

Bruegel: (1) Pieter Bruegel I

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(1) Pieter Bruegel I [the elder]

(*b* Breda, *c.* 1525–30; *d* Brussels, 1569).

Painter and draughtsman. Although heir to the early Netherlandish painters, particularly Hieronymus Bosch, Bruegel brought a new humanizing spirit and breadth of vision to the traditional subjects he depicted while creating many new ones. His style and subject-matter were adopted but rarely surpassed by the many artists of the later 16th century and the 17th who were influenced by his work, especially the landscape and genre artists of the northern provinces of the Netherlands. Today, thanks to modern techniques of reproduction, Bruegel's paintings are immensely popular, while as a draughtsman he is scarcely known except to specialists. Yet in the 16th century and the early 17th it was drawings attributed to him, especially those issued by Hieronymus Cock as engravings, that made him famous as a 'second Bosch', a term used by Vasari as early as 1568. Many of the drawings traditionally ascribed to him, however, including some 20 alpine landscapes and village scenes, have now been reattributed to Jacques Savery and Roelandt Savery. It is unclear whether the Saverys made these drawings, which bear 'signatures' and dates ranging from 1559 to 1562, as deliberate forgeries or as virtuoso emulations of a famous old master whose work enjoyed a tremendous revival of interest c. 1595–c. 1610.

I. Life and intellectual background.

The sources for Bruegel's biography are surprisingly scanty: there is, in fact, nothing beyond van Mander's work of 1604, which is lively and anecdotal but not always accurate. Still more surprisingly, Bruegel left no writings, as might be expected from an artist of that period with a humanistic background. The portrait of him in Hendrick Hondius's *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies*, published in 1572 by Hieronymus Cock, shows the profile of a bearded man with refined, intelligent, civilized, 'modern' features.

1. Early life, training and apprenticeship, before 1551.

According to van Mander, Bruegel was born in the village of Breughel near Breda; however, none of the three Flemish villages of that name is close to Breda. Probably van Mander's statement is a biographer's commonplace, and he assumed that Bruegel was of peasant origin because he painted peasants. There is, in fact, every reason to think that Pieter Bruegel was a townsman and a highly educated one, on friendly terms with the humanists of his time. Guicciardini, an Italian contemporary of Bruegel's who lived in Antwerp, was probably more correct when he wrote that the artist came from Breda. Auner (1956) has also argued for Breda as his birthplace, adducing several historical references to support this view. In the register of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke, the

painter's name appears as 'Brueghels': the 's' is a regular patronymic suffix in Dutch, whereas a place of origin would be indicated by 'van'. It may be, however, that an ancestor of Bruegel's was, after all, born in a village of the same name, which then became the family's surname.

The year of Bruegel's birth is equally uncertain. Various scholars have suggested that it was between 1525 and 1530, or between 1520 and 1522; the latter two dates, however, are incorrect (Grossmann, 1955). Bruegel became a master in the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp between October 1551 and October 1552, which makes it likely that he was born between 1525 and 1530.

Van Mander claimed that Bruegel learnt painting in Antwerp from Pieter Coecke van Aelst, and although there is very little affinity between the art of the Romanist Pieter Coecke and the later work of Bruegel, there is no reason in this case to doubt van Mander. In his time Coecke was one of the most admired painters in the country: he was court painter to Emperor Charles V and was moreover active as a sculptor, architect and designer of tapestries, stained glass and festal decorations. Another important early influence on Bruegel was no doubt the Brunswick Monogrammist, who is now generally identified with Jan van Amstel. The elder brother of Pieter Aertsen, van Amstel was brother-in-law to Pieter Coecke and thus close to him on both artistic and family grounds. He provided Bruegel with a stimulus in both landscape and figure painting. As van Mander observed, van Amstel practised the interesting technique of allowing the underpainting to show through as part of the tonality of the final picture; this, as well as the practice of painting in diluted colours, is not found in any of Jan van Amstel's contemporaries but reappears in the work of Pieter Bruegel. According to van Mander, after leaving Coecke's studio, Bruegel went to work for the print publisher Hieronymous Cock, who was also based in Antwerp.

Bruegel seems to have left Antwerp in 1550 at the latest, as between September 1550 and October 1551 he was in Mechelen in the studio of Claude Dorizi, working with Peeter Baltens on an altarpiece (untraced) for the glovemakers' guild; Baltens painted the central panel, Bruegel the grisaille wings. Although this first attested work by Bruegel is lost, the documented commission confirms the connection postulated by Glück between Bruegel and Mechelen, where there were about 150 workshops for *waterschilderen* (an unusual technique involving opaque watercolour or tempera on canvas, which was used for making wall hangings as a substitute for tapestries). This technique was employed by Bruegel in some paintings, such as the *Adoration of the Magi* (Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.), the *Parable of the Blind* and *The Misanthrope* (both Naples, Capodimonte). Mechelen was not, however, the only place where this technique was practised in the 16th century: others who used it were Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Joachim Patinir, Lucas van Leyden, Jan van Scorel and Hieronymus Bosch.

