

Research Article

# Abraham Brueghel's Engraving of *The Wine of St. Martin's Day* and the Bentvueghels Fraternity in Rome

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## Abstract

This article examines the engraving by Rome-based Nicholas Guérard commissioned by Abraham Brueghel (1630/31-c. 1690) in 1670 and based on his great-grandfather, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's peasant festival painting *The Wine of St. Martin's Day*, a mature work of the great Flemish painter recently authenticated by the Prado. The circumstances of the work's dedication to Pope Clement X's nephew Don Gaspare Altieri as "General of the Holy Church," i.e. head of the Papal military are discussed, and the Italian text of the dedication is translated. The gift to young Altieri was clearly a bid for patronage which evidently did not succeed, as Abraham relocated to Naples soon after. A period cabinet painting of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century is also evaluated as directly based on the engraving and not upon any copy of the original painting. Given their interest in bacchic subjects, it is proposed that the latter work might have originated from the circle of the *Bentvueghels* (Birds of a Feather), the fraternity of Dutch and Flemish artists in Rome to which Abraham Brueghel belonged with the club name *Rijngraaf* (Count of the Rhine). The work was possibly a tribute to the artist and his distinguished ancestor in a Martinmas celebratory context.

## Keywords

Abraham Brueghel, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, St. Martin, Wine Festivals, Bentveughels Fraternity

## 1. Introduction

In September of 2010 the Museo Nacional de Prado authenticated a painting from a private collection as Pieter Bruegel the Elder's original of *The Wine of Saint Martin's Day*. [1] The composition centers upon a large, elevated, and flowing wine barrel swarmed over by a crowd of thirsty peasants, with the saint on horseback far off to the right in his iconic act of sharing his cloak with a beggar. Saint Martin's November 11 feast day traditionally heralded the proving of the season's new wine and was the occasion for festival largesse and carnivalesque activity, whence this fantasy scene of a wine-soaked *Luilekkerland*. [2] Prior to the Prado identification, this Bruegel festival scene was known only through derivative works. These consisted of a

fragment of the right side of a close copy including most of Saint Martin and his horse, c. 1580-1600, probably by one of the Bruegel sons, Jan or Pieter (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); a full-size copy by Pieter Brueghel the Younger or his studio from the first quarter of the seventeenth century (Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels); an anonymous drawing, c. 1660-1675 (Musée Atger, Montpellier); and a large engraving commissioned by Abraham Brueghel (1630/31-c. 1690), the painter's great-grandson, from Rome-based printmaker Nicolas Guérard (c. 1648-1719) in 1670. [3] As is typical of such transfers to the medium of engraving, the image is the mirror reverse of the original painting. (Figure 1) Bruegel's contemporary in Antwerp, Pieter

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Baltens (c. 1527-1584) produced his own versions, not Bruegel copies, of *The Wine of Saint Martin* (Museum Catherijneconvent Utrecht and Royal Museum of Art, Antwerp).



**Figure 1.** *The Wine of Saint Martin's Day*, engraving after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1670. British Museum, London. Inv. 1874,0808.1576.

## 2. The Last Brueghel

Abraham Brueghel left his native Antwerp for Italy in 1649 at age eighteen, first working in Sicily for Prince Antonio Ruffo, and then from 1659 in Rome. [4] In 1670, the likely date of the engraving, he was invited into the prestigious *Accademia di San Luca*, and the following year into the *Confraternita dei Virtuosi al Pantheon*, both with significant ties to the Holy See. At the same time, he was also a member of the *Bentvueghels* (Birds of a Feather), the raucous society of Dutch and Flemish artists active in Rome between the years 1625 and 1720. [5] The Bentveughels were decidedly anti-Academy, as reflected in their original scenes of lower-class life. They made up the greater part of those renegade artists called in Italian *I Bambocchianti* (the Foolish/Ugly Puppets), the term, unlike Bentveughels, being more a generic label than a specific group identity. [6] More than four dozen of these Netherlandish artists, with their comical or pseudo-classical “bent” names, are on record. Abraham Brueghel was nicknamed *Rijngraaf* (Count of the Rhine) partly in recognition of his descent from a noble line of painters but also, perhaps, referring jokingly to the famous wine. Brueghel relocated to Naples in the early 1670s where he died about 1690. He was known for his lush still-lives of flowers and fruit and for flower-garland frame paintings. The engraving in question is his only known reference back to the genre subjects of his ancestors.

