

Bruegel Revisited

A Look at the Master in Anticipation of Bruegel Year 2019

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[M A N F R E D S E L L I N K]

It is somewhat dull and predictable to always begin texts about Pieter Bruegel the Elder with the observation that art historians know so incredibly little about this great master. The number of studies and dissertations on his work are in sharp contrast to the few factual details that are known about the person and his life. What do we know with certainty? Bruegel was born somewhere between 1525 and 1530. Some think this was in the (Netherlands) Brabant village of Breugel, others think it must have been in Breda, local historians in Belgian Limburg opt for Bree or Brogel and yet others – including the undersigned – think that it was most likely Antwerp. Although there is no archival proof, it is generally accepted that he received his artistic training in the Scheldt city in the 1540s, at Pieter Coecke van Aelst's workshop. What is certain is that Bruegel was enrolled as a master – and therefore as a fully qualified artist – in the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp in 1551. In 1551/52 he worked with the painter Pieter Balten on the side panels of a lost altarpiece for the St Rombout's Cathedral in Mechelen. Shortly after that, in the years 1552-54, he must have set off on a journey to Italy. Presumably he went via Lyon. In Italy he certainly spent quite a long time in Rome and travelled further south as far as Reggio di Calabria. He probably returned via Venice and then northwards through the Alps back to Antwerp. There he worked primarily as a landscape draughtsman and print designer for In de Vier Winden/Aux quatres vents (At the Sign of the Four Winds), Hieronymus Cock's internationally renowned print publishing house. Paintings dated from 1557 have survived and, as of 1561/62, it is clear that Bruegel concentrated increasingly on painting. In the autumn of 1562 he married Mayken Coecke, the daughter of his teacher, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, and moved to Brussels – where he was to devote himself completely to his career as a painter. The artist died in the autumn of 1569 and was buried in (or near) the Chapel Church in Brussels. There are dated works until 1568. The oeuvre from his own hand that has been passed down is small, approximately forty-five paintings and sixty-five drawings. The precise number depends on a small handful of problematic attributions. Pieter Bruegel left two sons, both of whom made their careers as painters. Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564-1638) was to devote himself completely to producing copies and paintings in the style of his father. The more versatile and considerably more talented Jan Brueghel



The Artist and the Connoisseur, c. 1565, drawing, 25,5 x 21,5 cm,
Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna

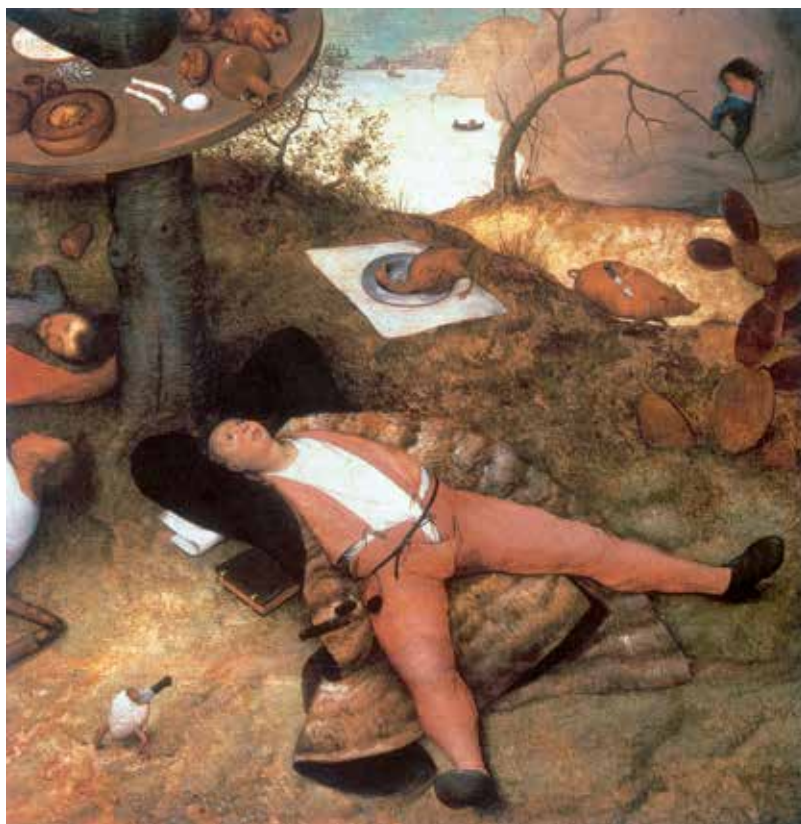
the Elder (1568-1625) became one of the most important and most successful painters in Antwerp in the first decade of the seventeenth century. The presumably already small oeuvre of the older Bruegel – relatively few paintings seem to have been lost – was as rare after his death as it was in demand and was quickly dispersed among prominent European (royal and aristocratic) collections.