2. Visit to Italy, 1551–c. 1554.

Soon after becoming a master in 1551, Bruegel set out for Italy. He travelled by way of Lyon and the Mt Cenis Pass and may have been accompanied by the painter Marten de Vos (as has been supposed from a letter to the cartographer and scholar Abraham Ortelius from the geographer Scipio Fabius in Bologna, enquiring after de Vos and 'Petro Bruochl', who appear to have stayed there as his guests). Bruegel did not content himself, as was usual, with travelling as far as Rome: in 1552 he continued to Calabria in southern Italy, as can be inferred from his drawing of *Reggio in Flames* (Rotterdam, Mus. Boymans–van Beuningen) resulting from the attack by the Turks in that year. The sheet is neither signed nor dated and is much altered and disfigured by 17th-century wash additions in the foreground. However, the engraving by Frans Huys after Bruegel, entitled *Sea Battle in the Straits of Messina*, clearly shows the town to be Reggio. From Reggio, Bruegel must have crossed to Messina, a view of which is incorporated in the engraving. Grossmann suggested that he went as far as Palermo, since Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* (Madrid, Prado) is clearly reminiscent of the famous fresco of the subject in the Palazzo Sclàfani there. What are still considered by many scholars to be Bruegel's earliest dated works, both drawings of 1552—*Mountain Landscape with Italian-style Cloister* (Paris, Louvre) and *River Valley with Mountain in the Background* (Berlin, Kupferstichkab.)—may also have originated in southern Italy. The painted *Harbour at Naples* (Rome, Gal. Doria-Pamphili) is further evidence of Bruegel's journey to southern Italy.

By 1553 Bruegel was back in Rome, as is known from two etchings by Joris Hoefnagel, inscribed '*Petrus Bruegel Fecit Romae Ao 1553*'. Bruegel's stay in Rome is also attested by the formerly disputed drawing of the *Ripa Grande* (Chatsworth, Derbys) and by the estate inventory of the Roman illuminator Giulio Clovio, which mentions 'a small miniature painted half by himself and half by Pieter Bruegel', as well as other works by Bruegel: a small picture of the *Tower of Babel* on ivory, a *View of Lyon* in gouache, two other landscapes and a gouache with a study of trees. All these works are untraced, but Tolnay (1965 and later) attributed to Bruegel several miniatures in the margin of works by Clovio, including his major work, the Towneley Lectionary (New York, Pub. Lib. MS 91).

Bruegel set out for the north in 1554 at the latest. The route he took has been a matter of dispute: the Mt Cenis Pass, Switzerland and Lyon or the eastern route via Munich? The question arose from attempts to localize the drawings he was thought to have made of alpine subjects. The tradition attached to these alpine views, all of which are now rejected (see §II, 2 below), goes back to an often quoted passage in van Mander, who claimed that 'when Bruegel was in the Alps he swallowed all the mountains and rocks and spat them out again, after his return, on to his canvases and panels'.

3. The southern Netherlands, 1555–69.

Bruegel must have been back in Antwerp by 1555, as in that year Hieronymus Cock published the series of 12 prints known as the *Large Landscapes*. Bruegel's first dated paintings appear from 1557, and this seems to have been a period of great creativity. By the mid-16th century Antwerp was one of the richest and most flourishing towns in Europe. Bruegel's circle of friends and acquaintances included some of the most eminent humanists of the Netherlands, such as Ortelius and the publisher Christoph Plantin. From 1559 Bruegel altered his signature from the Gothic minuscule *brueghel* to the Roman capitals BRUEGEL (the omission of the H may have signified an intention to Latinize his name according to humanist custom).

In 1563 Bruegel married Maria or Mayken Coecke (*b* ?1545; *d* 1578), the youngest daughter of Pieter Coecke van Aelst and his second wife, the illuminator and watercolour painter **MAYKEN VERHULST**. The wedding took place in Brussels, and at the same time Bruegel moved to that city, where his most famous pictures and other major works were created. Pieter and Maria's children, Pieter II, Jan I and a daughter, of whom nothing is known, were born in Brussels. According to van Mander, Jan I was taught to paint watercolours by his grandmother, by whom no painting has ever been identified (though in 1567 Guicciardini described her as one of the four principal female painters in the Netherlands).

Shortly before his death, according to van Mander, Bruegel had his wife burn certain drawings 'which were too sharp or sarcastic...either out of remorse or for fear that she might come to harm or in some way be held responsible for them'. This statement has led to much speculation concerning Bruegel's political and religious views: whether he was an Anabaptist, for instance, or a political satirist. The latter is certainly not the case; but, as a keen observer of social reality, he was certainly not indifferent to the atrocities of the Spanish occupation under the Duke of Alba from 1566 onwards. What danger the destroyed drawings might have represented to a painter who was admired by Cardinal Granvelle, Archbishop of Mechelen and President of the Council of State, and a close friend of Abraham Ortelius, the geographer to Philip II of Spain, is unclear. On the other hand, Bruegel is seen as an adherent of the Neo-Stoic philosophy, acquainted with Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More and with the ethical writings of the humanist Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert (considered an important source especially by Stridbeck, 1956). Ortelius's role was emphasized especially by Müller-Hofstede (in Simson and Winner, p. 75), who stated that 'given his close relations with Bruegel, [Ortelius] is the only reliable authority for the contemporary intellectual background of the latter's art. Any of Ortelius's statements afford a trustworthy basis for examining which of the ideas current in the Netherlands between about 1555 and 1575 can be validly applied to Bruegel's position.' However, it seems most likely that Bruegel, as an educated individualist, was not close to any particular party or religious group, nor indoctrinated with any one

philosophy. His humanistic sentiments were a matter of experience rather than reading; his view of the world was artistic and intuitive rather than philosophical. His work is imbued with a spirit of independence and impartiality towards the phenomena of his time, akin to such minds as Rabelais, Montaigne or Shakespeare.

II. Work.

1. Paintings.

About 40 pictures by Bruegel are known, 12 of which are in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Acquired by Archduke Ernst (1594) and Emperor Rudolf II, they belong to the original core of the Habsburg imperial collections. Not included in this total are lost works or those preserved only in copies, for Bruegel's oeuvre is known to have been a good deal more extensive than it now appears.

