

PETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1530) was the most significant artist of Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painting, a painter and printmaker, known for his landscapes and peasant scenes; he was a pioneer in making both types of subject the focus in large paintings.

He was a formative influence on Dutch Golden Age painting and later painting in general in his innovative choices of subject matter, as one of the first generation of artists to grow up when religious subjects had ceased to be the natural subject matter of painting. He also painted no portraits, the other mainstay of Netherlandish art. After his training and travels to Italy, he returned in 1555 to settle in Antwerp, where he worked mainly as a prolific designer of prints for the leading publisher of the day. Only towards the end of the decade did he switch to make painting his main medium, and all his famous paintings come from the following period of little more than a decade before his early death, when he was probably in his early forties, and at the height of his powers.

As well as looking forwards, his art reinvigorates medieval subjects such as marginal drolleries of ordinary life in illuminated manuscripts, and the calendar scenes of agricultural labours set in landscape backgrounds, and puts these on a much larger scale than before, and in the expensive medium of oil painting. He does the same with the fantastic and anarchic world developed in Renaissance prints and book illustrations.



1557, showing a drunken man being pushed into a pigsty, is his earliest known genre scene.

Netherlandish Proverbs (1559) depicts a scene in which humans and, to a lesser extent, animals and objects, offer literal illustrations of Dutch-language proverbs and idioms. Proverbs were very popular in Bruegel's time and before; a hundred years previous to Bruegel's painting, illustrations of proverbs had been popular in the Flemish book of hours.

Running themes in Bruegel's paintings are the absurdity, wickedness and foolishness of humans, and this is no exception. The painting's original title, the *Blue Cloak or The Folly of the World*, indicates that Bruegel's intent was not just to illustrate proverbs, but rather to catalogue human folly. Many of the people depicted show the



characteristic blank features that Bruegel used to portray fools.



Critics have praised the composition for its ordered portrayal and integrated scene. There are approximately 112 identifiable proverbs and idioms in the scene, although Bruegel may have included others which cannot be determined because of changes to the language. Some of those incorporated in the painting are still in popular use, for instance "*Swimming against the tide*", "*Banging one's head against a brick wall*" and "*Armed to the teeth*". Many more have faded from use, which makes analysis of the painting harder. "*Having one's roof tiled with tarts*", for example, which meant to have an abundance of everything and was an image Bruegel would later feature in his painting of the idyllic *Land of Cockayne* (1567).

The *Blue Cloak* which, in the centre of the piece, is being placed on a man by his wife, indicates that she is cuckolding him. Other proverbs refer to human foolishness. A man fills in a pond after his calf has drowned: "*Shutting the barn door after the horse has bolted*". Just above the central figure of the blue-cloaked man, another man carries daylight in a basket. Some of the figures seem to represent more than one figure of speech (whether this was Bruegel's intention or not is unknown), such as the man shearing a sheep in the centre bottom left of the picture. He is sitting next to a man shearing a pig, so represents the expression "*One shears sheep and one shears pigs*", meaning that one has the advantage over the other, but may also represent the advice "*Shear them but don't skin them*", meaning make the most of available assets.



In these two proverbs: to be a 'pillar-biter' is to be a religious hypocrite; and to 'carry the day out in baskets' is to waste one's time. (Compare: "*to carry coals to Newcastle*" and "*to sell sand in the desert*")'

To be 'unable to see the sun shine on the water' is to be jealous of another's success.



Eighty games have been identified in ***Children's Games***, painted in 1560. The children depicted range in age from toddlers to adolescents. They roll hoops, walk on stilts, spin hoops, ride hobby-horses, stage mock tournaments, play leap-frog and blind man's bluff, perform handstands, inflate pigs' bladders and play with dolls and other toys. They have also taken over

the large building that dominates the square: it may be a town hall or some other important civic building, in this way emphasising the moral that the adults who direct civic affairs are as children in the sight of God. This crowded scene is to some extent relieved by the landscape in the top left-hand

corner; but even here children are bathing in the river and playing on its banks.

The artist's intention for this work is more serious than simply to compile an illustrated encyclopaedia of children's games, though some eighty particular games have been identified. Bruegel shows the children absorbed in their games with the seriousness displayed by adults in their apparently more important pursuits. His moral is that in the mind of God children's games possess as much significance as the activities of their parents. This idea was a familiar one in contemporary literature: in an anonymous Flemish poem, published in Antwerp in 1530 by Jan van Doesborch, mankind is compared to children who are entirely absorbed in their foolish games and concerns.



