ART AND OCCUPATION

Lucas Gassel, *Coppermine* (also known as *Landscape with Mines and Forge*) 1544.

Oil on wood, 56.5 x 106.5 cm. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

This birds-eye view of a sixteenth-century mining and metal manufacturing operation is full of industrial detail. [1] The buildings on the left-hand hillside house the winding gear (one of which is horse-drawn), a wagon train of horses and carts is coming down the barren hill and a miner pushes a wagon on a rail track out of an adit. In the foreground ore is being graded with rakes and transported by wheelbarrow. A worker struggles to carry a large container (possibly an empty crucible) on his back whilst a nearby colleague hammers a large casting to release it from its mould. To the right and left are water-powered furnaces. The scene is set in a fictional landscape with fantastical mountains, rivers, lakes and seas. A richly clothed physician, accompanied by his chic young assistant, takes centre stage and with his fine white horse safely hitched he points authoritatively at the bowl of freshly produced vomit held by a distraught worker for a sick colleague (presumably suffering from the effects of exposure to some toxic metal). [2] To the left a woman in red carries a pitcher containing water or wine. Her general appearance, demeanour and location amongst the workers grading ore suggest that she supplies more than just liquid refreshment.

However, Gassel’s real purpose is not to record industrial progress. Although he celebrates the arrival of new technology he alludes to its adverse impact on society. In the right foreground a kingfisher (traditionally associated with peace and security) gazes at a blackberry bush (the symbol of wisdom) and turns its back to a thistle, an evil plant that only grows on barren soil. [3] The nobles watering their horses in the nearby lake ignore the ravaged hills behind them, whilst the miners content themselves with earthly pleasures.

This was a turbulent time in Europe characterized by the growth of usury, profit, capitalism, bankruptcy, greed and war. The demand for armaments fed the growth of free enterprise in manufacturing with consequent damage to society and the environment. Antwerp’s metal merchants were the main beneficiaries. [4] They were bankrolling the kings and queens of Europe in exchange...
for mining and mineral rights. In 1557 Spain and France and later (1560) Portugal all declared themselves bankrupt. [5] They also financed the pope in exchange for the entitlement to sell indulgences, and monopolized the import licences for the ‘Holy Wood’, guaiacum, the mainstay of treatment for syphilis (by now a terrible pandemic across Europe). They already had a monopoly on the only other ‘cure’, mercury, which was mined mainly in Northern Spain.

Lucas Gassel was born in Helmond before 1500 and died in Brussels around 1570. He captures the conflict between industry and society and uses a ‘world landscape’ format to suggest rhetorically the extent of the problem. The physician’s central role he leaves for us to contemplate.

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References

3. van Sprang S. Curator’s file, Inventory Number 3171, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Bruxelles.