

## Imaging the Word: Art & Theology

# Crown of Thorns

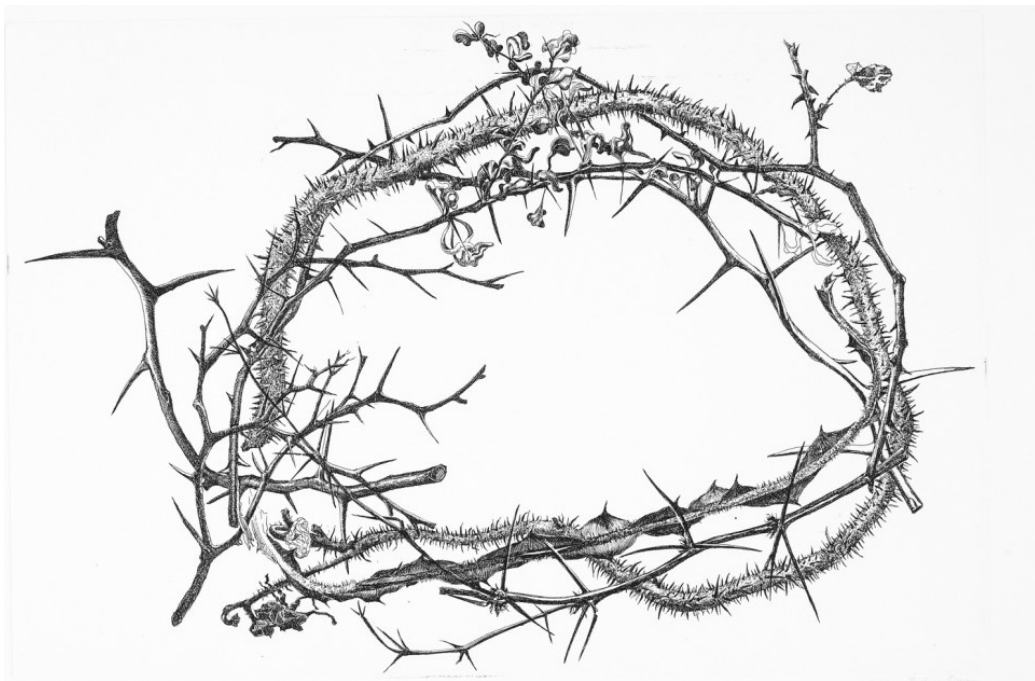
Vines, thistles, seaweed, ivy, and other botanical elements are frequent subjects in the work of Dutch artist Paul van Dongen. One fascinating example of this art is a series of etchings titled *Crown of Thorns*. Created in 2004–5, shortly after his return to the Christian faith, each of these pieces depicts a ring of twining briars that evoke the crown forced mockingly on Jesus just before his crucifixion.



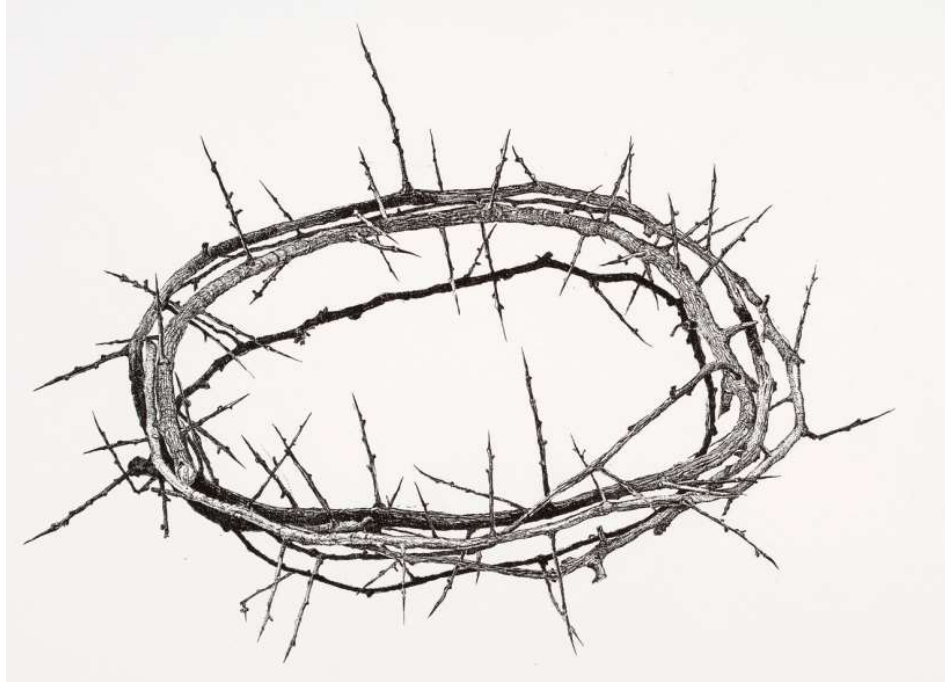
Paul van Dongen (Dutch, 1958–), *Crown of Thorns (2)*, 2004