In these details we see a mock wedding; morra, a hand game - similar to rock, paper, scissors - that dates back thousands of years to ancient Roman and Greek times; 'bum-bouncing' and rolling a hoop with bells.



The mock wedding, situated exactly at the diagonal centre of the panel, is perhaps an irony of the holy sacrament, or a reference to the main event that allows conception of children. Mock child weddings have been common folk tradition in many places in Europe, and were often celebrated at Midsummer.

No preparatory drawings for paintings by Bruegel are known, and highly detailed and finished works, such as this pen and ink drawing of **Beekeepers** (c. 1568), were intended as drawings for prints: etchings, engravings and woodcuts. This was a major source of income which he pursued throughout his life.

Depicting an everyday scene of village life it has an almost surreal quality. In the background a man climbs a tree to take eggs from a bird's nest and behind that is the village with its deep roofed, thatched cottages, typical of Bruegel.

The distant view of a town introduces deep space and atmosphere into the scene, a compositional device which was imported into the Netherlands by artists with a knowledge of contemporary Italian art.



Making the life and manners of peasants the main focus of a work was rare in painting in Bruegel's time, and he was a pioneer of the genre painting. His earlier style shows dozens of small figures, seen from a high viewpoint, and spread fairly evenly across the central picture space. The setting is typically

an urban space surrounded by buildings, within which the figures have a "fundamentally disconnected manner of portrayal", with individuals or small groups engaged in their own distinct activity, while ignoring all the others.

His earthy, unsentimental but vivid depiction of the rituals of village life—including agriculture, hunts, meals, festivals, dances, and games—are unique windows on a vanished folk culture, though still characteristic of Belgian life and culture today, and a prime source of iconographic evidence about both physical and social aspects of 16th-century life.



The Wedding Dance of 1566 shows a group of 125 wedding guests wearing clothing from the times, presented in the canvas in an apparently chaotic way in an outdoor party surrounded by trees. The brides wore black as was customary in the Renaissance period and the men wore codpieces, a normal part of their clothing at the time. Voyeurism (spying on people engaged in intimate behaviours) is shown throughout the work. Dancing was disapproved of by the authorities and the church, and the painting can be seen as both a critique and comic depiction of a stereotypical oversexed, overindulgent, peasant class of the times.

The foreground is occupied by peasants, including a dancer wearing the colours of the period. In the middle the bride dances with an older man, her father. On the right, watching the dance from the side, is a musician playing on a pijpzak. Judging by the writing utensils hanging on his belt, he is a writer or possibly a middle-class painter. In the background is a hanging tablecloth decorated with a crown and beneath it is the bride's table. Before her table, money collectors can be seen digging trenches while the wedding guests sit down and eat. The movements of the people show that their behaviour is inappropriate or a caricature of rustic buffoonery, but its representation of fertility and reproduction is presented in a joyful manner. It can be regarded as an attack on the stereotypical oversexed behaviour of the lower orders as well as evoking a comical picture. In the sixteenth century dance was subject to a strict code and regarded by the authorities and church as a social evil. People could not swing their arms or legs or laugh too loud, as that would be considered a type of rudeness to more sophisticated people. The painting therefore "expresses the peasants' liberation from the stricter limits of upper classes" by failing to adhere to the expected social standards of the times.



The author of *The Theme of Music in Northern Renaissance Banquet Scenes*, Robert Quist, has said that the painting was part of a series of Seven Deadly Sins and Virtues which "attest to [Bruegel's] moral devotions". He says "While dancing may appear innocuous or natural for peasants, it poses a palpable threat to the human soul. Its [the depiction of dancing] usefulness in characterizing the peasantry as wild and unruly undoubtedly derives from the moral opprobrium in which dancing was held by religious and civil authorities alike."

Bruegel often painted community events. In the *Peasant Wedding* Bruegel painted individual, identifiable characters, while the people in *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* are unidentifiable, muffin-faced allegories of greed or gluttony.



The Peasant Dance (c. 1567) is the same size as *The Peasant Wedding* and they may have been intended as a pair or as part of a series illustrating peasant life. They are the two most outstanding examples of Bruegel's late style, which is characterized by his use of monumental Italianate figures.

Like *The Peasant Wedding*, it is likely that Bruegel intended this painting to have a moral sense rather than simply being an affectionate portrayal of peasant life. Gluttony, lust and anger can all be identified in the picture. The man seated next to the bagpipe player wears a peacock feather in his hat, a symbol of

vanity and pride. The occasion for the peasants' revelry is a Saint's day, but dancers turn their backs on the church and pay no attention to the image of the Virgin Mary which hangs on the tree. The prominence of the tavern makes it clear that they are preoccupied with material rather than spiritual matters.