## 3. The Wine of St. Martin's Day Engraving

The engraving is clearly a bid for patronage, new or continuing. It is addressed to the young Don Gaspare Altieri (1650-1720) of the ancient and distinguished Roman family, under his title “Generale di Santa Chiesa” (General of the Holy Church), the de facto commander-in-chief of the papal armed forces - whence the appropriateness of soldier-saint Martin as subject. [7] Saint Martin remains a principal patron saint of the Pontifical Swiss Guards with their 1568 chapel of San Martino degli Svizzeri in the Vatican. Gaspare was nephew to the new Pope Clement X (1670-76) and would receive the title of “Principe di Oriolo,” a papal holding in Calabria, from his uncle in 1671. [8] The date of the print then must precede young Altieri receiving this additional honor since no mention is made of it therein.

The dedicatory inscription with the Altieri coat-of-arms at the foot of the engraved plate is signed by Brueghel. Through it he resolves “to give to Immortality (i.e. make immortal) the Saint Martin work by Bruegel my grandfather” (*di dare all' Immortalità l'Opera di S. Martino di Brugolo mio Nonno*) for the satisfaction of “certain virtuosi” who presuppose that this will redound to Abraham’s “praise, and the benefit of prosperity” (*à me lode, e beneficio di à Prosperi*). The *alcuni Virtuosi* presumably refers to Abraham’s new colleagues in the *Accademia di San Luca*, but it could also include brothers from the Bentveughels who would naturally value an old Flemish subject by an acknowledged master. The client-to-patron language is particularly fulsome – “the infinite veneration of my most humble servitude that lives always happy under your most benign auspices” (*la uenerazione infinita della mia humillissima Servitu, che uiuera sempre felice sotto suoi benignissimi auspicio*), but perhaps not more so than was normal for the period. That it was attached to a “low” genre scene might strike a note of irony perhaps unintended by the author.

In referring to the “Saint Martin work by Bruegel my grandfather,” Abraham evidently misattributed the composition to his grandfather, Jan Brueghel the Elder, rather than to his great-grandfather Pieter. He might therefore have directed the engraver Guérard to a family copy or cartoon of the Prado original, possibly then in his possession, as the model for the engraving. The reputation of the Bruegel dynasty of painters, and of this composition specifically, must have been fairly high at the end of the seventeenth century or Abraham would not have put forward this particular work in seeking or retaining young Altieri’s patronage. It was meant to please both the virtuosi and the papal nobility. Brueghel’s departure for Naples in the early 1670s might reflect then a failure ultimately to secure Altieri patronage in Rome.

## 4. A Possible Bentveughels Copy

An anonymous oil-on-canvas clearly derives from the

Brueghel/Guéraud engraving, as it exhibits the same reversed values. (Figure 2) This “painting after” does not include the far right fifth of the engraving (the restorer found no evidence of cropping), as well as a much smaller portion of the far left of the composition, giving the canvas a perfectly square shape. Apart from these alterations, however, the size of the oil-on-canvas (38 x 38 cm.) approximates that of the engraving (35 x 49 cm.). What the painting lacks on the right is the elder Bruegel’s foreground knot of two retching and two fighting drunkards in front of a placid mother feeding new wine to her infant, as well as some background hills, trees, and a distant castle. The painting’s square format renders the swarm of thirsty peasants on and around the wine barrel, organized as a flattened rhomb or lozenge in the elder Bruegel’s original composition, as more nearly a circle. The work, moreover, cannot have referred to a faithful painted copy of the original, but only to the engraving since, apart from Martin’s white horse, its color values - of the figures’ clothing, of props such as the large wine barrel - do not at all follow the original color scheme. In the smaller scale, many of its figures are only rough sketches of those in the much larger original. Nevertheless, the piece appears finished enough not to be simply an oil sketch for a larger painting. Far background details, left and right, also depart somewhat from the Bruegel original as well as from the engraving, and there is a considerably extra portion of sky with a heavy, grey cloudscape represented. It was evidently intended as a cabinet painting on a Bruegel subject known only through the engraving.



