

**“Creativity and Creation: Nature, Spirituality and the Paradox of Size in Adam
Elsheimer’s *Flight into Egypt*”**

L, Elsheimer, *Flight into Egypt*, c.1609

R, Elsheimer, *Self Portrait*

Some time in the first decade of the seventeenth century, probably no later than 1609, Adam Elsheimer, an expatriate German artist living in Rome, here on the right, completed this painting of the Flight into Egypt, which is now located in Munich.. Elsheimer is well known to those within the German art field, and to scholars of the Baroque period, to which this painting belongs, for two primary reasons: he influenced Rembrandt and Rubens, whose names have great currency today, and he was one of the pioneers of the naturalistic landscape. This painting is his greatest achievement in this genre, being at the same time the first known, realistic representation of the night sky in the history of Western art, and a virtuoso translation of the vastness of this space onto a physical support of relatively small proportions. But while the scientific and naturalistic aspects of *Elsheimer’s Flight into Egypt* have garnered much attention, there has been little discussion of their role in conveying the narrative. This in itself is a worthy art historical project, but will not be my focus today. Instead, with the themes of this conference in mind, I am considering the relevance of this painting – this image – to viewers who do not find immediate engagement in the biblical story itself. I will demonstrate that here the interaction between the visual form, style, and physical presence of *Elsheimer’s Flight into Egypt* conveys broader Christian themes; that these elements are designed to draw visual attention to its painted surface, and inner attention to the world it represents; to prompt a consideration of creativity in art and viewing; and to provoke the contemplation of Creation itself, suggested here in its beauty, glory, humanity, and ultimately, mystery – themes at the heart of Christianity.

Few of Elsheimer's works are signed or dated, and little is known about his life.¹ He was born in Frankfurt and baptized Lutheran in 1578. He apprenticed in Germany but soon left for Rome, stopping for several months in Venice on the way. Here he studied the work of prominent sixteenth-century Venetian painters, and met up with fellow expatriates, who exposed him to another type of painting with more Northern origins – the Mannerist landscape.

One of the most important artists working in this style was Jan Brueghel the Elder.

**L, Brueghel, *Harbor with Christ Preaching*, R, BLANK
c.1595**

Brueghel created small, delicate and decorative compositions that emphasized the artifice in art by distorting natural forms and their surrounding space. Mannerist landscapes typically offered a panoramic view with a distant level of detail far beyond what would be visible to the naked eye. In Brueghel's *Harbor with Christ Preaching*, for example, an impossibly detailed distant view recedes in the typical schematic version of atmospheric perspective, rendered as bands of green, white and blue. Brueghel is able to achieve these jewel-like tones, and this precision of detail, by painting with oil on a copper support – a technique that Elsheimer himself would use for the *Flight into Egypt*, and almost all of his other paintings.

Elsheimer became quite adept at working in the Mannerist style, but his early work indicates that he was equally interested in the other major trend emerging in the later 16th century: painting figures and landscapes with less emphasis on artifice, and more on the imitation of nature.¹

R, Tintoretto, *Flight into Egypt*, 1587

Leaders in this area were the Venetians, who produced large scale paintings of the Christian subjects that traditionally leant themselves to landscape settings. In Tintoretto's 1587 *Flight into*

¹ To a degree – the defects of nature were though best idealized through art.

Egypt, here on the left, and measuring 14 by 19 feet, the image is still visibly constructed, with aspects that are deliberately unnatural – notably Joseph’s pose. But the landscape more closely follows the visible world than in Brueghel’s painting.

R, Carracci, *Flight into Egypt*, c.1604

These developments continued into the seventeenth century, and in Annibale Carracci’s *Flight into Egypt*, done c. 1604 in Rome, on the right, and a smaller 4 by 4 feet, we are into the next style, called the Baroque. Here the Holy Family is immediately visible in the center of the composition, but the idealized landscape setting demands equal attention. Carracci is not interested in a panoramic view – the goal of this style of landscape is a more realistic recession into space and distant level of distant detail. The iconography of the scene follows the usual form at this time – Mary holds Jesus as they ride the donkey, Joseph walks alongside, and they are set in an extensive daytime landscape.ⁱⁱ

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Elsheimer was well aware of both these style when he arrived in Rome in the spring of 1600, where he remained until his death 10 years later.ⁱⁱⁱ His artistic output in this decade seems to have been limited; apparently he worked quite slowly – and he never achieved financial success. Indeed contemporary biographers link his premature death to the stresses of debtor’s prison. Nonetheless, in this decade, Elsheimer became a leader in the development of Baroque landscapes and interior scenes. His work was original in both its style – which was a distinctive integration of delicate artifice and an innovative naturalism – and its iconography. He seems to have been particularly imaginative, creating new versions of both common and unusual subjects.

