ART AND OCCUPATION

Quentin Massys, *The Moneychanger* 1514

Oozing sang-froid, an elegantly dressed couple, clothes fashionably adorned with fur, lean in towards each other, their luxuriously covered heads almost touching, their closeness and symmetry implying a sense of common purpose [1]. In his left hand *The Moneychanger* delicately holds a set of scales (*trebuchet*) and carefully weighs a coin, whilst she, distracted from her devotional prayers to the Virgin and Child, languorously considers his work [2]. Laid out before them on a green leather-topped desk are: rings and a variety of silver and gold coins (*schillings*, *reales*, *écu au soleil* and *excelentes*) [3]; pearls displayed on black velvet; and for measuring coins, a *pile de Charlemagne*—a lidded metallic container with multi-sized cups that fit into each other like a Russian *matryoshka* doll. Perhaps in

The Money Lender and his Wife, 1514, Massys or Metsys, Quentin. © Louvre, Paris, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

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homage to the famous Flemish painter van Eyck, at the front of the desk there is a convex mirror, which reflects the presence in the room of the artist, Quentin Massys wearing a red hat [4]. The detail may be difficult to see but Massys appears to be reading a book and pointing at a notable Antwerp building (possibly the cathedral) seen through a cross-shaped window. The enlarged details of this can be seen online [5]. Immediately behind the couple some plain wooden shelves, ‘symbolic evocation of the base world’ [6], display a series of ‘still lifes’ (see below) whilst an open door to their left reveals an old man remonstrating with a youth in a wide-brim hat. Throughout the picture Massys flaunts his consummate skills, capturing everything in minute and exquisite detail.

The painting (oil on panel, 71 × 68 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris), once owned by Rubens, is open to different interpretations. It may be a family portrait commissioned to celebrate newly-found wealth and to recognize the worthines of commerce and finance as respectable occupations [7]. Others consider it a Flemish morality tale—a sermonizing, allegorical work condemning avarice and exalting honesty [8]. Emblems of wealth (gold, pearls, rings, furs, a gilded prayer book) contrast with spiritual symbols: transience (snuffed-out candle), sin (apple—the forbidden fruit), purity (glass paternoster rosary), peace (flute) and judgement (scales) [9]. Is the positioning of the artist’s image in the mirror between the man’s riches (mammon) and the woman’s sacred text (God) a rhetorical comment on the ethics of capitalism in 16th century Antwerp [10]? If so, the moneylender’s trebuchet takes on even more symbolic meaning and perhaps explains why the painting’s frame was at one time inscribed with a quotation from Leviticus ‘Let the balance be just and the weights be equal’ [11].

Quentin Massys was born in 1466, the son of a renowned Louvain metalsmith and clockmaker to whom he was initially apprenticed [12]. However, he soon turned to painting probably because of physical incapacity or unsuitability to the trade. The change in occupation also allowed him closer access to Alyt van Tuylt, an artist’s daughter, whom he wooed away from another painter [13]. It is not known whether or where Massys apprenticed as an artist, but he entered the Antwerp Guild of Painters as a master in 1491. He married Alyt, had three children and rapidly gained a reputation for altarpieces and other religious works, visiting Italy and bringing back many Renaissance influences. He also painted satirical genre scenes, such as The Moneychanger [9] and later completed portraits of Erasmus (1517) and Antwerp’s Town Clerk, Pieter Gillis (1517). After Alyt’s death he re-married in 1508 and had 10 more children. By the time he died of the ‘sweating sickness’ (plague) at Antwerp in 1530 he had become the city’s leading, most respected and probably wealthiest painter [14].

Today the major health and safety risks facing bankers and their employees are principally crime-related, psychosocial and ergonomic [15]. Lately, however, the financial sector has attracted much more attention because of the risks it poses to others. In what is seen by many as pursuit of individual profit without individual responsibility [16] there appear to be ‘too many men who can figure costs and too few who can measure values’ [17]. Quentin Massys would have appreciated Ambrose Bierce’s definition of mammon as the ‘God of the world’s leading religion’ [18]. Yet, judging by his own accumulation of wealth, the artist seems (perhaps like the rest of us) to have been somewhat ambivalent about enjoying its spoils.

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References

17. Anon.