VP4629

ABEL GRIMMER
1570 – Antwerp – 1618/19

The Tower of Babel

Dated lower left: 1604
Oil on panel: 20 1/8 x 26 1/8 in (51.1 x 66.3 cm)

PROVENANCE
Acquired in the 1830s by Sir Edward Blackett, 6th Bt. (1803-1885), for Matfen Hall, Northumberland
By descent to the previous owner
Private Collection, England, until 2013

LITERATURE
H Minkowski, Der Turm zu Babel, Berlin 1991, p.207, erroneously as signed and dated L 604 and attributed to Lucas van Valckenborch
R de Bertier de Sauvigny, Jacob et Abel Grimmer, Brussels 1991, p.303, no.2; p.294, under no.1; p.189, under no.1

EXHIBITED
Newcastle, The Hatton Gallery King’s College, Pictures from Collections in Northumberland, 8th May-15th June 1951, no.42, as Lucas van Valckenborch (lent by Sir Hugh Blackett)
This exquisite landscape is one of Abel Grimmer’s finest works, combining miniaturist precision with an almost surreal inventiveness and sense of breadth. Abel, the son of Jacob Grimmer (1525-before May 1590), like his father specialised in landscapes which often incorporate a Biblical scene. He spent his whole career in Antwerp, the major port of the Spanish Netherlands and a centre of learning and publishing.

The Tower of Babel appears in medieval miniatures and was a popular theme in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Netherlandish art, depicted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Lucas van Valckenborch, Pieter Brueghel the Younger, Hendrick van Cleve III and Roelant Savery, among others. The subject is taken from Genesis chapter 11, verses 1-9. The inhabitants of Shinar decided to build a city that would touch the heavens. God, dismayed by their presumptuousness, sowed discord among them and ‘confound[ed] their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city’ (v.7-8). ‘Babel’ means confusion in Hebrew.

In the version of the story told by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (37-c.100 AD), the project was masterminded by Noah’s great-grandson Nimrod, the ‘mighty hunter before the Lord’. He is the king in the left foreground of Grimmer’s painting, being shown the plans by a distinctly nervous architect. Babylon was said to have been built on the ruins of Babel, as was foretold by the Sibyl. The stepped construction of the tower often depicted in western art echoes the real ziggurats in the temple complexes of Babylonia (modern-day Iraq).

Grimmer’s panoramic painting takes in the vast tower, which is already pushing up through the clouds, and the sweep of landscape behind it. There is a mesmeric fascination to the spiral tower, its brick arcades and toga-wearing statues reminiscent of the Colosseum. It is a nightmare mixture of the gothic and the classical, seemingly solid but irrational, the brainchild of megalomaniac but fatally divided mankind. Antlike figures are engaged in making and carting bricks and chiselling stone, while ships arrive at the port with more supplies. The tower is so huge that an ordinary Flemish street can sit comfortably on the lowest level of the spiral. A particularly charming invention is the monastery complex at the foot of the tower, with its procession and peaceful garden with slender cypresses. The dusty, brick reds and ochres of the monstrous construction site are girded by a landscape of deep turquoise inlets and misty grey-blue mountains, the pristine realm of the Almighty. We see it as if from the viewpoint of an eagle soaring above the scene.

Grimmer’s inspiration for The Tower of Babel came ultimately from two paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525-1569), especially the earlier, dated 1563, which is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. This work passed quickly into the collection of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II and also shows Nimrod in the left foreground. It is unlikely that Grimmer had direct access to Pieter the Elder’s painting, but he must have seen depictions of the sunlit Tower of Babel made by Pieter’s son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564-1637/38), who was a master in the Antwerp Guild of St Luke from 1585. Grimmer in any case puts his own stamp on the Bruegelian prototype with his delicate draughtsmanship, clear colours and the dynamism with which he directs the tiny figures in the landscape, as well as details such as the small monastery and the town clustering at the foot of the Tower. Even while describing chaos, he organises space in an instinctively classical way.
The Bible story of Babel is a tale of impiety and hubris, a moral implicit in both Bruegel’s and Grimmer’s paintings. The architecture of the tower echoes that of the Colosseum, symbol to sixteenth-century observers of the decay of imperial Rome. Grimmer’s painting can also be seen as a comment on the turbulent times in which he was living. In 1604, when he made this work, the Spanish Netherlands had been engaged for a quarter of a century in the struggle with the breakaway Protestant provinces in the north, disrupting Antwerp’s trade. The story of the Tower of Babel, where a world speaking one language is suddenly riven with the incomprehension of many different languages, paralleled the sixteenth century, with nations dividing into Catholic and Protestant as debate raged over the interpretation of the Word of God. In the central foreground of the painting, just to the right of the Nimrod group, a brawl has broken out and swords are raised. However, despite the moral of the story, viewers of Grimmer’s Tower of Babel would have enjoyed it as a masterpiece of invention, creating a fantastical yet convincing world which brings the Bible story – and deep truths about human nature – convincingly to life.

