

Hunters in the Snow – A Perspective



Three hunters trudge wearily homewards through the snow: it is by far the most popular non-religious Christmas card image scene, and with good reason. Pieter Breugel the Elder painted it in 1565, yet we feel it is a world we can understand. Not long ago, men very like these hunted on Boxing Day, and wood was gathered for the fire, and the winter was cold enough to safely play on frozen ponds. You could easily imagine a local artist fifty or so years ago, painting such a scene from life or memory.

Despite the bitter cold and the hunters' evident lack of success, it seems a place well cared for and worth living in. No wonder the painting features as a symbol of Earth in the Science Fiction movie *Solaris*

But appearances can be deceiving. Breugel was no provincial; he was a famous and well-travelled artist. This is not some rural backwater, but the outskirts of Antwerp, then the richest city in Europe. The painting was one of six depicting the changing year, painted for Niclaes Jongelinck, a wealthy merchant banker of that city. It is a traditional theme, once common in illuminated manuscripts, but done painted for a new market, to be displayed in a suburban villa. In many ways, this picture marks the start of an era that we are now leaving. Phillip II of Spain was the new ruler of Antwerp, more profitable to him than all his possessions in the Americas. In England, his wife Mary Tudor was burning Cramer at the stake and preparing the first Plantation of Ireland.

The strong diagonal lines of trees and houses draw your eye over the busy village below to the fantastical mountains in the distance. There are no such mountains near Antwerp; they are a memory of the Swiss Alps through which Breugel passed on his way to Rome twelve years before. There Michaelangelo and Raphael were painting, but his work is very different from theirs. Some parts seem still medieval in their uniformity of scale for houses and trees, but he has succeeded better than them in conjuring up the overall shape of the landscape and its space. The winter of 1556 was the harshest in living memory, near the start of what is now called the Little Ice Age. You can almost feel the cold.

Look again. In perspective, the horizon is always at the observer's eye level, so we are looking down on the hunters as if from the upstairs window of a house across the way from the inn they have just passed. The family outside has lit a fire to take the bristles of a pig they have just killed or are about to kill. The man who is carrying out the table on which it will be scraped is the only person in the whole painting whose face we can clearly see. He looks across at the hunters, but plainly no greeting has passed between them. Your eye is drawn to the mountains, and then back to the left. Behind the black trees, on a frozen yellow river, lies Antwerp.

The hunters are not going there, or to the mountains; otherwise, they would have taken the road on the other side of the inn. They can only be going one

place; zigzagging down the steep slope in front of them, perhaps to the house across the bridge from the mill, where no fire is lit. Is the old woman carrying a bundle of sticks across the bridge going to prepare a fire for them? Perhaps. The pollarded trees show the importance of firewood, and on the road a full cart of wood is headed away, probably to light the fires of Antwerp. Yet the family up at the inn are burning straw, and what is the little man at the bottom right of the picture doing?

Look closer. All is not well in this seeming idyll. Axe marks on the tree next to the lead hunter and a bird trap set at the last house in the ridge show how well Breugel knows that every bit of this land is exploited. The nearest hunter bends to examine a track in the snow, but it is only that of a hopping crow. The pig-killers have built their fire very close to the inn. If you did not know what was happening, you would almost think they were looting it. The broken sign shows that it is dedicated to Saint Hubert – the patron saint of hunters. Strangest of all – look at the house in the middle distance, between the church and the bridge. Its chimney is clearly on fire. Someone has climbed on the roof and thrown a bucket of water to try to douse it.

What does it all mean? We can only guess how much of that detail was painted expressly for Jongelinck. As to what it meant to Breugel – that is another matter.

There is only one thing more to say: the year after Breugel finished this painting, religious riots broke out in Antwerp, the prelude to a general revolt which led to Dutch independence and the sacking of the city by the Spanish, in 1576. Not so very different from the first Christmas after all.

Jenny Brien

For a more detailed image of the painting, see [Google Arts and Culture](#).