Peter Bruegel the Elder enjoyed painting peasants. He portrayed different aspects of their lives in so many of his paintings that he has been called Peasant-Bruegel, but he was an intellectual, and many of his paintings have a symbolic meaning as well as a moral aspect, as is apparent in *The Peasant Wedding* of 1566-69.

The bride is seated passively beneath a paper-crown, not participating in the eating or drinking taking place around her. She wears a crown on her head in front of the green textile wall-hanging. The scene is set in a barn in the summertime, and the Bridegroom is not in attendance at the wedding feast, in accordance to Flemish custom. Two sheaves of grain with a rake recalls the work that harvesting involves, and the hard life of the peasants. The main food was bread, porridge and soup and the plates are carried on a door removed from its hinges. Other features of the scene include two pipers playing the pijpzak, a young 'unbreeched' boy in the foreground licking a plate, the wealthy man at the far right feeding a dog by putting bread on the bench, and a mysterious extra foot seen under the load of dishes being carried by the two men in the right foreground. The scene is claimed to depict an accurate portrayal of the 16th-century way of celebrating a peasant wedding.



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There has been much conjecture as to the identity of the groom (if present) in this painting. One suggestion is that the groom is the man seen in profile in the centre of the painting, wearing a dark coat and green hat; another that he is the ill-bred son of a wealthy couple, seen against the far wall, to the right of the bride, eating with a spoon. It has also been suggested that according to contemporary custom, the groom is not seated at the table but may be the man pouring out beer. Or he may be according to the same custom serving the food instead. According to this theory, the groom is the young man wearing a red cap, who is serving his guests the food, handing out plates to his guests.

In a Freudian interpretation, the American scientist and author, Rudy Rucker, speculates:

... the groom is the man in the red hat, passing food towards the bride. The motion of a husband, to penetrate the wife. Near him are no less than three phallic symbols pointing towards the wife: the man's arm, the knife on the table, and the salt-cellar on the table. At the end of the man's arm is an ellipse of an angle-seen dish that is oriented and located in the right location to represent the bride's vagina.

Some authors have even suggested that the groom is not even included in the painting. Speculations include that this could be the depiction of an old Flemish proverb: *'It is a poor man who is not able to be at his own wedding.'* Others have argued that it is a presentation of the mystical Wedding of Cana, and that the painting was a Christian allegory, symbolizing corruption, depicting the corrupted Church, which was supposed to be the bride of Christ, but the groom has not appeared to claim his corrupt bride.

Breeching was the occasion when a small boy was first dressed in breeches or trousers. From the mid-16th century until the late 19th or early 20th century, young boys in the Western world were unbreeched and wore gowns or dresses until an age that varied between two and eight. Various forms of relatively subtle differences usually enabled others to tell little boys from little girls, in codes that modern art historians are able to understand.

Breeching was an important rite of passage in the life of a boy, looked forward to with much excitement, and often celebrated with a small party. It often marked the point at which the father became more involved with the raising of a boy.

The main reason for keeping boys in dresses was Toilet training, or the lack thereof. The change was probably made once boys had reached the age when they could easily undo the rather complicated fastenings of many early modern breeches and trousers. Before roughly 1550 various styles of long robes were in any case commonly worn by adult males of various sorts, so boys wearing them could probably not be said to form a distinct phenomenon. Dresses were also easier to make with room for future growth, in an age when clothes were much more expensive than now for all classes.



Flemish boy of 1625 in a dress with sewn in tucks to both layers of the skirt to allow for growth. The hair and hat are distinctively masculine, and he wears a sword or dagger on his right and red coral beads, which were used for teething.



The Land of Cockayne (1567, known in Dutch, as "the lazy-luscious-land") depicts what in medieval time was a mythical land of plenty - but Bruegel's picture of Cockayne and its residents is not meant to be a flattering one. He chooses rather a comic illustration of the spiritual emptiness believed to derive from gluttony and sloth, and two of the seven deadly sins.