Grimmer made several versions of The Tower of Babel, all with interesting variations. The group of figures around Nimrod in the left foreground of the present painting is considered by Reine de Bertier de Sauvigny to be by Frans Francken II (1581-1642)iii. Drs Luuk Pijl has recently made a case that they are by Frans’s father, Frans Francken I (1542-1616).

Other versions of The Tower of Babel by Grimmer are the painting signed and dated 1591, formerly in the von Bissing Collection, Munichiv; two signed and dated 1604 (private collections)v; an unsigned and undated painting with Galerie de Jonckheere, Brussels in 1979vi and a roundel in the Prado, Madridvii.

The present painting was acquired in the 1830s by Sir Edward Blackett, 6th Bt. (1803-1885), for Matfen Hall, Northumberland. The Matfen estate has belonged to the Blackett family since 1757. In 1828 Sir Edward commissioned Thomas Rickman to replace the old manor with a Jacobean-style building in accordance with the Romantic taste of the day. Its interior features a large Gothic hall. Sir Edward bought paintings in keeping with the Renaissance spirit of his new house, among them this Tower of Babel by Abel Grimmer.

Abel Grimmer was the son of Jacob Grimmer (1525-before May 1590) and like his father specialised in landscapes, often sets of the Four Seasons or the Months of the Year which include a Biblical scene. He married Catharina Lescornet in 1591 and the following year became a master in the Antwerp Guild of St Luke.

Grimmer was influenced by his father and also by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hans Bol. Some of his landscapes are copied directly from prints after Bruegel and Bol. For example, his 1592 series of the Twelve months of the year (Chapelle Nôtre-Dame, Montfaucon-en-Velay, Haute-Loire) are exact copies of Adriaen Collaert’s prints after Hans Bol, published in 1585.

Grimmer’s landscapes are strong and simple, with splendid colour harmonies, an emphasis on linearity and a geometric approach to the treatment of architecture. He also painted church
interiors such as *The interior of a gothic church with a Franciscan monk preaching* (private collection). His interest in perspective and golden light anticipates the work of Pieter Saenredam. Two architectural drawings by Grimmer have survived, an elevation of the gable of Antwerp Cathedral and a church gable with a gothic spire (Paul Saintenoy Collection, Brussels, before 1900). In paintings such as *Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary* (Musée d’Art Ancien, Brussels), Grimmer is particularly fascinated by the challenge of portraying interior space. He frequently collaborated with other artists, including Frans Francken the Elder (1542-1616) and Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642), who provided the figures in his landscapes. Abel Grimmer died in Antwerp in 1618/19.

The work of Abel Grimmer is represented in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels; the Groeningemuseum, Bruges; the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp; the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC and the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham.

Susan Morris

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ii 44 ¾ x 61 in / 114 x 155 cm; see Manfred Sellink, *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, Ghent 2007, p.188, no.124, illus. in colour. A smaller version of the subject of c.1568 by Bruegel, omitting Nimrod and with a less complex tower, is in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam (23 ½ x 29 1/3 in / 60 x 74.5 cm); Sellink *op. cit.*, p.189, no.125, illus. in colour.

iii Sauvigny, *op. cit.*, p.223, under no. XLIVbis.

iv 28 ¼ x 36 ¾ in / 72 x 92 cm; Sauvigny, *ibid.*, p.189, no.1.

v 13 x 17 ¾ in / 33 x 44 cm; with Richard Green in 1977 and with Galerie JO Leegenhoek, Paris in 1978; Sauvigny, *ibid.*, p.222, no.XLIV. The second 20 ¾ x 26 ¼ in / 51.4 x 66.8 cm, sold at Sotheby’s London, 11th April 1990, lot 12; Sauvigny p.222-3, no. XLIVbis.

vi 14 x 19 in / 35.5 x 48.5 cm; with Galerie de Jonckheere, Brussels in 1979; Sauvigny, *ibid.*, p.294, no.1, fig. 154.

vii Diameter 17 ¼ in / 44 cm; Sauvigny, *ibid.*, p.301, no.1.