L, Elsheimer, *Jupiter and Mercury in the House of Philemon and Baucis*

His *Jupiter and Mercury in the House of Philemon and Baucis*, here on the left, is a rare illustration of Ovid's tale of the humble old couple visited by the Gods in disguise. These vividly natural figures depicted in an intimate interior would influence Rembrandt's later *Supper of Emmaus*. Elsheimer's unique composition for his *Flight into Egypt* was also admired by fellow artists, including the great Peter Paul Rubens who used it as a model for his own version of the theme, and who wrote of Elsheimer: "in my opinion he had no equal in small figures, in landscapes, and in many other subjects."^{iv}

We do have a few additional facts about Elsheimer's life in Rome. In 1606 he married, and was elected a member of the Academy of St. Luke – the *Self Portrait* I just showed was probably originally intended to hang in their gallery.^v Elsheimer also had many friends and patrons in Roman society. He was part of a circle of Northern expatriates that in addition to Rubens and his brother Philip, included Johannes Faber, the prominent doctor and biologist, who declared that Elsheimer *quote* "so captured the true essence of nature that he opened the eyes of painters not only of his own day but (in this manner especially) those who came after"^{vi} *end quote* In this group was another German, Kaspar Schoppe, a ex-Lutheran who became a militant papist, and who in a letter Rubens credits with having converted Elsheimer to Catholicism.² In Rome Elsheimer joined the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina, where he met fellow artist Karel Oldrago, who is known to have owned 17 of his paintings, which he thought so valuable that they were kept safe in a locked chest. Unfortunately, however, we have yet to find many of the Elsheimer paintings listed in these contemporary inventories. And the situation has been complicated by the many copies made by his admirers and imitators, and the fact that he didn't sign or date most of his works.

² April 10, Rubens wrote to Johann Faber, "... I beg that on the arrival of Signor Scioppius in Rome you will commend me to him, and to his convert, Signor Adam, to Signor Enrico and to the other friends whose good conversation makes me often long for Rome." (Magurn)

L, Elsheimer, *Flight into Egypt*, c. 1610

This *Flight into Egypt* is a rarity in that it is dated 1609 in a contemporary hand, and is probably the same work that is listed as being in Elsheimer's possession at the time of his death in 1610.^{vii}

Modern art history is committed to the idea that Elsheimer's style evolved from a more 'artificial' Mannerism to the naturalism we see here, but my own research indicates that in order to fully appreciate his work, including this *Flight into Egypt*, we must recognize that in some respects, he remained committed to the Mannerist aesthetic. This is evident in the level of detail in the painting and the paradoxical relationship between the size of the work and of the depicted image – elements which have not lost their impact today.

R, Elsheimer, *Flight*, detail of Holy Family

In the center of this night scene torch light allows us to see only the most important details of the Holy Family – Mary embracing Jesus, who is shown as a sturdy, inquisitive child; the family's few possessions strapped to the donkey; and Joseph, who attends to both his family, and the possible sanctuary ahead. The men gathered around the fire at the left are more distant, and therefore smaller, but they are bathed in white light and depicted with a more decorative level of minute detail; further away from the fire the light is more naturalistic, leaving the animals partially in shadow.

R, Elsheimer, *Flight*, detail of the Milky Way

Even though these two sets of figures occupy foreground space, the scene is dominated by Elsheimer's vision of the natural world at night. The moon- and starlit sky occupies almost half of the painting surface, providing, with the large section of silhouetted trees, a canopy for the human figures below. Other artists had painted schematic versions of the night sky, but Elsheimer was the first to show the stars the way they actually look to the casual observer.^{viii}

R, Elsheimer, *Flight*, detail of Moon

He also has painted the moon and its reflection with realistic-looking craters, not as stylized or decorative forms. They create a diffuse glow in the sky and water that illuminates the nearby clouds and tree tops, which appear as discrete entities, but are not detailed beyond optical reality. This maintains a tension between the physical painting as an object of contemplation and as an evocation of the natural world.³

R, Elsheimer, *Flight*, detail of stars

Elsheimer has also avoided an explicit artificiality in the sky by including background shading to indicate the stars too far away to be recognized individually with the naked eye. However, a closer look reveals Elsheimer's miniaturist technique at work once again. He has painted the Milky Way as hundreds of individual stars – as seen here, and as documented by Dr. Quentin Parker at the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh, using equipment designed to detect only star-like objects.⁴

