The Sun, the Moon, and an Eclipse: Observations on The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John, by Hendrick Ter Bruggghen

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In 1956 the Metropolitan Museum acquired The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John, a painting by Hendrick Ter Bruggghen (1588–1629) of Utrecht. It is signed and dated: “HTB [monogram] fecit / 162[ ]” (Figure 1). It was discovered in a bombed-out church in London’s East End.

Two years after the painting’s acquisition, in 1958, Claus Virch, then an assistant curator in the Department of Paintings, wrote an extensive article about it in the Museum’s Bulletin, in which he states that Ter Bruggghen “is generally classified as a follower of Caravaggio.”1 From 1604 to 1614 the Dutch painter was in Italy on what was for artists a quasi-obligatory Bildungsreise. He presumably met Caravaggio (1571–1610) in Rome, although any personal contact between the two artists must have been of short duration, since in 1606 Caravaggio, in the wake of his involvement in a series of increasingly violent incidents, fled to Naples, pursued by the papal police. Nevertheless, Caravaggio’s uncompromising realism so impressed the young artist from the north that it became a signature feature of his own work; the manner is exemplified in the Museum’s Crucifixion.

Descriptions of this work concentrate on the realism of the figures—the body of the dead Christ, for example—and the depiction of the two saints as “unpretending Dutch peasants.”2 But they also “speak an extremely sensitive language of color.”3 This sensitivity is evident in the treatment of the saints’ robes and in the deathly hues of the crucified Christ. But as Edith Standen has written, “There is something beyond realism here. The strange, starry brown sky and the low horizon heighten the impression of an almost unbearable supernatural event.”4

This same, strange color of the sky I was witness to in the early afternoon of June 30, 1954, in Berlin, when Central Europe was crossed by the path of a total solar eclipse. It was an eerie experience. In spite of a cloudless sky, the light of day suddenly darkened dramatically and turned an unearthly ash-gray-brown dotted with gleaming pinprick stars. When I saw Ter Bruggghen’s Crucifixion at the Metropolitan about six years later, I was immediately reminded of that afternoon in Berlin, and wondered whether Ter Bruggghen too had been present at a solar eclipse.

My curiosity led me to the Hayden Planetarium at the Museum of Natural History across town, where I was kindly given extensive information about seventeenth-century eclipses by astronomer K. L. Franklin. And indeed, in the early afternoon of October 12, 1605, there had been a total solar eclipse in the city of Rome. This must have happened shortly after Hendrick Ter Bruggghen arrived in Italy. Ter Bruggghen must also have seen, in addition to the solar eclipse in Rome, the annular eclipse that occurred in the Netherlands sixteen years later, on May 21, 1621.5 Although not as spectacular as a total eclipse, the annular eclipse would surely have reinforced the artist’s memory of his Roman experience.

A solar eclipse occurs when the moon passes between the earth and the sun, thereby obscuring the earth’s view of the sun, usually for less than ten minutes. An annular eclipse occurs when the sun and the moon are exactly in line, but the apparent size of the moon is smaller than that of the sun. Hence the sun appears as a bright ring, or annulus, surrounding the outline of the moon. This configuration can occur only during a new moon. Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of Christ after the Crucifixion—the subject of Ter Bruggghen’s masterpiece—takes place on the first Sunday after a full moon following the spring equinox, on March 21.

In the Gospels, Matthew (27:45), Mark (15:33), and Luke (23:44, 45) each describe “a darkness” that descended over the land when Christ was on the cross, starting at noon and lasting for three hours. Luke gives the most detailed account:

And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. / And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

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Figure 1. Hendrick Ter Brugghen (Dutch, 1588–1629). *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John*. Oil on canvas, 154.9 x 102.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Funds from various donors, 1956 (56.228). See also Colorplate 4.
Another work in the Museum’s collection, in a different medium, that shows the crucified Christ between the Virgin Mary and Saint John—with the additional figures of Saints Catherine and Margaret—is a fourteenth-century German tapestry probably from the region of Constance. The tapestry’s most remarkable feature is the background, a pattern of bright yellow stars in an azure sky. Here the weaver interprets Luke’s three-hour darkness as a true night sky, not as an eclipse.6

Romanesque representations of the Crucifixion often show a stylized sun and moon above the cross, without any sign of darkness. Perhaps one of the first realistically represented moons in Western art is a panel of the Crucifixion by Jan van Eyck (active by 1422, died 1441; Figure 2), also in the Metropolitan Museum. Here the waning moon hangs low in the early morning sky, as it would appear just a few days after a full moon, correctly representing the sky on a Good Friday and circumventing the necessity of having to deal with the darkness at noon.

Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1475/80–1528), in the Isenheim Altar at Colmar, Alsace, provides a different interpretation altogether. Here the darkness appears as a black weather cloud with only a dim “squall line,” as sailors call it, at the horizon (Figure 3).

Ter Brugghen’s representation of the darkness at noon as a solar eclipse is evidently based on his personal experiences. And although astronomically incorrect, it serves well to heighten the scene, creating the remarkable, “almost unbearable supernatural event.”
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NOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
5. Personal communication and letters, February 22 and March 11, 1983, from K. L. Franklin. I would like to thank James Draper for bringing to my attention that the German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) also witnessed the 1605 eclipse in Rome.