

BRAFA ART FAIR

A REDISCOVERED MASTERPIECE BY GILLIS MOSTAERT



The Devil Sowing Tares

Gillis Mostaert (Hulst 1528 - 1598 Antwerp)

c. 1560-65 | Oil on oak panel | 27 x 35 cm

While peasants sleep in the foreground of this jewel-like panel, a pointy-eared devil strides purposefully through their field, scattering weeds among the wheat. At first glance, Gillis Mostaert's recently rediscovered painting appears to be a straightforward biblical illustration—a parable from Matthew about good and evil. Yet in the religious turmoil of 1560s Antwerp, this small work carried a dangerously progressive message: a call for tolerance in an age of persecution.

The parable's critical verse—"Let both of them grow together until the harvest"—became a rallying cry for moderate theologians arguing against the execution of heretics. By depicting this subject, Mostaert and his contemporaries (including Pieter Bruegel the Elder) were making a subtle but radical statement: only God, not earthly authorities, should separate the righteous from the damned. In a decade that would see the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt and waves of religious violence, such calls for coexistence were as urgent as they were controversial.

Today, as debates over religious freedom, pluralism, and ideological division dominate global discourse, Mostaert's message resonates with uncomfortable immediacy. The painting asks: who decides what is wheat and what is weed? And what damage do we cause when we try to root out what we perceive as evil before its time?

Mostaert's technical mastery elevates this moral complexity. His atmospheric landscape—rendered in subtle browns and greens that anticipate later Dutch painting—creates a deceptively peaceful setting for the devil's mischief. The pointy-eared saboteur, painted with a touch of Boschian grotesquery, moves unseen while a grinning horse mocks its slumbering owner. The scene becomes both a religious allegory and a warning against complacency: evil works while we sleep.

Recently emerged from the historic Clerk collection at Penicuik House in Scotland, this panel represents Mostaert's earliest known landscape and exemplifies why 16th-century Antwerp collectors avidly sought his work—one contemporary owned eighty paintings by or after him. As one of the most important masters of his generation, Mostaert helped pioneer landscape subgenres while collaborating with artists from Cornelis van Dalem to Jacob Grimmer.

At BRAFA, this small painting offers a large lesson: the questions that divided Reformation Europe—about tolerance, judgment, and who holds authority over conscience—remain unresolved in our fractured present.

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