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

As the conditional wording of this biographical sketch shows, contemporary sources and documents offer little real knowledge about Pieter Bruegel – most is based on indirect sources, the study of his works and circumstantial evidence. One of the few biographical certainties that we have is that he died in

Brussels in the autumn of 1569. That is why 2019 is considered internationally to be Bruegel Year, as it marks 450 years since the artist died. As already mentioned, his exact year of birth is not known. Years commemorating writers, composers and artists are not uncontroversial in the world of art and culture and are often dismissed as primarily economically driven initiatives for the benefit of (cultural) tourism and city marketing. That is always a risk and it is easy to think of examples of activities in this type of commemorative year where the content totally fails to make the grade. On the other hand, there are many examples of the opposite. Bosch Year 2016 is, in my opinion, one of these.¹

Obviously, one can always criticise overwhelming public interest as a measure of success, but the Hieronymus Bosch exhibitions in Den Bosch and Madrid were of the very highest quality and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for any art enthusiast in the Low Countries. The years of research into the master's oeuvre and his workshop were only possible thanks to financing from the jubilee year. Besides the public appreciation, it is already clear that this fundamental art historic and material technological research has provided not only many new insights in terms of both content and the discipline itself, but has also raised many questions, setting the agenda for research into Bosch and his workshop practices for the coming years. Presumably it will be no different with Bruegel. It is an incredible opportunity – both for the general public



The Land of Cockaigne (detail),
1567, oil on wood, 52 x 78 cm,
Alte Pinakothek, Munich



Abbey in a Valley, 1552, drawing, 18,5 x 32.6 cm,
Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

and for the discipline – that precisely these two artists should be the subject of thematic years so soon one after the other. Indeed, in the Low Countries the sixteenth century – a period that is certainly THE Golden Age in the Southern Netherlands – is dominated by these two unique grand masters. It is not without reason that this period is often summarised as the century ‘from Bosch to Bruegel’ – not only because of their chronological succession but, in particular, because of the influence of their work and imagery.

Vienna rules

Bruegel Year will start already in the autumn and winter of 2018/19, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. For the first time ever, a large monographic review of the master’s paintings will go on show there, together with a wide selection of his drawings and graphics of his design. While the drawings (and graphics) have almost all been brought together before (Rotterdam and New York 2001), it has never been possible to bring together more than a handful of paintings from his hand, as part of a more broadly based exhibition. The fact that the Kunsthistorisches Museum will probably manage to assemble thirty, perhaps even more, panels in Vienna – out of a total of forty-five, as mentioned above – is only possible thanks to the fact that the museum itself possesses twelve absolute masterpieces by Bruegel and, equally, the dynamic and resources generated by the symbolic jubilee year 2019. Bruegel’s works are, almost without exception, fragile panels that belong to the core collec-



View on the Scheldt near Baasrode, c. 1555, drawing, 24.9 X 42.1 cm,
Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

tions of the museums where they hang. That, plus the fact that the oeuvre is so small, makes obtaining the loan of a panel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder one of the most difficult tasks in the museum world – as is the case with Bosch. That at least thirty panels, around thirty drawings and thirty-five prints of his design will be on show together soon is more than a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – an expression that is all too easily used by museum directors and marketers. The chance of seeing this particular collection again can be ruled out for many decades. Here the Bruegel Year clearly works as leverage. Everyone realises that this is a unique event, both for the public and for further research and insight into the artist. Furthermore, there will be no second venue – however much museums in Paris, London, Madrid and Flanders would like it.

