



PETRO BRUEGEL, PICTORI.

*Quis novus hic Hieronymus Orbi
 Boschius ingeniosa magister
 Somnia peneuloquo, styloque
 Tanta imitaret arte peritus.
 Ut superet cunon interum et illum.*

*Macte animo, Petre, mactus et arte.
 Namque tuo veterisque magister
 Ridiculo, salubrisque referto
 In graphicis genere vitia laudum
 Præmia vique, et ab omnibus illo*

T. Galle sculpsit.

Com. Langensolis.

2 TO PETER BRUEGEL, PAINTER

Who is this new Jerome Bosch who has turned up in these parts? Who in the world is this painter skilled, both with his brush and with his pencil, in imitating his illustrious master's subtlest chimeras, skilled to the point of having more than once surpassed him?

Courage, Peter, you are good and your art will make you famous. Your delightful compositions – packed with the salt of your drolleries, like your master's – are bringing you a rich booty of praise; and this praise is assuredly in no way inferior to that which your illustrious forerunner and master harvested in his time.

Bruegel (family)

{broy'-guh}

The Bruegel family of Flemish painters was among the most notable families of professional artists. Peter Bruegel the Elder, c.1525-1569, is now considered the most important Northern painter of the mid-16th century. He established the independence of landscape and genre subjects (scenes of everyday life) from traditional figural painting (see *GENRE PAINTING*; *LANDSCAPE PAINTING*). Little is known about Bruegel's life or beliefs. Although he frequently depicted scenes of rustic life, "Peasant Bruegel," as he was known, was not a peasant but a townsman. His friends and patrons were humanists. Unlike his predecessors, Bruegel painted almost entirely for private patrons and produced no surviving works for churches or other public buildings. Consequently, he was known in his own time primarily as an inventor of moralistic figural scenes and landscapes, which were reproduced in engravings by other artists.

Many of Bruegel's paintings have been interpreted as disguised criticism of the harsh Spanish control of the Netherlands. Bruegel was patronized, however, by Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granville, advisor to PHILIP II, and about 1563 he moved from Antwerp to Brussels, the seat of the Spanish government in the Netherlands. Given the sparse and contradictory evidence, Bruegel's political convictions remain unknown. Modern scholars are also unable to determine his religious beliefs. Bruegel probably viewed organized religion as an obstacle between man and God; his *Parable of the Blind*, also known as *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568; Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples) may be interpreted as illustrating this idea.

Upon completing his artistic training in 1551, Bruegel traveled to Italy. In spite of the influences of this journey, he continued throughout his life to paint in a manner that was strongly Northern in both subject and style. Only close study of his works reveals that he absorbed figural poses and compositional ideas from Italian art. The journey through the Alps had a more obvious impact on Bruegel's artistic imagination. In a number of his landscapes, among them *Hunters in the Snow* (1565; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), tall mountains are placed in the backgrounds of his panoramic views while the centers and foregrounds depict typical Netherlandish settings and subjects.

Bruegel's painting style changed considerably during the short span of his career. His early works (until c.1562) are characterized by a multiplicity of small elements, an overall composition, and a bird's-eye perspective. A typical example is *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559; Staatliche Museum, Berlin). Here, as in so many of his paintings, Bruegel satirizes the folly and sinfulness of humankind.

Two religious paintings, the *Suicide of Saul* (1562) and the *Conversion of St. Paul* (1567; both Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), exemplify the changes that took place in Bruegel's style during the mid-1560s. These two paintings also show Bruegel's practice of depicting religious subjects as contemporary events. After c.1562, Bruegel's compositions were increasingly concentrated and were often organized along diagonals; the main action was more frequently presented at eye level.

During the last years of his life Bruegel usually painted figures that appear more monumental in scale and closer to the viewer. As in *The Blind Leading the Blind*, he steadily reduced his cast of characters to a minimum in order to concentrate the composition on the essentials of the story.

Two of Peter Bruegel's children were painters. Peter ("Hell") Bruegel the Younger, 1564-1638, frequently imitated his father's works. Jan I ("Velvet") Bruegel the Elder, 1568-1625, the more talented of the two sons, was court painter to the regents of the Southern Netherlands after 1610. Jan I favored a miniaturistic style. His landscapes, such as *Outskirts of a Village* (1597; State Art Collections, Kassel), differ considerably from the panoramic "world views" of his father; their mood, like their spaces, is more intimate. In his life-size flower paintings, such as *Flowers in a Blue Vase* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), Jan I created an encyclopedic arrangement of the many individual flowers he studied from life. In his allegorical and religious paintings, such as *Paradise* (c.1620; Mauritshuis, The Hague), he occasionally collaborated with Peter Paul RUBENS and other painters.