In the painting, a clerk, a peasant, and a soldier lie dozing on the ground underneath a table bound to a tree, arranged as if the spokes of a wheel. The clerk's book, papers, ink and pen lie idle, as do

the peasant's flail and the soldier's lance and gauntlet. A half-eaten egg in its shell runs between the peasant and the clerk. The table attached to the tree is laden with partly consumed food and drink. Behind the tree, a roasted fowl, in the place where a fourth spoke could be, lays itself upon a silver platter, implying that it is ready to be eaten. A roasted pig runs about with a carving knife already slipped under its skin. On the left, a knight emerges from a lean-to whose roof is covered in dishes of pie and pastry, with an open mouth, waiting for a roasted pigeon to fly in (the pigeon was accidentally removed during restoration work). On the right and behind the main action, a trouser-less man clutching a spoon forces his way out of a large cloud of pudding, having eaten his way through it; he reaches for the bent branch of a tree in order to lower himself into Cockayne. The fence enclosing the main scene behind the dozing trio is made of interwoven sausages. A partly eaten wheel of cheese and a bush (or tower) of flat loaves of bread are on the left and right of the scene, respectively.

It has been argued that the painting is a political satire directed at the participants in the first stages of the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648), where the roasted fowl represents the humiliation and failure of the nobleman (who would otherwise form the fourth spoke of the wheel) in his leadership of the Netherlands, and the overall scene depicts the complacency of the Netherlandish people, too content with their abundance to take the risks that would bring about significant religious and political change.

Attempts have been made to interpret the picture of five cripples and a beggar-woman, titled **The Beggars** or **The Cripples** (1568), as an allusion to a historical event: the badger's tails, or foxes' tails, on their clothes might refer to the Geux, a rebel party, active since 1566, against the government of Philip II of Spain and Granville; but a very similar group of beggars also occurs in Bruegel's *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, dated 1559. Nevertheless, the beggars are not quite ordinary beggars, as they wear carnival headgear representing various classes of society: a cardboard crown (the king), a paper shako (a military helmet - the soldier), a beret (the bourgeois), a cap (the peasant), and a mitre (the bishop). The work clearly has some satirical meaning, which has so far eluded interpretation. Perhaps physical imperfections are meant to symbolise moral decrepitude, which can affect all men irrespective of class.



Modern eyes may be inclined to conclude that Bruegel intended to invoke sympathy for the plight of the crippled figures, but from a historical perspective this is unlikely. Europeans of Bruegel's time gave little regard to beggars, and the painting provides hints that Bruegel shared this denigration: the figures are outside the town walls and are posed in such ways as to provoke contempt and amusement. The foxtail on some of the figures was a symbol at the time of ridicule in political caricature and real life. The woman behind them bears an empty bowl and may appear to be ignoring the beggars.

The painting dates from the end of Bruegel's career, when he showed a keener interest in the natural world. Tiny though it is, the landscape seen through the opening is bathed in a delicate light which simmers like dew on the foliage.



The Blind Leading the Blind, Blind, or The Parable of the Blind (1568), depicting the Biblical parable from the Gospel of Matthew 15:1, reflects Bruegel's mastery of observation. A procession of six blind, disfigured men pass along a path bordered by a river on one side and a village with a church on the other. The placement of Sint-Anna Church of the village Sint-Anna-Pede has led to both pro- and anti-Catholic interpretations, though it is not clear that the painting was meant as a political statement. The leader of the group has fallen on his back into a ditch and,

because they are all linked by their staffs, seems about to drag his companions down with him.

Each figure has a different, identifiable, eye affliction, including corneal leukoma, atrophy of globe and removed eyes. The men hold their heads aloft to make better use of their other senses. The diagonal composition reinforces the off-kilter motion of the six figures falling in progression. It is considered a masterwork for its accurate detail and composition. Copies include a larger version by Bruegel's son Pieter Brueghel the Younger, and the work has inspired poetry by Charles Baudelaire and William Carlos Williams, and a novel by Gert Hofmann.

Bruegel expands the two blind men in the parable to six; they are well dressed, rather than wearing the peasant clothing that typifies his late work. The first blind man's face is not visible; the second twists his head as he falls, perhaps to avoid landing face-first. The shinguard-clad third man, on his toes with knees bent and face to the sky, shares a staff with the second, by which he is being pulled down. The others have yet to stumble, but the same fate seems implied.

Painted the year before his death, it has a bitter, sorrowful tone, which may be related to the establishment of the Council of Troubles in 1567 by the government of the Spanish Netherlands. The council ordered mass arrests and executions to enforce Spanish rule and suppress Protestantism.

The faces and bodies of the blind men, and background detail including the church, are rendered in exceptionally fine detail. The backward-falling posture of the guide demonstrates Bruegel's mastery of foreshortening.