Paul van Dongen (Dutch, 1958–), *Crown of Thorns (3)*, 2004



Paul van Dongen (Dutch, 1958–), *Crown of Thorns (4)*, 2004



Paul van Dongen (Dutch, 1958–), *Crown of Thorns (5)*, 2005

For many artists, nature is not just organic, material, but symbolic. Van Dongen takes it even further, seeing nature as a sign, even a signal, of something or Someone beyond nature, that is, supernatural. Some items found in nature, like these thorn branches, even have a direct association with the Christian story, such thorns as part of Christ's passion.

The technique Van Dongen used to create these pieces is known as etching.

To create these etchings, Van Dongen first collects organic materials from his surroundings in Tilburg, Netherlands, bringing them back to his studio, where draws them directly from life, with no sketches beforehand or photographs. The drawings are in truth an etching. This is done by coating a metal plate (in van Dongen's case, zinc) in an acid-resistant ground of wax. The artist then draws a picture or design into the plate with an etching needle, exposing the bare metal so that when the plate is dipped into an acid bath, the acid bites into the exposed areas to create recesses that can retain ink. Next the artist removes the wax ground, inks the plate (letting the ink settle into the etched grooves), wipes clean the surface, and finally rolls the plate through a press with a sheet of paper, to which the reverse image adheres.

For his *Crown of Thorns* etchings, he gathered thorny twigs and branches from bramble bushes and bent and wove them into circles, which was surely a painful job”!

Connected to this somber series and yet visually distinct is van Dongen’s vibrant *Verrijzenis* (Resurrection) etching, made with colored inks and, using a process of his own making, printed watercolor.



Paul van Dongen (Dutch, 1958–), *Verrijzenis* (Resurrection), 2006.  
Watercolor etching

Through these etching, van Dongen offers a unique way into the subject of Jesus's resurrection, taking a non-figural, conceptual approach that invites reflection and contemplation. His etching shows a thorny stem with a few withered shoots splitting a crown of thorns, breaking it in two, suggesting the breaking of Jesus's body on the cross and, more hopefully, the breaking of the curse of sin and death, of which thorns are a symbol (Genesis 3:17–19). Perhaps too the artist may be evoking the covenant God made with Abraham, which God ratified by passing as a torch between the divided carcasses of sacrificed animals.

The spherical forms in the background are skulls, another of the artist's favorite themes, which is an allusion to human mortality and to Golgotha, the "Place of the Skull." But the skulls are dissolving. They and the other organic matter are rendered in red, yellow, green, blue, violet—colors of the rainbow, that ancient sign of God's promise from the story of the Flood. Taking the symbolism together, this piece depicts the brokenness of creation being transformed into new life. Even the vertical orientation of the artwork invites our eyes and our thoughts to rise heavenward.

"For me there is no fundamental difference between my explicitly religious works and my more profane, earthly works of art," van Dongen says. "Nature with its cycle of growing, flowering, dying, and sprouting out again is symbolic to me of Christ and his resurrection. And the other way around."

To contact the artist, or see more of his works, check out his website, [www.paulvandongen.com](http://www.paulvandongen.com) or follow him on Instagram [@paulvan.dongen](https://www.instagram.com/paulvan.dongen).