



The Mill and the Cross - Peter Bruegel's "Way to Calvary"

Michael Francis Gibson

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"The Mill and the Cross" is a highly original approach to a single painting by Peter Bruegel the Elder - "the Way to Calvary" - to which the book is entirely devoted. But it also represents an innovative approach to the general emergence of Christian culture out of the patterns of Antiquity.

Bruegel's work tells two stories at the same time: on the one hand, it is a straightforward relation of Christ's Passion, in which Jesus appears, lost in a crowd of some 500 characters, carrying his cross from Jerusalem (enclosed in the circle of its walls) to Calvary (marked by the darker circle of the expectant crowd). But it also tells the story of the passion of Flanders in Bruegel's day, since Christ is here escorted to Golgotha by the red-uniformed mercenary police of the king of Spain who was then imposing a fierce repression on Bruegel's native land.

Gibson also takes a close look at the windmill, oddly perched atop a pointed rock. It is, he argues, Bruegel's depiction of the "cosmic mill" which, in the tradition of Antiquity, was thought to grind the fates of men and nations.

The theme of the Precession of the Equinoxes is invoked to explain the deeply rooted tradition of the passing of the ages, the age of the ram giving way, in Jesus' day, to the age of the Fish, to which Christian tradition tied Christ himself.

This allows Gibson to take an innovative look at the way myth commands our representations of the world and how we, today, at another "turning of the world", may look back on the age out of which we are already moving.

More than an art book, it is a book about how we can come to terms with our own culture.

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