In contrast to earlier depictions of the blind as beneficiaries of divine gifts, Bruegel's men are stumbling and decrepit, and portrayed without sympathy. The eyeless figure would have been interpreted as a man who had suffered punishment for wrongdoing or fighting.

Bruegel painted with the empirical objectivity of the Renaissance. In earlier paintings the blind were typically depicted with eyes closed. Here, Bruegel gives each man a different ocular affliction, all painted with a realism that allowed identification of their conditions by later experts, although there is still some diagnostic

disagreement. The first man's eyes are not visible; the second has had his eyes removed, along with the eyelids; the third suffers from corneal leukoma; the fourth atrophy of the globe; the fifth is either blind with no light perception, or photophobic; and the sixth has pemphigus or bullous pemphigoid. Bruegel's accuracy in portraying the blind men facing not forward but with their faces raised in the air has been noted, as they would have had to rely on their senses of smell and hearing.

In ancient Greece the blind were depicted as having received gifts from the gods, and blind singers were held in high regard. In mediaeval Europe, the blind were depicted as the subjects of miracles, such as Bartimaeus in the healing the blind near Jericho (Mark 10:46–52). Following the Reformation, painted depictions of saints and miracles fell out of favour in Protestant areas. In Catholic thought, charitable works of mercy, such as giving alms to the blind and poor, were good works which, together with faith, helped the salvation of the doer. However, the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* rejected the efficacy of works in achieving salvation, prescribing that it depended on faith alone (and the complication of God's predestined will for each individual). The status of charity for the poor and infirm diminished, and beggars saw their circumstances deteriorate. In popular literature of the time, the blind were depicted as rogues or targets of pranks. The parable of the blind leading the blind also appears as one of the illustrated proverbs in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559).



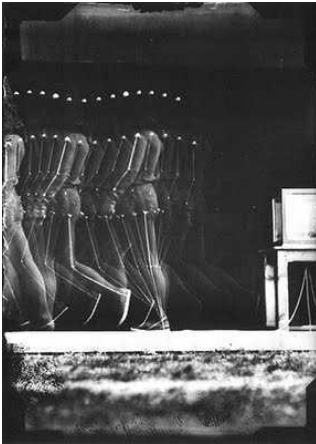
Charles Bouleau wrote of the tension in Bruegel's compositional rhythms. The picture is divided into nine equal parts divided by a set of parallel oblique lines. These are divided by another network of lines at constant angles to the first. The composition invites the reader to follow the action rather than dwell on the individual figures. The blind men resemble each other in dress and facial features, and they appear as if they succeed one another in a single movement culminating in a fall, beginning on the left with "rambling, then

hesitation, alarm, stumbling, and finally falling". The succession of heads follows a curve, and the further the succession, the greater the space between heads, suggesting increasing speed. The steep roofs of the background houses contribute to the composition's feeling of motion.

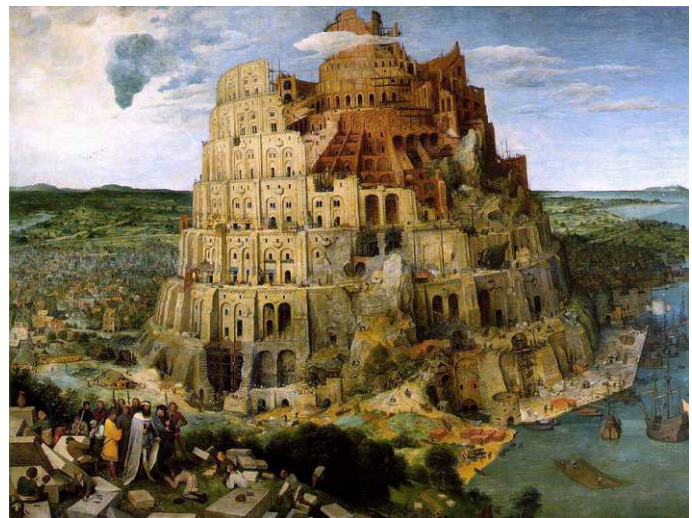
Incongruities have been noted in that the beggars are well-dressed and carry staves and full purses.

Also, Bruegel may have implied that the blind men represent false priests who ignored Christ's admonitions not to carry gold, purses, or staves; the leader carries a hurdy-gurdy, a musical instrument associated with beggars in Bruegel's time; perhaps implying a false minstrel, one who sings praises not for God.

In contrast to the posed, static figures typical of paintings of the period, Bruegel suggests the trajectory of time and space through the accelerated movement of the figures. It has been suggested that the concept of visualizing movement was not formulated until the 17th century, and that Bruegel prefigures motion pictures and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*; and that the painting anticipates the 19th-century chronophotography of Étienne-Jules Marey. Dutch film director Joris Ivens stated, "If Bruegel were alive today he would be a film director."