According to an old description, Bruegel was a 'second Bosch'. But only two of his paintings bear any relation to Bosch's demonology: the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.) and *Dulle Griet* ('Mad Meg'; Antwerp, Mus. Meyer van der Bergh). The two painters' mentalities were, in fact, distinctly different: Bruegel's work is Bosch secularized. Bosch is late medieval, the last 'primitive'; Bruegel, by contrast, is the first 'modern'. Bosch's pandemonium is poised within a bottomless world of pious fear, with innumerable trap-doors leading to Hell; Bruegel's spirits and goblins play their tricks on the firm ground of humanist *ratio*. In Bosch they were still perceived as real creatures; in Bruegel they are only allusions, often with ironical overtones, and in the drawing of the *Fall of the Magician Hermogenes* (1564; Amsterdam, Rijksmus.) Bruegel finally took leave of these spirits.

But Bosch was not the only source of Bruegel's art. The whole Flemish tradition was important: Joachim Patinir and his followers, but especially Bruegel's immediate predecessors Jan van Amstel and Cornelis Massys. On the other hand, the influence of Italian art (e.g. Titian's landscape drawings, or prints after them) is limited or well concealed; scholars' attempts to identify such influences have arguably had little success. Bruegel assimilated the Italian Renaissance in his own sovereign way. He lacked interest in the nude, and the depiction of sensual nakedness is alien to his work. His figures are rotund, heavy and swathed in thick materials. Rhetoric and declamation were also foreign to him. He was interested in human physiognomy but not in the individual portrait as a genre. There is only one very small self-portrait in the *Road to Calvary* (Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.), where he can be seen, wearing a cap, on the extreme right, close to the pole surmounted by a wheel.

(i) Early period, 1553–60.



Pieter Bruegel I: Netherlandish Proverbs, oil on panel, 1.17×1.63 m,...

The earliest known painting is the *Landscape with Christ Appearing to the Apostles* (c. 1553; priv. col.), in which the figures may be the work of Marten de Vos. Another painting generally regarded as a youthful work is the original *Fall of Icarus*, of which there are two versions, both probably copies (Brussels, Mus. A. Anc., and Brussels, van Buren, priv. col.). The *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559; Berlin, Gemäldegal.), of which at least 16 copies are known, is the first painting to show the characteristic marks of Bruegel's style. It is also the first of three great works of this period, all of which have many small figures scattered in a novel and ingenious manner over a large space. The composition of the *Netherlandish Proverbs* has no direct precedent. Over 100 proverbs have been identified: the most complete and convincing interpretations are those by Fraenger (1923), Grauls (1938) and Glück with Borms (1951). The general theme is that of 'the world turned upside-down', as is indicated iconographically by the precise blue shade of the inverted globe, the blue cloak (denoting deceit)

and so on. The work is a catalogue without condemnation, a kaleidoscope of the Netherlandish vocabulary and the lively wit of the common people. 'The moralist's lament over the sinfulness and corruption of mankind is opposed by the smiling understanding of popular wisdom' (Huizinga). This was certainly Bruegel's view. His method in this early work was to express the figurative language of proverbs literally in pictorial form. The effect is enhanced by the pseudo-logic of village architecture and the everyday setting, which create the impression of an open-air lunatic asylum.

Bruegel adopted the same method in another great early work, the *Children's Games* (1560; Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.). Flemish folklore also figures in a third masterpiece, the *Battle between Carnival and Lent* (1559; Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.). The theme is an old one and occurs in 13th-century Burgundy, but the pictorial treatment is Bruegel's own and unprecedented. Frans Hogenberg's engraving of the subject, published by Cock in 1558, is only a thematic suggestion and not a direct model. Bruegel's picture represents the kind of tournament that actually occurred in carnival processions, with a contest between the allegorical figures of Shrovetide (a portly male character) and Lent (a skinny female one). The left half of the picture belongs to Carnival, the right half to Lent. The tavern and the church confront each other, while in between is an encyclopedic collection of customs proper to the season of festivities and that of penance, depicted as though contemporaneous. The illustrations are as exhaustive as possible, recalling the completeness of the *Proverbs* and *Children's Games*. There has been a vast amount of detailed research into this picture, resulting in the most varied interpretations. It should be emphasized, as Demus pointed out (1981, p. 63), that the picture does not constitute 'a key to allegorical, moral, religious, political or any such "deeper meaning"'; it reveals no particular partisanship on Bruegel's part. The bird's-eye perspective is not mathematical, as has been proposed, but 'extended' (Novotny), in order to accommodate more scenes: the mass of figures forms a large ellipse around the centre and a smaller one around the house in the background. Only real motifs are depicted, and they have been identified in great detail by folklorists (e.g. Demus, pp. 61ff).

Certain customs and motifs featured in the *Battle between Carnival and Lent* also form the subject of separate, later works: the two carnival games 'Orson and Valentine' and the 'Dirty Bride' (or the 'Wedding of Mopsus and Nisa') on the left of the picture appear in woodcuts (Bastelaer, nos 215–16), while in 1568 Bruegel made a painting of *The Cripples* (Paris, Louvre), with figures similar to those at the centre left of the 1559 painting. Related in theme are the *Three Heads* (Copenhagen, Stat. Mus. Kst) generally believed to be by Pieter Bruegel I and the compositions of *Fat Cooking* and *Lean Cooking* (or the *Rich Kitchen* and the *Poor Kitchen*), preserved only in two etchings.

(ii) Middle period, 1561–4.

