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## Did Pieter Bruegel the Elder create the earliest Scottish landscape?

Coastal rock formation in 16th-century engraving resembles the famous Bass Rock at the mouth of the Firth of Forth, art historian argues

[TIM CORNWELL](#)

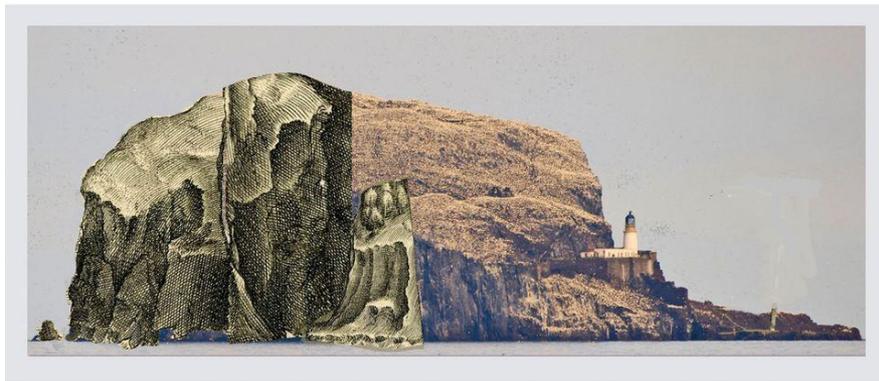
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Peter Bruegel the Elder, Sailing Vessels, Armed Three-Master with Daedelus and Icarus in the sky, engraved by Frans Huys (1560-6)© Trustees of the British Museum

A 16th-century engraving by Pieter Bruegel the Elder contains the earliest image of any Scottish landscape, according to the leading Scottish art historian Duncan MacMillan. His theory is based on what he describes as an uncanny resemblance between a coastal rock formation in Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus* and the famous Bass Rock at the mouth of the Firth of Forth.

Bruegel probably did not visit Scotland but used work by others, MacMillan argues, at a time when Scottish artists worked in Flanders and vice versa. Bruegel's engraver, Frans Huys, included the rock's distinctive outline but reversed it, meaning the tell-tale outline appeared the wrong way round. The coast of Fife, to the north, is also suggested in reverse.



The principal features of Bruegel's image superimposed on the Bass Rock Courtesy Duncan Macmillan

The Bass Rock's huge colony of gannets, who circle the rock and plummet down into the surrounding waters for fish, is said to seal the discovery, as reported in [Scottish Art News](#), the magazine of the Fleming Collection of Scottish art. It is the presence of what are clearly gannets in Bruegel's work that confirms the identification, says MacMillan, a critic and author of *Scottish Art 1460-2000s*.

The Fleming Collection's director, James Knox, says he was "delighted to support Duncan Macmillan's landmark discovery in Scotland's art history." No independent Bruegel experts had responded to comment requests at time of publication.

The Bass Rock, a striking seamount two miles from the Scottish fishing town of North Berwick, has inspired artists from JMW Turner to the modern Scottish pastel artist Matthew Draper. The northern gannets—who take their Latin name *Morus Bassanus* from the Rock—were a famous natural phenomenon recorded as early as 1521 in John Major's *History of England and Scotland*.

The works are an exact fit, MacMillan argues, although only half of the Rock's outline appears in the work. “The overarching point is that Bruegel is explicitly comparing the fate of Icarus to the flying and diving of the gannets. If you look at any early description of Scotland the Bass Rock gets a mention.”

Manfred Sellink, the general director and head curator of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, as well as a co-curator of the mammoth Bruegel show in Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, says he is "very sympathetic" and "willing to accept that Bruegel used Bass Island as a source of inspiration. However, "more contextual information and circumstantial evidence is needed to testify to the fact that Bass Island was a more or less regular visual image that had a reasonable chance of being available for Bruegel in Antwerp in the years 1550-60. What are the concrete indications of direct connections? Just referring with a sweeping statement to merchants relating the two is too easy."

He also questions whether there were proofs of any other artists portraying the Bass Rock in the 16th century, or whether it was known beyond the local area.

**UPDATE:** This article was updated to include comment from Manfred Sellink