The (Great) Tower of Babel (c.1563) depicts the construction of the Tower of Babel, which, according to the book of Genesis, was built by a unified, monolingual humanity as a mark of their achievement and to prevent them from scattering: "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'" (Genesis 11:4). It is the largest of the two surviving paintings by Bruegel of the subject, housed in Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Bruegel had visited Rome in 1552–1553, and his depiction of the architecture of the tower, with its numerous arches and other examples of Roman engineering, is deliberately reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum, which Christians of the time saw as a symbol of both hubris and persecution. The parallel of Rome and Babylon had a particular significance for Bruegel's contemporaries: Rome was the Eternal City, intended by the Caesars to last forever, and its decay and ruin were taken to symbolize the vanity and transience of earthly efforts. The Tower was also symbolic of the religious turmoil between the Catholic Church (which at the time conducted all services in Latin) and the polyglot Protestant religion that was increasingly popular in the Netherlands.



Bruegel had an extensive knowledge of architecture, and is known to have made studies (now lost) of the monuments when in Rome. In addition to these he may have referred to prints, such as this one of the Colosseum published by Hieronymus Cock in 1551.

The majority of Cock's prints were made after paintings or designs purposely made for him by artists from the Low Countries, including Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch.

The tower is built as an ascending spiral, with arches perpendicular to the slanted ground, thereby making them unstable. A few arches can already be seen crumbling. The foundation and bottom layers of the tower had not been completed before the higher layers were constructed.

This detail shows the king, or Nimrod, and entourage visiting the builders. Extra-biblical traditions associating him with the Tower of Babel led to his reputation as a king who was rebellious against God.

Bruegel's signature is at bottom right.



The story of the Tower of Babel (like that in *The Suicide of Saul*, Bruegel's only other painting with an Old Testament subject) was interpreted as an example of pride punished, and that is no doubt what Bruegel intended his painting to illustrate. Moreover, the hectic activity of the engineers, masons and workmen points to a second moral: the futility of much human endeavour. Nimrod's doomed building was used to illustrate this meaning in Sebastian Brant's 1494 allegory *Ship of Fools*. Bruegel's knowledge of building procedures and techniques is considerable and correct in detail. The skill with which he has shown these activities recalls that his very last commission, left unfinished at his death, was for a series of documentary paintings recording the digging of a canal linking Brussels to Antwerp.

The tower is shown partly-built with stone facings over a massive brick framework, a typical technique in

Roman architecture, used in the Colosseum and other huge Roman buildings. Grand and formal architecture of this sort is not a usual interest of Bruegel in either paintings or drawings, although it was typical subject matter for many of his contemporaries.

There are no surviving drawings that are studies for this or any other of Bruegel's paintings. This is despite indications that Bruegel did make use of preparatory studies. Both *Tower* versions are full of the type of details which are likely to have been worked out in sketches first. Except for a lack of mountains, the paintings contain the main ingredients of the world landscape, a type of composition followed in many of Bruegel's earlier landscapes. The Vienna tower is built around a very steep small mountain, which can be seen protruding from the architecture at the centre near the ground and to the right higher up.



In this drawing for an engraving entitled *The Big Fish Eat the Little Fish* (possibly an illustration of a proverb) of 1556 many details show the influence of Hieronymus Bosch: hybrid creatures, such as the fish with legs walking away with a fish in its mouth, and the flying fish; the man wielding an outsize fish knife, and the imaginary construction on a small island in the background.



engravings of the *Vices and the Virtues* which he had just completed for the Antwerp publisher Hieronymus Cock.

The archangel Michael and his angels, robed in white, are shown by Bruegel in the act of driving Lucifer and the rebel angels from Heaven for the sin of Pride. The conflict of good and evil, vice and virtue, is a theme which recurs constantly in Bruegel's work.



At the centre of the composition the archangel Michael, dressed in armour wields his sword and drives the rebellious angels down to hell. As they fall they transform into ferocious monsters, weird hybrids. Michael himself, with his thin insect-like limbs contrasts with the fuller bodies of the white robed angels.



spiked head; and a naked humanoid figure bends double, its legs transformed into arms to fight with itself, one being bitten off by its own reptile like head. Dogs wear crowns and a frog-like creature unbuttons its own stomach to reveal its spawn.