No dated painting of 1561 is known. For 1562 there are five, including another three tremendous works: the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.), *Dulle Griet* ('Mad Meg'; Antwerp, Mus. Meyer van den Bergh) and the *Triumph of Death* (Madrid, Prado). The last is not dated, but the similarity of its theme suggests that it belongs to nearly the same time as the other two. The three works were perhaps executed for a patron who wanted something in the style of Bosch (Auner, 1956). They represent both a culmination and a turning-point, the prelude to a departure from Bosch's style. The Fall of the Rebel Angels was also depicted by Bosch but only as a small, incidental scene in some representations of Paradise. From him comes the idea that the angels, while still falling, were transformed into hellish vermin. Bruegel developed this scene into an almost inextricable tangle of overlapping figures. In an easily won battle the angels, led by the Archangel Michael in golden armour, drive the loathsome brood, glittering with many colours, down into the chaotic abyss of Hell. In this painting Bruegel ventured to adopt an extremely complicated—almost Baroque—treatment of space. The colouring is the most varied of any of his works, with a subtle rhythmic cycle of yellows, reds, greens and blues in all their tones (Jedlicka, 1938). Yellow, especially, undergoes a palpable development from the most spiritual connotation to the most material. It begins, at the top of the picture, as immaterial light and then materializes in the garments of some of the angels and in their trumpets; it is still more tangible in the glittering gold of the archangel's armour in the centre of the scene and reappears as a ghostly hue, 'much broken, turbid and jelly-like...in the amorphous yet precise mass of the hellish creatures' (Jedlicka). No less masterly is the contrast in the adversaries' external appearance: above, the garments of inviolable

purity; below, the nakedness of animal bodies, slimy, hairy and prickly. The picture may have been suggested by the central panel of Frans Floris's altarpiece of the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1554; Antwerp, Kon. Mus. S. Kst.) in the chapel of St Michael in Antwerp Cathedral and perhaps by Dürer's woodcuts of the *Apocalypse* (1498).

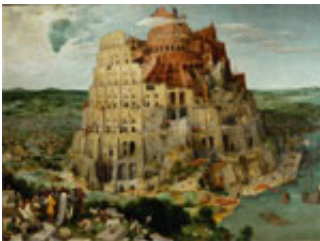


Pieter Bruegel I: Dulle Griet ('Mad Meg'), oil on panel,...

Dulle Griet is one of Bruegel's most intricate compositions and the literature concerning it extensive. The central figure is a tragi-comic, witchlike character from folklore, also connected with the proverbial saying: 'The best Margaret [Griet] ever found was the one that tied the Devil to a cushion.' In Bruegel's work she is on a plundering expedition to the mouth of Hell. The painting, at first confusing in its complexity, has been interpreted in many ways. The simplest is Grossmann's view that 'Mad Meg' represents the deadly sin of avarice: the painting can thus be seen as an enormously enlarged and elaborated version of the drawing in the series of *Deadly Sins* (1558; London, BM).

The *Triumph of Death* is perhaps the richest of all Bruegel's compositions with small figures. In contrast to the fantastic and devilish motifs of the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* and *Dulle Griet*, it consists of a profusion of lifelike human scenes and is easier to read and understand. Van Mander spoke of it as a picture 'in which all means are adopted to ward off death'. As Tolnay pointed out, Bruegel combined two iconographic traditions: the Italian 'Triumph of Death' (e.g. Buffalmacco's work in the Camposanto, Pisa, and the fresco in the Palazzo Sclàfani in Palermo) and the northern '**DANCE OF DEATH**' (as found in Hans Holbein the younger's *Dance of Death* woodcuts). In the former, Death appears on horseback as a skeleton with a sickle, meting out death to all; in the latter, the individual death of a member of any class or estate is shown, with Death personified as a rickety, bony figure who comes to fetch one and all in accordance with the saying 'mors certa, hora incerta' ('Death is certain, though the hour is not'). Bruegel's combination is further enriched by the motif of the 'battalions of death' (Tolnay) fighting against the living. As in *Dulle Griet*, the multiple horrors are presented in a hellish landscape such as that depicted by Bosch and his followers. Bruegel, with his usual completeness and lively sense of fantasy, offered a catalogue of the ways in which death may overtake humans. All try to escape, but no one succeeds. The 'Dance of Death' motif is represented by five forceful examples in the foreground. In one, on the extreme left, the emperor has fallen back helplessly and Death mockingly shows him an hour-glass to indicate that his time has come. The maliciousness of death is emphasized and is indeed part of the main theme.

The composition illustrates Bruegel's powers of organizing both content and form. As is frequently the case, the right and left halves of the picture are differently constructed, each intensifying the other. They are linked by the foreground, in which the five scenes are placed at equal intervals from left to right: the emperor, the cardinal, a pilgrim, a warrior and a loving couple. This is a classical form of Renaissance symmetry, which Bruegel skilfully conceals. Earthly power and love, in the two corners, represent opposite extremes; in the centre is the man who has renounced both, the pilgrim, in the white garb of a penitent. All four corners of the painting are marked by distinctive accents. The forms of the emperor and the lovers are bent so as to fit into them; above on the left are the big funeral bells, on the right the wheel. It has been suggested that this painting alludes to the deaths caused by the political oppression of Spanish rule.



Pieter Bruegel I: Tower of Babel, oil on panel, 1.14x1.55...

Other works from 1562 are the *Two Monkeys* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie) and the *Suicide of Saul* (Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.). These were followed by two masterpieces of 1563, the *Flight into Egypt* (U. London, Courtauld Inst. Gals), which is a landscape like the *Suicide of Saul*, and the *Tower of Babel* (Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.), the undated variant of which (Rotterdam, Mus. Boymans-van Beuningen) is usually thought to have been painted c. 1567-8. The theme of the Tower of Babel does not occur on panel before Bruegel, except for a lost work by Patinir that is said to have been in Cardinal Grimani's palace in

Venice. Bruegel's eerie architectural Utopia is modelled on the ruins of the Colosseum in Rome, which he must have studied while in Italy. He conceived the vision of a Roman monstrosity, the

fearful scale of which far exceeded all architectural megalomaniacs of the past. The Tower of Babylon, described in the Bible and by Josephus Flavius, symbolizes the fact that all the works of mankind are doomed to imperfection. According to Demus, the tower could not be completed because the hubristic design of its builders had reached the limits of possibility. Bruegel's intent is to make evident this frustration: the scene typifies 'a glaring want of coordination', 'a muddled conception doomed from the outset', 'an absurd state of helplessness before the grandiose mockery of a nightmarish bankruptcy of reason'. The impression that it is built on a slant

"...is not to be explained by an intention to show it as likely to collapse. On the contrary, Bruegel's decision, with spurious logic, to make the main axis and all other up-and-down lines vertical in relation to the 'horizontal' approach ramps gives an impression of massive compactness and immovability. The fact that the whole thing is out of true despite this apparent observance of the laws of statics is a crowning demonstration of the radical flaw in its conception (Demus, p. 78)."



