The Evangelists, Religious and Secular Painting in the Dutch Netherlands: a background story to Jan van Bijlert's "St Matthew and the Angel".

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The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century began as an attempt to reform the practices of the Catholic church. It was sparked in 1517 by Martin Luther's 95 Theses in Germany, and led to a schism in Western Christianity. The conflict between those who held to the doctrines of the Catholic church and those who protested them, who became known as Protestants, led to a wave of conflict throughout Europe. This conflict eventually made its way to the Netherlands.

Although Spain officially ruled the Netherlands, it did give the land and its many diverse provinces a great deal of autonomy. With this autonomy, the Netherlands thrived, making it one of the most prosperous regions in all of Europe. As wealth was produced in the Netherlands, Spain happily claimed its share.

However, as the Reformation made its way to the Netherlands, the Spanish Habsburg dynasty got nervous. Knowing the desire for religious freedom often gave way to the desire for political autonomy, Spain began to tighten its control of the Netherlands. In October 1520, Charles assumed the title of Roman emperor-elect. He rejected Luther's doctrines and essentially declared war on Protestantism. During his reign and afterwards, specific laws made it acceptable to persecute and execute Protestants.

Although many credit Martin Luther for sparking the Reformation, Lutheranism never had a strong presence among the Dutch. Instead, Anabaptism became very popular, especially in the areas of Holland and Friesland. Anabaptists denied the legitimacy of infant baptism and held the Bible, rather than the church, as the only rule for life. As a group, Anabaptists were very radical in their beliefs, forming new communities made entirely of those who believed as they did. This social restructuring soon upset the status quo within the Netherlands and made Anabaptists a target of persecution by Catholic Spain.

Creating even more chaos than the Anabaptist movement were the Calvinists, named after the 16th century reformer John Calvin. They believed that God held authority over humanity and the church, rather than the supreme authority of the Pope.

Over the course of the 16th century, church reformers of all convictions opposed what they saw as the misuse of art for unholy purposes, particularly within the church.

John Calvin rejected any attempt at representing the invisible but also any depiction of visible things that could provoke unwanted worship, especially in church buildings, and led to the use of almost exclusively non-figurative and decorative art in Calvinist churches. Calvin, however, was not completely averse to art in general or the depiction of biblical stories. He simply believed they must have an uplifting character and educational value.

Protestant church reformers were not the only ones to oppose the uninhibited treatment of sacred history as well as pride and indecency in art. The Council of Trent, which convened from 1545 to 1563 and had far reaching consequences for artistic practice, drew up a number of strongly restrictive rules for the iconography of altarpieces and other forms of religious painting. These

guidelines revealed not only a high degree of prudishness but also a consistent dedication to the authenticity of the depiction.

The view was that paintings should not have a capacity to improve nature, as it would be sinful to presume that something more perfect in the world was conceivable. Instead, they should focus on God's creation, and nothing more than that. A painting was intended to take on the function of a devotional piece in order to shape the thoughts of the faithful.

Unlike many other new ideas, Calvinism reached both the aristocratic and common folk. In a rather short time period, most of the province of Flanders had converted to Calvinism. Not surprisingly, this got the attention of Catholic Spain. Philip II, who inherited the Spanish Empire from his father Charles in 1555, began persecuting Calvinists throughout the Netherlands. Thousands were executed and imprisoned during this time. However, the Dutch Calvinists would not be silenced. They answered back by ransacking churches, destroying Catholic images along their way. This destruction of religious images is known as iconoclasm.

These acts of iconoclasm were the result of years of pent up tension and aggression between Protestants and Catholics, combined with the instability caused through economic crisis and social unrest.

The Spanish responded to this destruction of monasteries by punishing the perpetrators even more harshly. They most likely expected the unrest to be taken care of in a few short months; however, it would be years before the fallout from this conflict would reside.

The Dutch rebellion against Spain was waged as much for political and economic freedom as religious freedom and so numerous Dutch Catholics initially joined the patriotic Protestant side too. The pre-reformation church was so lax and corrupt that few were moved to defend it and they were as angered as Calvinists by the repressive policies adopted by their Spanish sovereign, fearing the loss of traditional liberties and being burdened by new tax demands. This passivity continued even after rebels began to seize towns where they established Calvinist rule and forbade Catholic worship in 1572.

The impact on Catholic culture in the South was that it became a bastion of Counter-Reformation ideas and practices.

An important role in the Catholic revival that subsequently occurred in the South was the return of Catholic exiles who had fled Flanders and Brabant for Cologne and other securely Catholic lands when the Calvinists seized, or threatened to seize, their home towns. The experience of exile played an important role in the formation of the Catholic identity. Those who fled their country because of their faith nurtured an increasingly strong sense of Catholic identity during their exile.

With a Protestant government in power in the United Provinces, Utrecht no longer had an archbishop and the celebration of Mass was forbidden.

Despite the Protestantization of the United Provinces, the Utrecht chapters - colleges of clergymen that played an important role in the running of the diocese and also looked after a considerable amount of church property - continued to exist because of the significant financial interests that prominent Utrecht citizens had in them.

The Catholic clergy dedicated themselves to promoting the cult of the national saints. The biographies of the saints were substantiated as far as possible on historical grounds, and

emphasis was placed primarily on their exemplary lives and their services to the church, and less on the magical and anecdotal. In other words, the faithful were called upon to identify with them rather than simply pray to and venerate them. They hoped to instil courage into Catholics in their difficult situation by pointing to the honourable tradition of their faith as symbolized by these holy men.

Rome had meanwhile given up hope that the United Provinces would be retaken by Spain in the foreseeable future. The centuries-old tradition of the Catholic faith in the Netherlands which had previously served chiefly as a consolation for loyal Catholics and as an argument in the polemic against Protestantism, now also became a weapon in the fight for recognition in Rome.

Catholic paintings of this time seemed to reflect a longing for another, enduring Catholic Utrecht, and aimed to convey the message of an unbroken Catholic tradition in the Low Countries.

In 1596 the kings of France and England arranged a treaty with the Republic of the United Netherlands, which was only 15 years old at the time, to unite the northern Netherlandish regions as an internationally recognised nation state following their rising up against Spain. In 1609, Spain followed and signed the Twelve Years' Truce which recognised the existence and physical extent of the Republic. This federal state consisted of the provinces of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht and Friesland.

From the 1600s onwards, the Dutch Republic entered its golden age.

From the beginning, Holland was the richest and most powerful province. Maps of the Republic's core area, which after 1600 began to appear in abundance as a sign of growing self-awareness, always bore the name of Holland, even though they also largely depicted the other three core provinces around it—Zeeland, Utrecht, and Friesland.

It was during the Golden Age that scientists, mathematicians, and intellects from all over the world flocked to the Netherlands, thanks to its intellectual tolerance.

The Dutch Reformed church and a rising sense of Dutch nationalism informed the Golden Age. Art too took on independent directions, developing an emphasis on secular subjects, depicted not with Catholic grandeur, but emphasizing ordinary human life and realistic treatments. As a result, some scholars have referred to Dutch Golden Age painting as Dutch Realism.

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