To contemporary viewers with even a passing knowledge of the history of science and religion, the date of 1609, and the innovative astronomical accuracy in this work, point to the excitement and later controversy, created by the celestial observations made by Galileo Galilei in Milan, with his powerful new telescope late in this year. Keith Andrews and Deborah Howard have argued that Elsheimer was unlikely to have known of Galileo's observations of the Milky Way and moon, which were not begun until the end of November of 1609, and not published until March 1610. And even if he heard of these results through his learned circle, it would have left Elsheimer, a notoriously slow worker, precious little time to finish the painting. This of

³ Elsheimer's illustration of the moon's topography – innovative for the time – probably had some connection with contemporary developments in astronomy. Whether he would have had actual knowledge of Galileo's studies of the moon, published in 1610, is debatable. It is possible that Elsheimer retouched his painting of the moon just before his death in December of that year. For the most recent discussion of this issue see Howard.

⁴ Howard, 215.

course assumes that the 1609 completion date is correct.⁵ What has been demonstrated is that in the *Flight into Egypt* Elsheimer was more concerned with apparent realism than astronomical accuracy. The constellations would actually be larger than this, and the Milky Way would not be visible when the moon is full and the sky is cloudy.^{ix} Still, as other scholars have argued,⁶ is an unlikely coincidence that Elsheimer would concern himself with the apparent realism of the night sky at this time, especially given his contact with men who knew the most current scientific developments. And at the very least, his *Flight into Egypt* is a unique artistic record of the emerging revolution in astronomy at that time.

Some later 17th century critics noted the unique qualities of this work – in his biography of Elsheimer, Joachim von Sandrart mentions the Holy Family and shepherds, but reserves his greatest praise for the Milky Way and the moon and its reflection, concluding that *quote* “this work is incomparable both in the whole of its parts and in each individual part.” *end quote* It is this estimation of Elsheimer’s *Flight into Egypt* – as an almost prescient, naturalistic wonder – has stood the test of time. But other than the studies of its scientific content, modern commentary has been surprisingly vague – with a noticeable gap between the recognition of the work’s emotional and spiritual power, and the language used to describe this viewing experience; a gap inadequately bridged in earlier scholarship by the term, ‘poetic’. In the 20th century, Keith Andrews, and Malcolm Waddingham, have elaborated, describing this work in terms of ‘infinitude and domestic intimacy’ and ‘transcendent realism’, respectively. Andrews has also asserted that it is ‘an essay in humanity and compassion’ and ‘a demonstration of the unity

⁵ Howard, 214. According to Byard, Faber was an admirer and friend of Galileo. Whether he would have had actual knowledge of Galileo’s studies of the moon, published in 1610, is debatable. It is possible that Elsheimer retouched his painting of the moon just before his death in December of that year. For the most recent discussion of this issue see Howard.

⁶ Anna Ottani Cavina, Margaret Byard.

between man and nature.”⁷ In a 1992 article Michael Levey briefly touches upon the theme of Incarnation, stating that beyond the obvious size differential between the painting and its image, *quote*, “there lies the further paradox, for the baby being carried through the darkness is the Light of the World and the Creator of the Universe” *end quote*; but he does not pursue this theme.

A scientific emphasis dominates modern scholarship on this painting, but there is no indication that any of Elsheimer’s viewers found the prominent, observed night sky in his *Flight into Egypt* to be in any way controversial. Granted, we do not have any detailed contemporary descriptions, but a letter from Rubens to Faber dated January 14, 1611 gives us an indication of the perceived value of this painting. Rubens writes,

“I should like to have that picture on copper (of which you write) of the "Flight of Our Lady into Egypt" come into the hands of one of my compatriots who might bring it to this country, but I fear that the high price of 300 crowns may prevent it.”

Another clue is found in the writings of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, founder of the Academy of St. Luke, and friend and patron to at least two artists in Elsheimer’s inner circle, and later correspondent with Galileo himself.⁸ Borromeo had great enthusiasm for the microscope and telescope, and for small, highly detailed copper paintings that emphasized the variety and specificity of nature. In a recent study of Borromeo as collector and art theorist, Pamela Jones demonstrates that his appreciation for these landscapes was closely tied to his belief that contemplating the visual beauty of the natural world, and its representation in art, could be a route to spiritual enlightenment.⁹ In a devotional treatise of 1625 Borromeo asks: “What was the

⁷ Andrews monograph, 37.