Pieter Bruegel I: Road to Calvary, oil on panel, 1.23x1.7...

The *Road to Calvary* (1564; Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.) is Bruegel's largest picture. Its composition is based on a long Flemish tradition going back to Jan van Eyck. Immediate predecessors were works by Jan van Amstel and Pieter Aertsen, which clearly show the extent of Bruegel's imaginative genius. Each of the 200 or so figures is full of rich and lively observation. The intentional playing-down of the main scene (the figure of Christ is quite small but is placed exactly in the centre) expresses a stoical attitude *vis-à-vis* the generality of mankind, indifferent and eternally blind to the significance of great

events.

(iii) Late period, 1565–9.



Pieter Bruegel I: Hunters in the Snow, oil on panel,...

In these last four years of his life Bruegel synthesized all his accumulated experience of landscape, figure painting and composition. In 1565 he painted the great series of *The Seasons* (see fig.); several winter landscapes with religious subjects; the *St John the Baptist Preaching* (Budapest, Mus. F.A.); and a *Peasant Wedding in the Open Air* (Detroit, MI, Inst. A.). Also typical of this last phase are compositions with large figures in the foreground (e.g. the *Peasant Dance*, and the *Peasant Wedding*; both Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.) and others with a few monumental figures (*Land of Cockaigne*,

Munich, Alte Pin.; *The Cripples*, Paris, Louvre; the *Parable of the Blind*, Naples, Capodimonte) or a single figure (the *Unfaithful Shepherd*, Philadelphia, PA, priv. col.). Bruegel must have worked like a man possessed: apart from two or three early works, his whole output of about 40 paintings was produced in a mere 12 years (1557–69), and the last six years in Brussels alone account for nearly two-thirds of the total—about 30 masterpieces, not counting those that are lost or survive only in copies.



Pieter Bruegel I: Return of the Herd, oil on panel,...

The Seasons are unique in 16th-century landscape painting: they achieve a rare combination of nature and vision, idea and reality, visual exploration and the recognition of form—a resounding diapason of everything in nature, and a cycle in which human beings, especially peasants, form an integral part. Compared to this universality of Bruegel's, all later landscapes (except those of Rubens and Rembrandt) are mere fragments of what he conceived and depicted as a unity. Originally *The Seasons* formed a frieze decorating a room in Nicolaas Jonghelinck's house in Antwerp. They

were completed in 1565, having probably taken a year to execute. In 1566, along with other paintings by Bruegel (and a picture by Dürer and 22 by Frans Floris), they were used by

Jonghelinck as surety for a debt of 16,000 guilders; the surety was forfeited, and in 1594 the city presented *The Seasons* to the stadholder, Archduke Ernst. The long and complicated dispute as to whether there were six or twelve pictures has been resolved. There were only six (Demus, p. 86), five of which survive: the *Gloomy Day*, the *Return of the Herd* and *Hunters in the Snow* (all Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.), as well as *Haymaking* (Prague, N.G.) and the *Corn Harvest* (New York, Met.). The sixth, a picture of spring, is lost. The division of the year into six parts, although rare, was not uncommon in the Netherlands. Besides the four main seasons were 'early spring' (*kleinlente* as opposed to *grootlente*) and 'late autumn'. The pictures thus do not have to be assigned to particular months (a point that previously caused confusion). The cycle begins with early spring (the *Gloomy Day*) and ends with winter (*Hunters in the Snow*). Unlike the older tradition of calendar scenes, Bruegel's emphasis is not on seasonal labours but on the transformation of the landscape itself. Novotny (1948, p. 26) drew attention to the basic tonality of the landscapes, and Mössner (no. 86) observed that the six paintings (including the lost one of spring) form a chromatic order: brownish-black for early spring (blue for spring), green for haymaking, yellow for the corn harvest, yellow ochre for autumn and white for winter. Although the paintings do not depict identifiable locations, the cycle is the end product of a long 'incubation' of observations and sketches, which were then transformed into an elaborate imaginative work. Also in 1565 Bruegel painted the small *Winter Landscape with a Bird-trap* (Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.). This extremely popular work was copied over 100 times, more often than any other of the artist's works.



Pieter Bruegel I: Parable of the Blind, opaque watercolour on...

Among the major late works of a monumental character, the *Parable of the Blind* (1568; Naples, Capodimonte) is one of the most profound and fascinating. It is based on the text in Matthew 15:14: 'If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.' The phenomenon of blindness finds its ultimate and fullest expression here, from bodily disability to the symbol of the spiritual blindness of all mankind. The line of straggling, stumbling blind folk illustrates the parable in terms of a parabola, a curve in the mathematical sense. The monumental power of Bruegel's brilliant composition, its complexity and sureness of organization and the interlocking of its many levels of significance were analysed by Sedlmayr (1959, p. 319), who pointed out three associations: with the Wheel of Fortune (the theme of fatality), the grotesque and uncanny Dance of Death and the suggestion of damnation, especially in the countenance of the second man from the right. It remains an open question why Bruegel entrusted one of his most important paintings to the perishable medium of watercolour on canvas.



Pieter Bruegel I: Peasant Wedding, oil on panel, 1.14×1.63 m,...

