

# The Moneylender and His Wife

By Quentin Metsys  
Oil and Panel, 1514

## About the Artist

Quentin Metsys (also spelled Mastsys), 1466-1530, was born in Louvain, Belgium and initially trained as an ironsmith. Rumor had it that his wife preferred the silent sound of a paint brush on paper to the loud bang of an iron mallet on anvil. Regardless of the reason, he switched to painting and by 1491 he was mentioned as a master in a guild of painters in Antwerp. He appears to have been a person of faith as many of his painting depicted Biblical scenes or had a moral undertone.

Antwerp had become the center of economic activity in the Low Countries of Belgium and the Netherlands. Importers traded sugar from

Spain, Portugal, and the colonies to other European countries. In addition Jewish refugees fleeing the Spanish Inquisition migrated north seeking a better life. So the mix of trade, cultures, and people using a variety of currencies created the need for moneylenders and moneychangers. The prosperity of the region also made it possible for artists like Metsys to thrive. He eventually became Antwerp's leading artist and founder of the Antwerp School.



## The Painting—A Visual Parable



Parables are a literary device employed to help the listener ponder, reflect, or look for the deeper meaning of the story. The author, or in this case painter, creates a simple surface level tale that the reader or viewer can easily understand. For example, Metsys shows us a man and his wife seated at a table looking closely at various objects in front of them—gold coins and nuggets, silver cups, pearls on a black velvet bag, gold rings, a glass canister, an illuminated manuscript, and a small mirror. In the mirror which is pointed towards the viewer, we see the

stained glass windows of the shop and the reflection of a man in a turban reading a book. The viewer could assume that the man in the mirror, who could be a refugee or a trader, has brought his treasures to be appraised by the moneylender and he is waiting for his reply. It would have been a common

scene in sixteenth century Antwerp and in fact there are numerous paintings of this type from that time.

But Metsys the parable painter has more in mind than simply illustrating daily life. So he strategically planted clues to catch the attention of the curious and help them look deeper. The first clue is the small mirror pointed towards us the viewer. Along with the man in the mirror waiting for his treasures to be appraised, we the viewer are asked, “What is your treasurer and how do you measure its worth?”

A second clue is the left hands of both husband and wife. It is where all the energy of the painting is concentrated. The husband holds a small scale with his thumb and forefinger and he is about to add a coin to determine the value of the gold nuggets. Meanwhile the wife is turning the page of her prayer book or Bible with her thumb and forefinger. The position of her hand is identical to his. Metsys is suggesting that as the husband weighs the earthly treasure in front of him, the wife is about to weigh the spiritual treasure in front of her, if only she will look more closely.

Instead her gaze is distracted by the worldly symbols of power, wealth, and security. If only she, as well as we the viewer, will look down at the image on the next page of her book. There we see a picture of the Virgin Mary holding the infant child Jesus. It was Mary who surrendered her body to the Lord and the Lord made his home in her. It was Mary who gave up all she had to gain the pearl of great price—Jesus. It was Mary who treasured these mysteries in her heart. It was Mary who sang the praises of the Lord, extolling his mercy and salvation. It was Mary who warns us that the rich, the proud, and the haughty will one day be brought down from their high places and sent away empty handed. It is Mary, the second Eve, who shows us a new way of living. If only the wife will look down and not be tempted to look right.

The temptation to devalue or dismiss the spiritual in favor of the temporal is so subtle—all it takes is a casual glance. Every common man and woman all the way back to Adam and Eve have struggled with this dilemma. Speaking of Adam and Eve, they are suggested by the piece of fruit from the garden located on the shelf just above the man’s head. To the left of that is an underused rosary hanging by a nail. On the right side of the painting above the woman’s head is an extinguished candle suggesting faith that has died. The passionless expression on the faces of the man and woman hint at the vain emptiness of a life preoccupied with worldly wealth to the exclusion of spiritual depth. Finally, to the right of the woman is a partly open door to the backroom of the house with an old man talking to a young man. Notice the window. It is night and darkness has come to this house.

But Metsys is no pessimist. Look again at the small mirror next to the prayer book. For the viewer of the painting there is hope because it is still daylight. There is still time to look, ask questions, and probe more deeply. There is still the opportunity to choose a path that leads to Life, to Love, and to Joy.

Steve Stuckey, April 2017