

Professor Jeanne Nuechterlein of the History of Art Department, University of York, discusses a favourite painting from the Gallery's collection. The identity of the artist has long been debated but through her research Jeanne has found the probable solution.



Marten van Cleve (c.1527-1581), *The Road to Calvary* (1565?), oil on canvas, 146cm x 259cm

The Road to Calvary (c. 1565), by Marten van Cleve, might seem an odd choice for a favourite painting from the Gallery collections. The picture surface has suffered significant damage in its history, and for that reason it has rarely been displayed in the Gallery, until it was placed in the stairwell in 2021 following conservation. Despite the abraded paint, to my eye this is an impressive and beautiful composition, full of intelligently-planned details, and therefore well worth close study.

The way to Calvary was a popular subject in the sixteenth-century Low Countries (for example, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Procession to Calvary* of 1534, now in Vienna). Procession scenes enabled artists to invent varied figures in an expansive landscape, and viewers then have the fun of working out what is happening in different parts of the picture. Here the procession moves from right to left, emerging up through the rocky outcrops at the right (by implication originating from the city in the distant background) and heading towards the green hill of Calvary in the upper

left midground. The composition includes numerous participants in the procession itself—soldiers and supporters of the governing regime, many in semi-exotic dress—as well as many observers. The artist decided to foreground a group of traveller onlookers, centred on the man in blue seen from behind and perched on a birdcage, with a child to his left temporarily distracted from the birdcage by the procession. Two women on the man's other side sit on the ground, one holding a child and facing into the scene, while the other older woman, wearing a striped robe and flat round hat associated with the Roma, seemingly wipes her eyes as she looks away. Another onlooker group approaches at the left foreground, with a father propping up a small boy on their donkey for a better view, while another man behind them peers around a classical column. A woman in red carrying a container on her head looks directly out at us, the painting's viewers.

In such pictures, the figure of Christ is often deliberately semi-lost in the crowd. Here he can be deciphered towards the right side of the picture, wearing a long brown robe that blends with the ground. He has fallen to his knees under the cross, and looks back at a guard in a white shirt and striped leggings, who raises an armoured fist. Further ahead in the procession, to the left, we can make out the two semi-naked thieves who will be crucified alongside Christ. The good thief rides a white horse backwards and suffers the taunts of onlookers, while the bad thief, close to the exact middle of the painting, is reluctantly dragged and pushed along by soldiers. Another detail demanding careful attention is the group of small figures at the right edge in the middle ground, standing at some distance back. The figures in red and seemingly green (but originally no doubt blue) can be identified by their clothing and postures as John the Evangelist and the Virgin Mary, comforting each other in sorrow at what is unfolding, while virtually everyone else in the picture—other than, perhaps, the seated Roma woman—is either an active participant or a merely curious observer. After taking in such details, we the observers of the painting might begin asking ourselves what sort of viewers are we: do we fully grasp the significance of the event, or are we idle spectators looking for entertainment?

Before it was hung in the York Art Gallery stairwell in 2021, this painting was loaned out for many years to the Treasurer's House, where it was displayed high on a wall above a fireplace. I confess that I hardly knew anything about it until our Senior Curator, Beatrice Bertram, invited me to look at it with her from a scaffold in 2019, when the Gallery was considering taking it back. I was immediately struck by its high quality, despite the extensive surface damage. Notes in the object file refer to over-cleaning around 1900, but surely the main problem has an earlier origin: the work is currently on canvas, but it would originally have been painted on panel, so it must have been transferred at an early date, when conservation methods were considerably different from today's. Parts of the original surface paint were lost in the process, and subsequent over-painting (later removed) attempted to hide the damage.



The painting at the Treasurer's House before removal to the Gallery.

The artist of this painting has long been a mystery. Recently I have come across the probable solution: the Teylers Museum in Haarlem owns a drawing attributed to Marten van Cleve that appears to be an initial version of this composition.



Marten van Cleve (c.1527-1581), *The Way to Calvary*, c.1565, pen and brown ink, blue wash, heightened with white, on grey-blue prepared paper, 25.1cm x 41.5 cm, Teylers Museum, Haarlem.

Van Cleve was a near-exact contemporary of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in Antwerp, and his workshop and followers produced numerous variations of popular compositions. York's painting and the Teylers' drawing appear to be rare, exceptional works mostly by the master himself, rather than workshop replicas. For me this painting well deserves its current place on the Gallery walls, both because of its intrinsic quality, and because the vicissitudes of fortune that irreversibly change an artwork's appearance can now be appreciated as part of its history, rather than hidden away.

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