Even though the *Peasant Wedding* (c. 1568) and the *Peasant Dance* have both been overinterpreted iconologically in terms of greed, anger etc, Demus (1981) has shown that the wedding is depicted exactly according to custom. The table is set up on a threshing-floor, the bride sits alone in the centre of the table, wearing her wreath and with downcast eyes and folded hands; she is not allowed to speak or eat. To the right are the notary, a Franciscan friar and the lord of the manor. The man pouring out beer may be the bridegroom or one of the lord's servants; in any case, the groom, as was customary, is not

at the table. According to Demus (pp. 110–11):

"Not one of the lifelike, individual types is caricatured so as to appear comic, coarse or ugly; though unembellished, all the proceedings are natural and orderly...all [previous] iconological consideration of the picture has ignored two facts. In the first place, it exhibits the full classical unity in which the object, theme and content are one. Secondly, the artistic form developed in and with the objective approach has attained a classical purity that wholly excludes any negative or even humorous intent, implying undue prepossession with the theme."

While it is certainly true that earlier etchings, such as those of Cornelis Massys and, above all, the *Peasant Kermis* and *Peasant Wedding* of Pieter van der Borcht, have a moralizing tone associated with the depiction of riotous excess, this is plainly not the case with Bruegel's two pictures.

The diagonal arrangement of the marriage table is foreshadowed, albeit remotely, in Jan van Amstel's *Feeding of the Poor* (Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Mus.) and looks forward to Tintoretto's *Last Supper* (1592–4; Venice, S. Giorgio Maggiore). Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding* and *Peasant Dance* are so similar in style and content that they have been regarded as pendants or even parts of a planned series on peasant life. Throughout his career Bruegel showed masterly skill in depicting physical movement. In the *Peasant Wedding in the Open Air* (1566) the dance itself is the dominant motif. In the Vienna *Peasant Dance* it is displaced into the middle distance; the couple in the foreground are not yet dancing but are running to join in. The man's leg poised in the air is both distinctive and definitive in form, like the unforgettable pose of the red-capped serving-man in the *Peasant Wedding*. The groups of figures and their relationship to each other are subtly and rhythmically conceived. This painting is neither an allegory nor a genre scene in the 17th-century sense. Instead, Bruegel articulated for the first time, and in individual fashion, what was reduced only later to a pictorial type and a commonplace humorous genre scene. The picture is also a mine of information on folklore.

The riddle of the *Peasant and the Birdnester* (1568; Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.) is still unsolved, as is the meaning of the drawing of the *The Beekeepers* (see §2 below). Also mysterious and much interpreted is the *Magpie on the Gallows* (1568; Darmstadt, Hess. Landesmus.), which, according to van Mander, Bruegel bequeathed to his wife, signifying thereby 'the gossips whom he would deliver to the gallows'. (There is a Netherlandish saying that treasonous talk can bring one to the gallows.) Particular motifs remain unexplained, above all the strange contrast between the lyrical, sun-drenched landscape, the dancing couples and the sombre gallows motif. The *Storm at Sea* (Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.), long regarded as a late work by Bruegel, has now been shown (Demus) to be by Josse de Momper II. The stylistic conclusion was corroborated by a dendrochronological examination of the oak panel by Dr P. Klein of Hamburg, which showed that the tree was felled in 1580 at the earliest, at least 11 years after Bruegel's death. Nothing has survived of the series of pictures, which according to van Mander, the magistrates of Brussels commissioned from Bruegel to commemorate the digging of the Brussels–Antwerp canal (completed in 1565). Apparently the work was interrupted by Bruegel's death.

2. Drawings and prints.

By 1907 Bastelaer had already enumerated 104 original drawings, and in 1908 he was the first critic to compile a list of prints by Bruegel. The basic critical catalogues of the drawings were compiled by Tolnay in 1925 and 1952 and, on the basis of his work, by Münz in 1961. Since then, however, research has drastically reduced the number of drawings attributed to Bruegel.

In 1970 van Leeuwen and Spicer independently recognized that the c. 80 figure studies carried out *naer het leven* ('from life'), until then given to Bruegel (Münz, nos 51–88 and 91–125), were the work of Roelandt Savery. The second major reassessment came as more of a shock. In 1986 the whole series of 'small landscapes' (M 27–45), the series of three sheets depicting the *Gates and Towers of Amsterdam* (M 47–9) and the *Parable of the Blind* (M 46)—a total of 23 sheets on which scholars had previously relied as authentic (except for one or two that were occasionally called in question)—were shown by Mielke to be forgeries by Roelandt's brother Jacob Savery (see also 1986–7 exh. cat., nos 97–100). It was subsequently recognized by Mielke (1991) and P. Dreyer (lecture at College Art Association, 1993) that even the large alpine landscape drawings could not be by Bruegel. The *Upper Rhine Landscape* (New York, Pierpont Morgan Lib.), until then considered the largest, most beautiful and attractive of Bruegel's landscape drawings, was found to be on paper with a watermark dating to c. 1585–8. It was reattributed to Roelandt Savery. The rejection of this drawing effectively eliminated most but not all of the other landscape drawings from Bruegel's oeuvre. Some areas, however, remain debated: the Italianate landscapes of 1552 were still accepted by Mielke but rejected by Dreyer. Mielke also accepted those surviving drawings (London, BM, and Paris, Louvre) related to Cock's series of 12 etchings known as the *Large*

Landscapes, all composite alpine landscapes except for *Pagus nemorosus*, which depicts an idyllic Flemish village beside a wood. When published by Cock c. 1555, these prints mentioned Bruegel as the designer, but other prints (and designs) traditionally associated with him, such as Cock's two series of prints of *Views of Villages near Antwerp* (1559 and 1561), do not carry Bruegel's name until later editions (e.g. that published by C. J. Visscher in 1612).



Pieter Bruegel I: Elck ('Everyman'), pen and brown ink, 209×292...