⁸ Jan Bruegel and Bril.

⁹ Jones, 34.

first thing to greet your eyes when they were opened by God's fingers? Were they not the trees and greenery? Were you not created in the midst of this?"¹⁰

Elsheimer himself left no writings, and there is no documentation of his religious beliefs with respect to nature. But even if there were, we are viewing this painting almost four centuries later – in a postmodern, post-Christian culture, where we are concerned with how art can serve as a bridge to religious experience. Here we ask ourselves: what particular relevance does Elsheimer's *Flight into Egypt* have in our own culture, especially to viewers who are indifferent to the Christian story and its interpretation? This painting prompts another, more specific question in response: how are the broader Christian themes of creativity and Creation conveyed through physical and visual form?

If we consider the physical aspects first, there are two important distinctions between Elsheimer's *Flight into Egypt* and the two paintings of the same subject that I showed earlier, by Tintoretto and Carracci. Recall that the other two *Flights* measured 14 by 19 feet, and 4 by 4 feet, respectively. Elsheimer's painting is only 12.4 by 16.4 *inches*; this big (show paper).

In addition, the other two are both oil on canvas, while Elsheimer's is oil on copper. The smooth non-absorbent surface of copper allows the artist to paint minute details with no visible brushstrokes, and to build up layers of thin glazes resulting in rich color saturation.^x This technique was used by Mannerists who wanted to render an extensive view composed of tiny, precise details, and to create a physical surface that glittered like a precious jewel. This demonstration of artistic virtuosity deliberately emphasizes the physicality of the painting, and undermines its illusory qualities. In the case of panoramic miniature landscapes, the contemporary viewer was surprised and delighted by this physical and visual artifice. A paradox

¹⁰ From *Le Piaceri*, a devotional treatise of 1625

of infinite visual space within a limited frame that demanded alternative viewing positions – within, and above, a created world. An effect that is in itself Mannerist in its capriciousness.

But in the *Flight into Egypt* this technique is heightened by just how realistic this tiny world appears. On the one hand, Elsheimer has suppressed much of the artifice that foregrounds the artistic process itself. The level of detail in the sky is a result of his facility with miniaturist painting on copper, as is the translation of the realistic recession of the trees, the evocation of the stillness and majesty the night sky and the natural world below – to this small panel. But the overall effect is of a painting much larger because there are no visual clues within the image that point to the actual size of the work. This was Elsheimer's particular talent – to miniaturize without diminishing his Baroque naturalism. Far from it – despite the diminutive, decorative scale of his landscapes, their form led the way for other artists who wanted to simulate the visible world rather than fabricate from other artistic models.

Elsheimer's mastery of the Mannerist and Baroque idioms within a single work is an instance of artistic creativity that demands attentive viewing, even in our supersaturated, digitized culture. With its foregrounding of the methods of its own creation, this image also encourages a responsive reflexivity – as does the viewing position above the actual painting itself. Standing in front of this tiny world, the themes of creativity and Creation – and of one's place with respect to each – are layered upon the force naturally carried by the artwork as an index of the mortal artist, which contrasts and accentuates the temporality of both the viewing experience, and of physical existence itself. The painting has lasted 400 years in excellent condition but it is ultimately a finite object – even in its disembodied existence on the web it is ultimately dependent on physical hardware. What is imaged, and what is communicated in the painting goes beyond the transitory, however. Yes, the leaves on the trees that are depicted will

wither and die, as will the trees themselves. Even the stars and the earth itself are not eternal, but their source is. But this divine force present in the Christ Child, nestled in his mother's lap, is largely represented by the immensity and intensity of surrounding natural world – Creation with a capital 'C'. This essentially panentheistic view, at its most basic level, understands God as both within and beyond nature – a paradox no less rich and complicated than that of the humanity and divinity of Christ. As an Episcopalian, with a characteristic preference for 'both/ and' over 'either/or', I find such mysteries both intellectually intriguing and spiritually satisfying – the lack of comprehensible explanations in themselves being a sign of the Holy One at work. In our post-Christian context, Elsheimer's *Flight into Egypt* speaks to these postmodernist inclinations against duality, certitude and artistic intention, and towards complexity, multivalence, and the beholder's role in the creation of meaning.