Three of the next generation were painters: Peter III (1589-c.1634), son of Peter the Younger; and Ambrosius (1617-75) and Jan the Younger (1601-78), both sons of Jan I. Each imitated the work of his father. Five sons of Jan the Younger were artists: Jan Peter, Abraham, Filips, Ferdinand, and Jan Baptist. Abraham (1631-90), a still-life painter, was the most talented. None of these members of the family attained the artistic stature of Peter the Elder. Zirka Filipczak

Bibliography: Delevoy, Robert L., *Bruegel* (1991); Gibson, Walter S., *Bruegel* (1977; repr. 1985); Pieter Bruegel the Elder: *Two Studies* (1993); Stechow, Wolfgang, *Bruegel Masters of Art* (1990); Sullivan, Margaret A., *Bruegel's Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance* (1994); Van Bastelaer, Rene, *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, rev. ed. (1992); Winkelmann-Rhein, G., *The Painting and Drawings of Jan "Flower" Bruegel* (1969).

Bruegel, Pieter the Elder (1525-1569)

The above engraving of Pieter Bruegel the Elder by Theodore Galle, c. 1570.

Special thanks to the Microsoft Corporation for permission to use following biographical information from **Microsoft® Encarta '96**:

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a Flemish artist active in Antwerp and Brussels, famous for his paintings and drawings of landscapes and scenes of robust peasant life, and founder of a dynasty of artists that remained active well into the 17th century.

Bruegel's art is often seen as the last phase in the development of a long tradition of Netherlandish painting beginning with Jan van Eyck in the 15th century. This tradition transformed the abstraction of medieval art into a more empirical view of reality. Bruegel clearly rejected the influences of Italian Renaissance art and its classical foundations, which dominated the work of many of his Flemish contemporaries. Rather than mythological subjects, muscular nudes, and idealized scenes, Bruegel's art portrays figures observed from nature acting out realistic situations in believable contemporary settings. Bruegel is thought to have come from the town of Breda, located in northern Brabant in present-day Holland. Born Pieter Brueghel, he later dropped the "h" from his name. Before he became a member of the painters' guild in Antwerp in 1551, he seems to have studied with Pieter Coecke in Brussels and worked for a short time in Malines. After a trip to Italy between 1552 and 1555, Bruegel returned to Antwerp. In 1563 he married Coecke's daughter, Maria Coecke van Aelst, and moved to Brussels, where he resided until his death in September 1569. Their two children, Pieter the Younger and Jan, both became painters of some renown.

Bruegel's earliest works were landscapes, an interest he retained throughout his life. A number of panoramic landscape drawings made on his Italian trip—for example, those preserved in Berlin (1552, Staatliche Museen) and in London (1553, British Museum)—show Bruegel's ability, even in his early career, to depict the changing seasonal moods and the atmospheric qualities of nature. These same characteristics appear in his later landscape paintings, such as *Hunters in the Snow* (1565, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and *Magpie on the Gallows* (1568, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Germany).

After his return to Antwerp from Italy in 1555, Bruegel regularly made drawings for engravings published by the printing house owned by the graphic artist Hieronymus Cock. Some of Bruegel's drawings for Cock were landscapes, but others were clearly meant to capitalize on the popularity of the bizarre art of Bruegel's famous Flemish predecessor Hieronymus Bosch. The fantastic, monstrous figures and demonic dwarfs in Bruegel's series of engravings *The Seven Deadly Vices* (1557) are within this category. Late in the 1550s, Bruegel began a series of large painted panels with complex compositions depicting various aspects of Flemish folk life. The earliest of these is an encyclopedic portrayal of common sayings, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559, Staatliche Museen), followed by *Combat Between Carnival and Lent* (1559) and *Children's Games* (1560, both Kunsthistorisches

Museum). All are marked by a perceptive observation of human nature, a pervasive wit, and the vitality of Bruegel's peasant figures. Later examples of peasant folk subjects include *Peasant Kermis* and *Peasant Wedding Feast* (both 1566-1568?, Kunsthistorisches Museum).

Modern scholars are far from interpreting Bruegel's art as simple, whimsical folk subjects painted by an artist from mere peasant stock, as painter and art historian Karel van Mander described him in 1604. Recent writers see him as a knowledgeable man who was known to be a friend of such intellectuals as geographer Abraham Ortelius. Bruegel's pictures have been variously interpreted as referring to the beliefs of different religious thinkers, to the conflicts between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, to the political domination of the Lowlands by the Spanish, and as visual equivalents to dramatic allegories performed publicly by Flemish societies of rhetoric.

This site created and maintained by Carol Gerten-Jackson ©1996

[Back to Bruegel the Elder](#)
[Alphabetical Index](#)
[Nationality/Time Index](#)
[Featured Artists](#)