Even after the loss of these major groups of drawings, it is clear that Bruegel was a draughtsman of extraordinary range, importance and innovative power, who was responsible for an important group of allegorical and satirical compositions with small or numerous figures. In 1556–8 he made the preliminary drawings for etchings published by Cock that established his reputation as a 'second Bosch': the *Temptation of St Anthony*, *Big Fishes Eat Little Ones*, the *Ass in the School* (M 127–9), the allegories of the *Seven Deadly Sins* (M 130–36), the *Last Judgement*, *Elck* ('Everyman') and *The Alchemist* (M 137–9). In 1559–60 followed the allegories of the *Seven Virtues* (M 142–8); in 1561 *Christ in Limbo* (Vienna, Albertina); and in 1564 the *Fall of the Magician Hermogenes* (M 150), Bruegel's last work with a demonological theme. There are also two non-allegorical scenes of popular life: *Skaters before the Gate of St George, Antwerp* (1558; M 140) and the *Kermis at Hoboken* (1554; M 141).

The theme of the *Seven Deadly Sins* and the *Seven Virtues*, a series that appeared two years later, come from the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius: the battle between virtues and vices for the human soul. The virtues and vices first began to be depicted as female figures with characteristic attributes during the Middle Ages. However, Bosch (in the tabletop in the Prado, Madrid) had already renounced animal attributes and expressed the allegories as scenes of everyday life. Bruegel consciously reverted to the older schema, showing the sins at work in a world dominated by hellish creatures and using animal attributes in an archaic style (see 1975 exh. cat., nos 64–74). The complicated iconography of his allegories is significant on several levels (see Stridbeck, 1956). However, the drawings again confirm Bruegel's critical detachment, his ironical attitude expressed in conscious archaism and the inexhaustible fantasy of his often malicious humour. Bruegel is not an austere moralist. The satirical intention of the whole cycle of Virtues is clear from the buffoonish slaughter of *Fortitude* (Rotterdam, Mus. Boymans–van Beuningen) and the horrors of *Justice* (Brussels, Bib. Royale Albert 1er): the scenes are a sarcastic travesty in which each virtue turns into its opposite. The world may be topsy-turvy and behave accordingly, but it is described exactly as it is—big fishes do eat little ones. The picturesque accumulation of all possible examples already foreshadows the encyclopedic quality that is fully apparent in the first three big paintings of 1559–60: the *Netherlandish Proverbs*, the *Children's Games* and the *Battle between Carnival and Lent*.

The elaborate and disquieting *Elck* (London, BM) is doubtless drawn from contemporary moral philosophy and has been interpreted as an allegory of human egoism. The inscription, in three languages, comprises three different sayings: 'Everyone seeks himself', 'Everyone tugs for the longest end' and 'No one knows himself'. Elck is the eternal unsatisfied seeker, entangled by his own cupidity; the accumulated objects take on a *vanitas* character. His restlessness makes him a victim as well as a doer. The drawing exemplifies the many-sidedness and multiple significance of Bruegel's inventions. Among the humorous details is an empty, broken chest on which Bruegel has depicted the emblem of Hieronymus Cock's firm; just above it, two old men tug at a twisted piece of cloth—perhaps an allusion to Bruegel's business connection with Cock?

In the delicate drawing of *The Alchemist* (1558; Berlin, Kupferstichkab.), the moral appears to be that the alchemist's promises are illusory: they will not make the family rich but bring them instead to the poor-house. The *Resurrection* (Rotterdam, Mus. Boymans–van Beuningen), dated 1562 by Grossmann (1966, no 30), is a grisaille-like brush drawing in a vertical format unusual for Bruegel (see also 1975 exh. cat., no. 85). The drawing is much damaged and has been questioned because of the unusual technique, but Grossmann's convincing analysis has removed lingering doubts as to the authenticity of this striking composition, which combines the gospels of St Mark (16:1–7) and St Matthew (28:1–8). Bruegel chose a different point in the traditional biblical

account, in order to depict the women at the sepulchre and the angel seated beside it. Bruegel's vivid narrative sense is expressed in the massive size of the stone beside the grave, enhancing the effect of the miracle. Although not originally so intended, an engraving was made of the sheet, probably by Philip Galle—the gesture of blessing thus appearing the wrong way round.

Between 1560 and his death in 1569 Bruegel was fully occupied with the large paintings, so that his professional graphic work for Cock declined in quantity. Nonetheless, he executed some particularly fine compositions on paper, reduced to a few monumental single figures, which in some cases merge into the landscape—an evolution of style that is also found in his paintings from 1565 onwards. *The Shepherd* (Dresden, Kupferstichkab.), of which there is an exact copy in Vienna (Albertina), probably dates to c. 1560–63. The '*Painter and his Patron*' (c. 1565; Vienna, Albertina), also regarded as a late work, has been interpreted in very different ways but may express the artist's somewhat hostile attitude towards a pedantic layman. The painter with his expressive countenance has been regarded by some as a self-portrait and by others as an idealized portrait of Bosch; both conjectures are likely to be wrong. Contemporary admiration of the drawing, which was probably conceived as an independent piece, is attested by four good copies (M A 45–8).