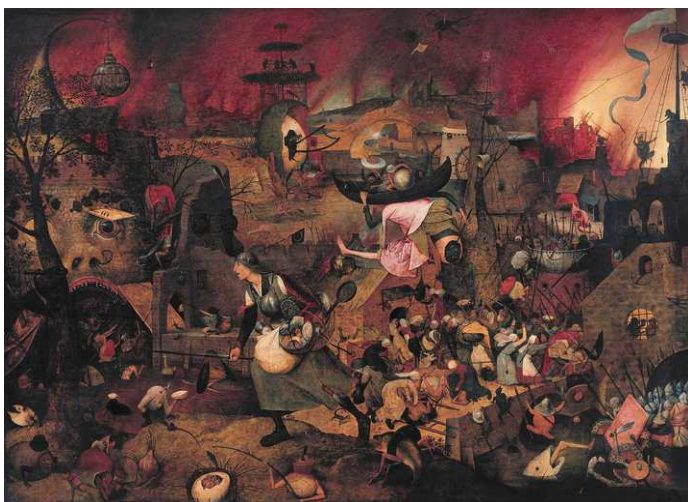


In this terrifying vision one helmeted creature, sword in hand fights back; another blows a trumpet at the angel pushing them down. A musical instrument grows crab-like claws and a

Bruegel's prints adopt many of the very individual mannerisms of Hieronymus Bosch. That imitations of Bosch sold well is demonstrated by his drawing *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, which Bruegel signed but Cock shamelessly attributed to Bosch in the print version. Among his greatest successes in prints were a series of allegories: *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *The Virtues*; in which the sinners are grotesque and unidentifiable while the allegories of virtue often wear odd headgear.



In this engraving of *Anger* from the *The Seven Deadly Sins or the Seven Vices* (1558) a large central figure, wearing a helmet with a crest reminiscent of Bosch's fantasy constructions, presides over a scene of mayhem. A pair of anonymous armoured figures cut up a line of recumbent people with an outsize knife, while others are attacked by hybrid, part-human, part-animal creatures. A man is roasted on a spit, while another naked couple are boiled in a cooking pot over a fire on top of a tent. In the background is another Bosch-like construction while in the far distance a walled city burns.



Dulle Griet (anglicized as **Dull Gret**), also known as **Mad Meg**, painted in 1563, is a figure of Flemish folklore depicting a virago, Dulle Griet, leading an army of women to pillage Hell, and owes much to the example of Hieronymus Bosch. Based on its close compositional and stylistic similarity to *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* and *The Triumph of Death*, it is assumed the painting was destined for a series.

Writing in 1604 Bruegel's earliest biographer, Karel van Mander, described the painting as "Dulle Griet, who is looking at the mouth of Hell".

Griet was a disparaging name given to any bad-tempered, shrewish woman. Her mission refers to the Flemish proverb:

She could plunder in front of hell and return unscathed.

Bruegel is thus making fun of noisy, aggressive women. At the same time he castigates the sin of covetousness: although already burdened down with possessions, Griet and her grotesque companions are prepared to storm the mouth of Hell itself in their search for more.



While her female followers loot a house, Griet advances towards the mouth of Hell through a landscape populated by monsters reminiscent of Bosch, representing the sins that are punished there. Griet wears male armour — a breastplate, a mailed glove and a metal cap; her military costume is parodied by the monster in a helmet beside her, who pulls up a drawbridge. A knife hangs from her side, while in her right hand she carries a sword, which may refer to the saying: "He could go to Hell with a sword in his hand." A book of proverbs published in Antwerp in 1568 contains a saying which is very close in spirit to Bruegel's painting:

One woman makes a din, two women a lot of trouble, three an annual market, four a quarrel, five an army, and against six the Devil himself has no weapon.



The Triumph of Death (c. 1562) in the Prado Museum, shows a panorama of an army of skeletons wreaking havoc across a scorched, blackened, and desolate landscape. Fires burn in the distance, and the sea is littered with shipwrecks. A few leafless trees stud hills otherwise bare of vegetation; fish lie rotting on the shores of a corpse-choked pond. Legions of skeletons advance on the living, who either flee in terror or try in vain to fight back. In the foreground, skeletons haul a wagon full of skulls; in the upper left corner, others ring the bell that signifies the death knell of the world. People are herded into a coffin-shaped trap decorated with crosses, while a skeleton on horseback kills people with a scythe. The painting depicts people of different social backgrounds – from peasants and soldiers to nobles as well as a king and a cardinal – being taken by death indiscriminately.