The fascination of the original

The exhibition in Vienna – of which I have the incredible privilege to be one of the curators – has a specific focus: the creative process, or the way in which the master created his works in terms of concept, techniques, form and style. That is a research question that seems to have appealed quite frequently in recent years to both the general public and specialists. It is useful to understand why. In an age when an abundance of images and information is immediately available (virtually) with the click of a mouse or the swipe of a finger, museums are increasingly aware that their great advantage lies in the fact that they have the original works within their walls – either as part of the permanent collection or brought together temporarily in an exhibition. Being eye to eye with the originals creates an enormous fascination, a desire to get into the mind of the master and learn more about how Bruegel's astonishing masterworks came into being, from conception to execution; to understand how the rare combination of

minute details and suggestive lack of clarity blend into one coherent composition; to know whether and how he changed his mind while he was painting; to know how he managed with an extraordinary economy of means to conjure up such a broad and kaleidoscopic and, in particular, such a layered image; to understand how Bruegel used rhetorical and – without being aware of the concept – psychological tricks to ‘play’ the viewer and draw him into his composition.

A search for the essence

There is something else, too. In the second half of the twentieth century, connoisseurship and a stylistic approach towards older art has to some degree fallen into discredit, for being too intuitive, too subjective and not scientific enough, a criticism that is in many ways understandable and not entirely wrong. But in the past decade a lot has changed, particularly because of the exhaustive scientific approach to restoration and conservation, on the one hand, and the rise of material technical research as a skilled and highly specialised discipline within art history on the other. This latter type of research – known within our field as conservation science – combines state-of-the-art research and technology in the field of natural sciences, chemistry and imagery with the insights of art historians, archival researchers and restorers. This team-oriented and multidisciplinary analysis of artworks seems increasingly to be producing results. This is partly because of incredibly fast technological developments and ever more specific applications, such as chemical analysis of the pigments and materials used, dendrochronology (the dating of panels by statistical analyses of tree rings) and analysis of images based on techniques such as infrared, ultraviolet



The Harvesters (detail),
1565, oil on wood, 119 x 162 cm,
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

and X-ray. All this is supported by equally fast developments in the field of ICT and data storage, whereby it is possible, for example, to take and use detail shots – so-called macro photography – which zoom in on a square millimetre of the structure and paint surface of Bruegel the Elder’s panels. This might all sound abstract and not very exciting, but these developments have all made it possible to acquire much better insight into how an artist like Bruegel produced his works. The exhibition Vienna aspires to is – rather like the Bosch exhibitions in Den Bosch and Madrid – much more than an analysis of Bruegel’s technical craftsmanship and skills, it is a search for the essence of his artistry.

New insights

Moreover, there is a striking and important side-effect of a thematic year and a large retrospective exhibition – one that gives the quest for knowledge about the creation of Bruegel’s paintings an extra stimulus. In the years-long run up to 2019, new (material technological) research has been done in many muse-



The Triumph of Death (detail), c. 1562, oil on wood, 117 x 162 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Skaters at the Sint Joris Gate, Antwerp, 1559, drawing, 20.8 x 29.3 cm, Private Collection

ums where his works hang, and some damaged panels have been cleaned or even thoroughly restored. That is the case, for example, with the *Dulle Griet* (aka *Dull Gret* or *Mad Meg*) in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum in Antwerp and *The Triumph of Death* (*De Triomf van de Dood*) in the Prado. Both panels – which are often considered to have been painted at more or less the same time in Bruegel's workshop and which will be on show together for the first time in Vienna – were studied and restored in 2017-2018. Even works that, due to their fragility, cannot travel – such as the *Peasant Wedding* in Detroit – are being studied in detail during this preparatory phase. All this research and the intensive exchange of information is providing many new insights, which will throw new light on Bruegel as a painter, not only in the exhibition in Vienna but in other publications too. Moreover, insight is increasing into the creative process in more than just his paintings. For example, the Royal Library of Belgium and the University of Leuven (KUL) have collaborated on a high-tech research project and an exhibition, which will open in the spring of 2019, in which the creation of his prints and drawings will be reconstructed in detail – including an analysis of the use of various inks and pens. This will apparently make it possible to reconstruct the order and phase in which Bruegel produced his drawings.