In 1563 Bruegel executed the two delightful allegories, preserved only as prints, the *Fat Kitchen* and the *Lean Kitchen*; in 1565 both *Spring* (Vienna, Albertina) and the allegorical *Calumny of Apelles* (London, BM); in 1566 the designs for woodcuts (Bastelaer, nos 215–16) with figures from a carnival farce, *Orson and Valentine* and the *Dirty Bride* (M 153); and in 1568 *Summer* (Hamburg, Ksthalle) and *The Beekeepers* (Berlin, Kupferstichkab.). Religious themes do not occur in any of these drawings. Although *Spring* and *Summer* are separated by three years, they are part of a planned series of the *Four Seasons*, which was interrupted by Bruegel's death. Cock completed the series with *Autumn* and *Winter* by Hans Bol and published them as prints in 1570. Unlike the large paintings of *The Seasons* of 1565, which were really a depiction of the transformations of nature, Bruegel's designs for engravings emphasize typical seasonal activities in the traditional way of calendar illustrations. Here again he went to work in a very novel and personal manner. *Spring* combines the months of March, April and May; here, even more clearly than in *Summer*, the activities of each month are arranged spatially one after the other. While *Elck*, for instance, is imbued with deep unrest, the atmosphere here is one of quiet and calm, despite busy activity. The silently organized labour of the workers is expressed by the repetition of movement and emphasized by the hiding of their faces, their round caps and eyes fixed on the ground. The maid on the right also looks downwards. (This self-absorption of the figures is brought to its logical conclusion in the complete anonymity of *The Beekeepers*.) Bruegel's stipple-like technique of drawing is developed to the full and achieves an inimitable delicacy in the gradation of volume, which is lost in reproduction. The gravitas of the figures has, not without reason, been compared to Michelangelo; but suggestions as to particular models are not really convincing. Direct borrowings in Bruegel are not known; nor does he ever repeat himself. Despite the similarity of theme in the drawing of *Summer* and the painting of the *Corn Harvest* of 1565, no single motif is repeated literally. In *Summer* three months are again combined, but two (June, haymaking, and July or August, the fruit and vegetable harvest) are thrust to either side by the main motif of reaping (July or August). The whole scene is bathed in shimmering summer heat. Bruegel needs no shadow to represent light; however, the scene is not only full of light, but sweltering as well. The bodies are heavy, and so is their toil in the summer sun. This is emphasized by the drinking labourer whose thrown-back head expresses the ecstasy of quenching his thirst. The effect of facelessness can be seen here even more clearly than in *Spring*, 'the artist displaying his virtuosity by showing most of the figures as turned away' (see 1975 exh. cat., p. 91). As is clear from the figure of the mower who appears left-handed, this drawing too is in reverse for the engraving.

The impressive drawing of *The Beekeepers* is generally regarded as a late work. The date MDLXV... is cut off on the right and should certainly be read as 1568. It may have been Bruegel's last work and is undoubtedly one of the most mysterious, with its disguised figures and their circumspect movements. Its presumed meaning can be elucidated from the contemporary proverb on the right, which reads: *dye den nest Weet dyen Weeten/dyen Roft dy heeten* ('He who knows where the nest is has the knowledge; he who steals it has the nest'); the boy in the tree is, in fact, plundering a bird's nest. But this proverb has, in turn, led to all kinds of divergent interpretations, none of which is totally convincing. (This sheet has always been discussed together with the equally enigmatic

painting of the *Peasant and the Birdnester*.) The *double entendre* of the proverb is that a bold wooer will fare better than a shy one. While the words are inscribed in the same ink as the drawing, opinions differ as to whether they are in Bruegel's hand.

Altogether Bruegel published 64 etchings with Cock, but there is only one by his own hand, the *Rabbit Hunters*. Also published by Cock, it is signed at the lower left BRUEGEL with the date 1560. This has previously been read as 1566, but on stylistic grounds the work must be earlier; moreover, the correct date, 1560, appears on a reversed copy after the preliminary drawing (Paris, Fond. Custodia, Inst. Néer.). The composition recalls that of the *Large Landscapes*. Bruegel used the etching needle as a drawing tool, rather than fully exploiting the new medium (see White, in Simson and Winner, p. 190); this is perhaps why he did not try further experiments in etching. Philipp Fehl (see 1975 exh. cat., nos 75 and 75a) has pointed out that the sportsman is aiming at two rabbits at once and thus will miss them both. The drawing (though not the etching) shows a third hare in the foreground, probably to indicate that the hunter could easily hit it were he able to be content with one only. Fehl cited Erasmus of Rotterdam's proverb 'Duos insequens lepores neutrum capit' ('He who chases two hares will catch neither'). The man with the spear, according to Fehl, is a marauding soldier who is about to turn the tables by hunting the hunter. This is plausible, but as an example of Bruegel's humour rather than his 'cosmic pessimism'.

III. Critical reception and posthumous reputation.


Among the first to collect Bruegel's work were Cardinal Granvelle and the rich, highly respected Nicolaas Jonghelinck of Antwerp. Which or how many pictures Granvelle owned is not known. The only one whose provenance can be traced back to him with certainty is the *Flight into Egypt*. Jonghelinck possessed no fewer than 16 paintings by Bruegel, including *The Seasons*, a *Tower of Babel* and the *Road to Calvary*. The number of works by Bruegel owned by Abraham Ortelius is also unknown, but he certainly possessed the *Death of the Virgin* (Upton House, Warwicks, NT), a grisaille that he had engraved.

The 17th, 18th and even the 19th century had no real understanding of Bruegel and regarded his son Jan as a superior artist. For a long period Pieter the elder was appreciated merely for the 'drollness' of his peasant figures. 'His field of enquiry is certainly not of the most extensive; his ambition, too, is modest. He confines himself to a knowledge of mankind and the most immediate objects.' This view, expressed in 1890 by Hymans, the 'rediscoverer' of Bruegel, is questionable in many respects; it is typical of a classicist misconception that for 300 years prevented a true understanding and appreciation of Bruegel's art. It must be said, however, that his work was then known chiefly from engravings, crude replicas and imitations. His masterpieces were removed from public gaze, reposing in aristocratic collections; no fewer than 14 belonged to the Habsburgs. Only from the beginning of the 20th century did his greatness begin gradually to be recognized by art historians such as Hulin de Loo and van Bastelaer, Romdahl, Baldass, Glück, Tolnay, Friedländer and Dvořák. His work as a draughtsman was radically reassessed in the last quarter of the century, and his contribution to the development of landscape drawing, in particular, was reconsidered.


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