**Figure 2.** Anon. *The Wine of St. Martin's Day*, oil on canvas, c. 1680-1720. Private collection.



**Figure 3.** Domenico van Wijnen. *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, detail, c. 1685. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin., Inv. NGI 527.

This derived work can only be roughly dated to the end of the seventeenth/beginning of the eighteenth century. It was identified by Westport Auction, Norwalk CT as coming from the estate of a private art collector from Weston CT. The painting was further appraised by the Du Moucelles Auction House in Detroit on April 23, 2022, including an ultraviolet-light examination. They found minimal professional restoration and concurred with a late seventeenth-/early eighteenth-century date. Given the fact that Abraham Brueghel was an active member of the Bentvueghels, and given that group’s great affinity for Bacchic subjects, drinking rituals and genre scenes, it is possible that this small painting based on the 1670 Guérard engraving might have emanated from their circle. With its carnivalesque swarm of peasants seeking their free dole of the saint’s wine, it might well have been a tribute to Rijngaaf and his distinguished ancestor and/or produced in conjunction with a Martinmas celebration of the fraternity. Bruegel scholar Manfred Sellink has examined several detailed photos of the painting and would also venture a late seventeenth-/early eighteenth-century date and a possible connection to the Benveughels (e-mail correspondence, 4/4 and 5/12, 2022).

The broaching of the new wine and the slaughter of live-stock for winter provisions were two seasonal activities that converged at Martinmas and gave rise to various communal expressions: feasting, donations of wine, bonfires, etc., in a kind of mini-Carnival before the penitential season of Advent. The secular importance of St Martin’s feast day for the Netherlands can be gauged by an early sixteenth-century proverb: *Tis altijd gheen s. martens avont* (It isn’t always Martinmas Eve, i.e. Not every day’s a holiday), which was also said of *vastenavont* or Shrovetide [9]. Throughout the



Early Modern period *Maartensavond* was a winebibber's holiday deplored in a pious seventeenth-century almanac as *een Bacchus-feest omdat men dan meer den duivel dan God dient* (a Bacchus feast wherein one serves the devil more than God). [10] William of Orange gives some idea of the pervasive drunkenness associated with the festival. In a 1563 letter he writes: *Nous avons tenu la S. Martin fort joieux, car il y a avoit bonne compaignie. Monsr. de Brederode at este ung jour que pensois certes qu'i devoit mourir, mais il se porte mieulx* (We celebrated St. Martin's [at Breda] very jovially, for there was good company. For a day Mons de Brederode seemed certain to die but he is better now). [11] The Bentvueghels were more than likely to have celebrated this popular wine holiday. The festive storming of a large wine barrel, reminiscent of the engraving, for example, occupies the center of a *Temptation of St. Anthony* (c. 1685) by Domenicus van Wijnen (1658-1700), a member of the fraternity with the bent-name *Askaan/Ascanius*, who was active in Rome between 1680 and 1690. [12] Van Wijnen was known for spectacular witchcraft scenes, as well as for portraying the Bentveughel initiation ceremony engraved by Matthijs Pool.

## 5. Conclusion

Whatever its exact provenance, whether from the sphere of the Bentveughels or not, the painting after the Brueghel/Guérard engraving is clear evidence of a continuing interest in the elder Bruegel's *Wine of Saint Martin* motif some four to five generations on. The Prado's 2010 verification of Bruegel the Elder's original painting was a major event in the art world, which enhanced, moreover, a folkloric practice that is still prevalent in our century. November 11 new wine festivals under the patronage of St. Martin of Tours continue to be celebrated in Western and Central Europe. This author attended, for example, the *Festa di San Martinu* in Patrimonio, Corsica in 2013 and 2014 where the free distribution of new wine together with slices of roast ox created an ebullient scene perfectly evocative of the Bruegel painting. The Wine of St. Martin's Day still freely flows.

## Author Contributions

Martin William Walsh is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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