As an illustration of an earlier, emerging paradigm shift in the conception of the world and humanity's place within it, this image is also particularly relevant to our own context, where we are struggling to adjust to an increasingly complex scientific paradigm. Where telescopic images of distant galaxies that are going ever further back in time, claim to be edging ever closer to the moment of Creation itself, but where the paradoxes of time and space in quantum physics undermine this confidence. In this world, the contemplation of the awesome beauty and mystery of both art and Creation, represented and evoked here in Adam Elsheimer's *Flight into Egypt*, is more important than ever, for Christians and non-Christians alike.

I conclude with the words of the great modern artist Paul Klee:

“Art goes beyond the object, beyond the real one as well as beyond the imagined. It plays an unconscious game with things. Just as a child who plays, imitates us, we in our play imitate those powers which have created, and still create, the world.”¹¹

¹¹ Dated 1924, quoted in Bialostocki, from W. Hofmann, *Zeichen and Gestalt. Die Malerei des 20. Jhdts*, 1957. Punctuation edited for flow.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Munich *Flight into Egypt* is dated in a contemporary hand on the back 1609.

ⁱⁱ The subject of the Flight into Egypt is described in only one gospel: Matthew 2:13-15. Herod the Great, King of the Jew and collaborator with Roman Empire. The 3 wise men told him of the birth of a king in Bethlehem but God had told Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt in time. Herod had all the male children in the town age 2 and under massacred. The Holy Family stayed in Egypt until an angel told them Herod had died (4 BC).

ⁱⁱⁱ Elsheimer arrived in Rome in 1600, by April 21st at the latest, as indicated by his inscription in the *album amicorum* of Abel Prasch, the son of a famous organist of the same name from Augsburg (d.1592), then visiting Rome

^{iv} “Surely, after such a loss, our entire profession ought to clothe itself in mourning. It will not easily succeed in replacing him; in my opinion he had no equal in small figures, in landscapes, and in many other subjects. He has died in the flower of his studies...”

^v This portrait of Elsheimer, likely by the artist himself was probably intended for the member’s gallery. The date of Elsheimer’s election is not based on documents from the institution, which have been lost, but on Andrews’ discovery of a 1606 date included on the painted surface of a near-contemporary copy of Elsheimer’s self-portrait now in the Uffizi. This copy is part of a larger frieze of artist portraits currently located in the Sala dei Archivi in the Accademia. The Uffizi self-portrait is disputed by Weizsäcker, *Beschreibende Verzeichnisse*, 84-86, but Andrews argues convincingly that it is an authentic Elsheimer self-portrait – see Andrews, “Elsheimer’s Portrait,” 2-3, and Andrews, *Adam Elsheimer*, 155.

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^{vi} In Faber’s 1628 book on Mexican animals that discusses Elsheimer’s *Mocking of Ceres* (by name)

^{vii} On the more recently discovered, smaller oval *Flight into Egypt*, acquired by the Kimbell Art Museum (Forth Worth) in 1994 see Keith Andrews. “A Rediscovered Elsheimer.” *Burlington Magazine* 128 (1986): 795-97; and Brown, 195.

This work is listed in the inventory done after Elsheimer’s death in 1610, and not as unfinished, and it, or another version, was owned by Goudt who engraved it in 1613. It is therefore one of the few Elsheimer paintings that can be confidently dated to the end of the artist’s life. This particular painting is recorded in later inventories but has been in Munich since 1813 and is now housed in the Alte Pinakothek. Rubens admired this work and wrote to Faber in 1611 that he should like to see the painting bought by a Flemish collector.

^{viii} In 17th century dark settings become popular, but night scenes are not that common unless subject is magic or hell. Examples include the night scene in predella of Gentile da Fabriano’s *Adoration of the Magi* (1422); Raphael’s fresco in Stanza d’Eliodoro of *Deliverance of St. Peter from Prison*, and Jacopo Bassano’s Nativity scenes.

^{ix} Recognized constellations actually much larger; eg. Plough in top right hand corner. Leo above Holy Family is actually visible near the pole, never so close to the Milky Way. (Howard) The positions of the brightest stars also indicate that Elsheimer made his observations at several different times of the year

^x Copper is non-absorbent so many layers could be built up without the pigments settling, and extremely thin layers of pigment could produce rich color saturation. The smoothness of the support also allowed the artist to use sketchy brushstrokes or to eliminate their appearance entirely. On the technique of painting on copper see *Copper as Canvas*, 74-85; and Jill Dunkerton. “North and South: Painting Techniques in Renaissance Venice.” In *Renaissance Venice and the North: Crosscurrents in the Time of Bellini, Dürer, and Titian*, edited by Bernard Aikema and Beverly Louise Brown. New York: Rizzoli, 1999, 276.