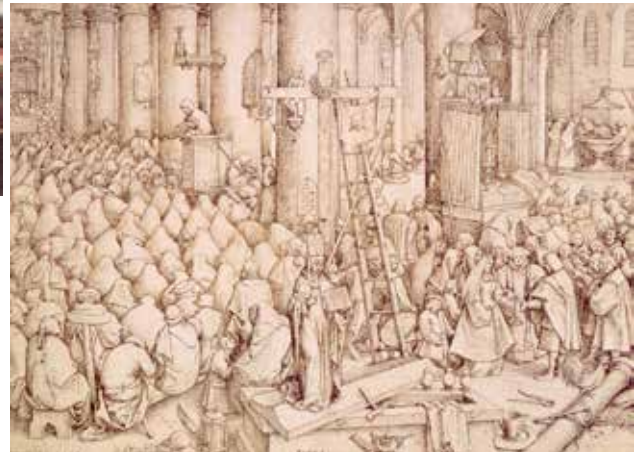
Perceptions and clichés

However much politicians and the public in Flanders hoped that it would be possible to organise a monographic retrospective exhibition in Antwerp or Brussels, with as many works from the hand of Pieter Bruegel as possible, it was clear from the beginning to all museum insiders that the Bruegel year



The Fall of the Rebel Angels (detail), 1562, oil on wood, 117 x 162 cm,
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

The Faith,
1559, drawing, 22.5 x 29.5 cm,
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



would have to find a different expression here. On the one hand the year will be interpreted in a much broader sense and will contextualise the artist, while on the other his influence, significance and imagery will be explored in a range of exhibitions, publications and workshops. What is striking is that a number of workshops and a couple of museums that the general public do not immediately associate with Bruegel will focus on the perception of the artist in Belgium and Flanders in the twentieth century. As part of a reappraisal of the Flemish Primitives and early Netherlandish art – the period of Van Eyck to Bruegel has long been seen as one long and continuous art historical development – Pieter Bruegel rapidly grew in popularity, from the end of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century, to become one of the most popular Flemish artists. Furthermore – partly under the influence of authors such as Pieter Timmermans, but also through themes that were picked up by visual artists from the early twentieth century onwards – ‘Peasant Bruegel’ almost became the (self) image of the typical Fleming: deeply rooted in the traditions of the Flemish countryside, distinctly ‘Burgundian’, and with a strong, rather popular sense of humour that has little time for central government and the powers-that-be. It is a completely one-sided and totally untenable interpretation of the

artist and his work, but nonetheless a stubborn cliché that still lives on. Both in Gaasbeek Castle (artistic treatment of the oeuvre in the twentieth century) as in the open-air museum in Bokrijk (the artist who portrays the prototypical Flanders) Bruegel's imagery is associated with this sort of cliché about his life and work. It will be no surprise that, at a time when there is great confusion and heated debate about what exactly the (historic) identity of this region and its inhabitants is, this approach is as topical as it is fascinating.

A look at our own period

The second half of the sixteenth century in the Southern Netherlands generally lends itself extremely well to focussing attention on issues that affect us today: fast-growing towns and cities with huge social inequalities, the manageability of health, care and security in urban areas, increasingly heated discussion and irreconcilability between religions, ever-increasing economic, social and political uncertainty, at the same time as being a period of economic innovation, discovery and an unprecedented flourishing of the arts and sciences. And it is precisely in the work of Bruegel and his contemporaries that the characteristics of this both fascinating and complex era are implicitly and sometimes explicitly portrayed. The various exhibitions being organised in Brussels and Antwerp on Bruegel and his period contextualise Bruegel and his imagery. They map out the booming cities that were so characteristic of the Low Countries, they highlight the blurring of the borders between towns and the countryside surrounding them, and they zoom in on Bruegel's intensive involvement in 'new' media such as printing.

Without falling into the trap of suggesting a direct link between that era and our own, the various exhibitions each offer an insight into or a view of the work of Bruegel and his time, and they encourage us to look from (and with) Bruegel at our own time. It is only the greatest and most timeless artists whose work makes this possible and who can be discovered and rediscovered again and again by new generations. Pieter Bruegel is certainly one of them. Bruegel Year 2019 is THE opportunity to get to know and value his work and significance. ■

For the Bruegel exhibition in Vienna, see:
www.khm.at/en/visit/exhibitions/bruegel

For the programme of Bruegel Year 2019, see:
www.visitflanders.com/en/themes/arts.../flemish-masters/index.jsp

NOTES

- 1 See: Manfred Sellink, 'Hieronymus Bosch – Both Trendsetter and Representative of His Time. Reflections on the Significance of His Oeuvre': in *The Low Countries. Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands* 24 (2016), pp. 124-133.