on such trifles. They didn't find the leather purse of gold coins that was bound between his mule's legs.

Fortunately, when they had left, he found the paintings were not damaged except that one villain, who had been silent during the attack, had made off with a small portrait of Angelina lying nude on a bench surrounded by flowers under the warmth of the Tuscan sun.

At first he was distraught because it was his favorite painting. But, thinking about the theft a little later, Petrus thought it was for the best. It would have been difficult to

explain the passion in that painting and the light in Angelina's eyes. "She was just one of the models," might not have satisfied Neelke.

After that adventure, the journey became easier as he rode north through France beyond Lyons. Occasionally, he would stop by a stream in the mountains to sketch scenery for a later painting. He tried to raise his viewpoint and look down at the scene as Da Vinci had done, or see it in terms of its colors as Tinteretto did.

Then after a while, the horse would wander over and nudge his sketching hand. It had decided that it was time to be fed, or to move on. Once when he pushed the horse's muzzle away to continue his sketching, the horse carefully stood on his foot. After that he was careful to take the nudge for what it was ... an order, not a request.

Once he had crossed the border into Belgium and then into France, he knew he was home ... he could speak to passers-by in Flemish, a language that he hadn't used for nine months and they would understand. Now the horse wondered why he was being urged to trot.

## 5. The Finished Painting

When Petrus returned to his village he found a world of differences.

With his horse still balking at any touch of the reins or his heels he went straight to his home but found no one there. The windows were shuttered and the door locked. The tiny building and its courtyard were deserted.

Next he went to Neelke's parents' home and found the windows draped in black. Neelke came running out laughing and crying at the same time and she flung herself tightly around his neck as he dismounted. It had been nine months since they had seen each other *and she looks more beautiful than ever*, Petrus thought.

Then the laughter faded and Neelke sobbed wildly. She was like a wild thing. When her sobbing eased she explained that her father had died in a farming accident at the manor just a few weeks before: a scythe had cut into his neck and he had bled to death.

But then just as quickly, she was laughing again and pulling at his hand ... "Come and see. Come and see Maria," she said. "You're a father, Petrus. Come ... over here." She took hold of his arm and drew him to a cradle set under the window.

He looked into the cradle among the clothes. There she was, indescribably small with tiny blue eyes that looked up at his face with just as much curiosity as he looked at her. She was lovely ... with a clear delicate skin and a tiny nose. "Maria Versmissen." He mouthed the words and they sounded right. *She would grow up to be a painter he decided right then ... the first woman painter in Flanders. He would teach her all that he knew*, he promised himself.

But there was more news ... their home had been abandoned because Neelke's father had left his home to them. It was Neelke's dowry. So Neelke had already moved in with Maria and all their belongings. Neelke's mother, Cornelia, would live in the tithed cottage to the side. Now they had their own house. He sat down heavily ... partially to consider it all, and partially to recover from weeks of riding *that damned horse*.

Next he visited the workshop ... this time on foot. He left the horse tied to a railing at his house.

He entered the workshop quietly and at once noticed that the wooden floor needed sweeping even though a young boy was vigorously flourishing a broom. Things don't change.

They hadn't much. Red-bearded Paul had returned to Woertel to start his own workshop but everything and everyone else were as he had left them ... except that Verhofstadt was ill.

He was dying.

Verhofstadt lay on a narrow bed in the room next to the workshop. The housekeeper cared for him because he had never had time to get married. Painting had been his whole life.

He looked up at Petrus and smiled. "It's good to see you back. We have all missed you. I have missed you."

Petrus took his frail hand, and said, "It's good to see you too, Hans, and we need to get this hand back painting as soon as we can. This workshop needs you." But as he said it, he noticed the transparency of Hans' skin and wondered.

Verhofstadt said, "No, Petrus my son. This illness will soon take me away and I will only paint through you. I have no son, so I have always thought of that rascal, the sweeping boy sleeping under the table, as my son."

He coughed badly and Petrus saw blood on his kerchief and he knew that Verhofstadt was sicker than he had been told.

Old Verhofstadt went on, "We have done well since you went away. We have sold all types of paintings to all types of buyers as long as the canvases were small." And he gave a hacking cough and wiped his mouth.

"Even the church wants smaller paintings to fit the new smaller chapels," he said. "So we painted smaller paintings, and the workshop is wealthy.

He paused a moment and clasped Petrus's hand tightly. "You have all the talent of this workshop and more now that you have visited Tuscany. Soon I want to hear of everything that you have learnt there. Perhaps tomorrow."

He paused again, "Now I hear you have a daughter and that you head the household in Liefenstrat. You will need a little more money so I have decided to leave this workshop to you when I am gone."

He smiled and coughed again, "I don't think that will be long."

Petrus couldn't speak. This old man had taught him painting, a little gruffly at times but with care. He had changed his rough sketches into something that others valued and even given him the chance to learn all there was about painting on his journeys to Antwerp and Tuscany.

"There's no need of that Hans. I have enough with what I am paid and I am happy painting."

"I have no one else, Petrus," said Hans.

And so it was, Verhofstadt died three months later, and the workshop went on exactly as it had done before with Hermann painting his moral messages and Joris enjoying the licentious stories that he hid in vivid paintings of the market. Rene was growing in talent and he took on the responsibility for the faces and hands that had been Verhofstadt's specialty for their cooperative paintings. With their original talents, and the new techniques that Petrus had brought back, the workshop began to rival the best in the land ... that of Rubens himself.

Yet, there were other changes. The reformation of the church was now firmly established in the north of the Low Countries (Netherlands) and just as firmly rejected in the south, in Flanders. The differences were so sharp that a virtual border existed in thinking between the two regions. Moreover, since the Dutch Calvinists had revolted against Spanish catholic rule earlier and had been crushed ruthlessly by the Duke of Alba even before Petrus left for Italy, it seemed that the 'border' encompassed all thought and ideas: political, religious and social. Some were even speaking of an independent Belgium separate from the United Provinces.

However, having unfriendly neighbors hardly complicated Petrus and Neelke's life at all, since only an occasional Dutch traveler came through the town. In the meantime Maria grew up and was soon followed by a brother, Toon.

As Petrus mused while he was adding a little more blue to the sky in his painting, *Life goes on from one painting to another - from the tragic to the sun-lit scene.*