

*The Dancer* to Alberto Giacometti's *Gazing Head*, from Marc Chagall's *The Fiddler* to Kazimir Malevich's *Yellow Plane in Dissolution*, sculptures and paintings follow one another in intriguing combinations. Piet Mondriaan's sparse compositions are adorned with the dynamic, fragile mobiles of Alexander Calder, while Dutch artist Herman Kruyder's *Distrust* forms a suggestive pair with Chaim Soutine's slaughtered ox. Edward Kienholz's *The Beanery* has been restored to its former glory; the surreal reflection of the drinkers with clocks instead of faces is a favourite with the public. A striking choice is the dedication of an entire wing of the museum to a permanent design exhibition. The highlight of this is Gerrit Rietveld's ultra modern 1926 piece *Harrestein Bedroom*. It is clear that director Ann Goldstein has serious plans for the *Stedelijk Museum*. The opening exhibition sets the tone for things to come. The retrospective of Mike Kelley, following the artist's sudden death, was a world first. It ran until 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013. The exhibition is to travel on to Paris, New York and Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup>

JULEKE VAN LINDERT

*Translated by Anna Asbury*

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#### NOTES

1. The large square which is also home to the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum and the Concertgebouw.
2. Luc Tuymans' portrait of the Dutch Queen Beatrix.
3. The exhibition is on show in the MoMa in New York from 7<sup>th</sup> October 2013 until 5<sup>th</sup> January 2014 and in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles from March to June 2014.

## Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Limelight Again

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (approx. 1525-1569) continues to fascinate new generations of art lovers. And certainly not only in Flanders - where, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century his work has, consciously and unconsciously, been considered an historical representation of Flemish identity, even though it is by no means historically correct. There is tremendous interest all over the world for the master's oeuvre and for his intellectual and artistic legacy. In the last few years, numerous interesting publications have appeared, taking a wide variety of approaches and not only intended for the academic world, but also aiming to inform a much wider readership of the master's small but exceptionally rich and complex oeuvre. In this article I would like to turn the spotlight on the varied and abundant seam of current Bruegel research by making a small selection of what to me seem the most fascinating and stimulating recent contributions.

One publication that is undeniably monumental and important is *Pieter Bruegel* by Larry Silver, an American professor and specialist in 16<sup>th</sup> century Netherlandish art. Apart from the fantastic quality of the reproductions, the importance of this book lies in its synthetical and thematically classified study of the whole oeuvre - all the genres and all the subjects, in paintings, drawings and prints. Whereas in virtually every other study published over the last few decades, Bruegel has been studied from a specific angle, integrated approaches to this extremely complex oeuvre at this sort of level are exceedingly rare (there have of course been countless popular publications that aimed to do this, which were very inferior in academic underpinning and content). Silver's approach to Bruegel's iconography and place in cultural history - which has elicited numerous studies that were as 'scholarly' as they were entirely hypothetical - is balanced and subtle. Absolutely to be recommended for the expert and the enthusiast. This book is a worthy successor to Walter Gibson's more compact 1978 book on Bruegel, whose substance still stands up.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Wine of Saint Martin's Day*, painting discovered in 2010, Prado Museum, Madrid

Gibson has undeniably been the godfather of Bruegel research since the late 70s. His most recent addition to a long list of important publications is a study of the depiction of proverbs in Netherlandish art in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, a subject in which Bruegel played a crucial part. In addition to many publications on individual paintings of proverbs, this is the first study in which this topic has been covered systematically. Like many other books by Gibson, this one is a delight to read: balanced, well-written and with a down-to-earth look at the subject that is only possible if the author has an unrivalled knowledge of the iconography of Bruegel and his contemporaries.

As one might expect, in the last few years there have of course been talented young researchers in the United States and Europe who have devoted a dissertation to aspects of Bruegel the Elder's oeuvre. These are usually very much influenced by what in the trade is called 'new art history'. This is a slightly misleading label, as this is a research trend that has already been around for several decades and whose vague common denominator, to summarise it very concisely, is a highly postmodernist and theoretical approach. Although there is a lot of chaff amongst the corn, two recent dissertations definitely come to the fore – two studies that combine new angles with a keen eye, thorough art history knowledge and down-to-earth interpretation. The Dutch researcher Matthijs IJssink compares Pieter Bruegel's oeuvre with that of Hieronymus Bosch (approx. 1450-1516); this

comparison is often made, but it is usually limited to iconographic derivation. IJssink shows convincingly that Bruegel emulated and was stimulated by the older master and his views as an artist, and entered into artistic dialogue and rivalry with him. It is also striking that Bruegel does this in a specific section of his work: everything associated with hell, the devil and evil. In an interesting aside, IJssink also looks at the artistic rivalry between Bruegel and his successful contemporary Frans Floris.

Todd Richardson's ideas are based on the same premise, which is that in Pieter Bruegel's generation several artists became increasingly aware of 'art as art' and in their work also deliberately adopted positions on artistic and art theory choices, often in reaction to work by other artists; in short, a purposeful artistic dialogue. This young American researcher concentrates on Bruegel's late work and, carrying on from previous studies of his drawings and prints, demonstrates that it was with surprising frequency that the artist entered into dialogue with and was inspired by Italian art and art theory, as well as (indirectly?) by the legacy of classical antiquity.

Another approach is the research into materials and techniques, which, regarding Pieter Bruegel's oeuvre, only got going surprisingly late in the day. A book by Christina Currie and Dominique Allart is the most recent contribution in this field, and is a monumental publication that concentrates on research into the painting methods of Bruegel the Elder and

his son Pieter Brueghel the Younger, whose oeuvre consists largely of copies of his father's work, which he continued making until well into the 17th century. The analysis of the way the young Brueghel copied his father's work (the originals of which he had often never seen) yields a treasure trove of information about the elder Bruegel's creative process and working methods, even more so than the research into the work of the father. This is the innovative strength of this study, which is intended more for the professional specialist.

One piece of striking news on the Bruegel front is the discovery of a couple of new works - an unprecedented rarity in this small oeuvre. I was fortunate enough to be closely involved in both instances: the discovery of what is called a *Tuechlein* in a private Spanish collection, an unusually large and ambitious painting in tempera on canvas that is now in the collection of the Prado in Madrid, and in 2012 the discovery of a landscape drawing by him. This last work - the last time an entirely unknown Bruegel drawing was found was in the 1970s - was part of an exhibition in which all the works by Bruegel in Antwerp collections were brought together, with special emphasis on his prints and research into the techniques and materials used in *Mad Meg*, the masterpiece in the Mayer Van den Bergh Museum in Antwerp. One curious fact which shows that interest in Bruegel is a worldwide phenomenon is the highly successful exhibition of all the prints after Bruegel held by the Royal Library in Brussels, which is now touring Japan. Yoko Mori, the Japanese professor and compiler of the exhibition, has spent decades studying Bruegel's work and is probably the first (and perhaps only) Japanese citizen to specialise in the drama of the chambers of rhetoric and sixteenth-century language and imagery in the Low Countries on which Bruegel often based his work. Even though he was blessed with a fertile imagination, Pieter Bruegel could probably never have imagined such a situation as this.

MANFRED SELLINK

*Translated by Gregory Ball*

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