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Bruegel 's Plowman and the Fall of Art Historians

Landscape with the fall of Icarus is Bruegel's most interpreted composition. Poets, philosophers and art historians delved in its mysterious presentation, basing their insights on the copy at the Royal Museums in Brussels. This copy is, however, mutilated and lacks the flying figure of Daedalus that appears in a better preserved copy at the Van Buuren Museum. Though this figure must affect the meaning of the painting, all interpretations ignored it, referring to the Royal Museum copy only.

The numerous interpretations may be classified in two groups, the first reading the painting as a condemnation of human apathy to the suffering of the other and the second, concentrating on the dominant figure of the plowman, suggesting that the painting lauds the noble peasant who goes on with his work notwithstanding any enticement. Both groups failed to read, however, the plowing scene, which must have seemed a manifestation of bad farming to any contemporary of Bruegel.

Seeing the composition in these contexts, a new reading of it as an artistic protest against the rule of Philip II of Spain is suggested.