A skeleton parodies human happiness by playing a hurdy-gurdy while the wheels of his cart crush a man like he's nothing. A woman has fallen in the path of the death cart; she has a slender thread which is about to be cut by the scissors in her other hand—Bruegel's interpretation of Atropos, the Greek Fate who cuts the thread of life.



Nearby another woman in the path of the cart, holds in her hand a spindle and distaff, classical symbols of the fragility of human life—another Bruegel interpretation of Clotho, the Fate who spins the thread, and Lachesis who measures it. A starving dog nibbles at the face of a dead child held by the woman. Just beside her, a cardinal is helped towards his fate by a skeleton who mockingly wears the red hat,...



....while a dying king's barrels of gold and silver coins are looted by yet another skeleton; oblivious to the fact that a skeleton is warning him with an empty hourglass that his life is about to literally run out of time, the foolish and miserly monarch's last thoughts still compel him to reach out for his useless and vain wealth, making him oblivious of repentance.



In the centre, an awakening religious pilgrim has his throat cut by a robber-skeleton for his money purse;.....



.....above the murder people are caught in a net by skeleton-fishermen, some hooded and wearing monks' habits.

In the bottom right-hand corner, a dinner has been broken up and the diners are putting up a futile resistance. They have



drawn their swords in order to fight the skeletons dressed in winding-sheets; no less hopelessly, the court jester takes refuge beneath the dinner table. The Backgammon board and the playing cards have been scattered, while a skeleton thinly disguised with a mask (possibly the face of a corpse) empties away the wine flasks. Of the menu of the interrupted meal, all that can be seen are a few pallid rolls of bread and an appetiser apparently consisting of a pared human skull. On the far side of the table, a woman struggles in vain while being embraced by a skeleton in a hideous parody of after-dinner amorosness. To the right as the fighting breaks out, a skeleton in a hooded, blue robe mockingly seems to bring another dish, also consisting of human bones, to the table—horrifying another woman with the realisation of mortality. Oblivious to the horrendous scene in the bottom right corner an elegantly dressed young woman listens to amorous songs from her lover.

Landscapes

Bruegel adapted and made more natural the world landscape style, which shows small figures in an imaginary panoramic landscape seen from an elevated viewpoint that includes mountains and lowlands, water, and buildings. Back in Antwerp from Italy he was commissioned in the 1550s by the publisher Hieronimus Cock to make drawings for a series of engravings, the *Large Landscapes*, to meet what was now a growing demand for landscape images.



Long thought to be original the ***Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*** is now thought to be a good early copy painted in the 1560s by an unknown artist of Bruegel's lost original, perhaps from about 1558. According to the museum: "It is doubtful the execution is by Bruegel the Elder, but the composition can be said with certainty to be his".

In this episode of the story, largely derived from Ovid, the fall of Icarus is barely noticeable – only his legs are shown as he plunges into the sea.

As W. H. Auden says in his poem "*Musée des*

Beaux Arts" the plowman and the shepherd (both mentioned in Ovid) are oblivious to the extraordinary event, and the ship carries on regardless, as it has somewhere more important to go. The shepherd, whose back is turned to the falling Icarus is looking at a point in the sky where in another, smaller, version of the painting his father Daedalus appears. There is also a Flemish proverb: "And the farmer continued to plough..." pointing out the indifference of people to fellow men's suffering.

The painting has also inspired other poems and films, notably *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, starring David Bowie.



Patinir, *Crossing the River Styx* c. 1515–1524 depicts the classical subject related by Virgil in his *Aeneid* and Dante in the *Inferno*. The larger figure in the boat is Charon, who transports the souls of the dead to the gates of Hades. The passenger in the boat, too minute to distinguish his expressions, is a human soul deciding between Heaven, to his right (the viewer's left), or Hell, to his left. The river Styx is one of the four rivers of the underworld that passes through the deepest part of hell.

The **world landscape**, a translation of the German **Weltlandschaft**, is a type of composition in Western painting showing an imaginary panoramic landscape seen from an elevated viewpoint that includes mountains and lowlands, water, and buildings. The subject of each painting is usually a Biblical or historical narrative, but the figures comprising this narrative element are dwarfed by their surroundings.

The world landscape first appeared in painting in the work of the Early Netherlandish painter Joachim Patinir (c. 1480–1524), most of whose few surviving paintings are of this type, usually showing religious subjects, but commissioned by secular patrons. "They were imaginary compilations of the most appealing and spectacular aspects of European geography, assembled for the delight of the wealthy armchair traveler", giving "an idealized composite of the world taken in at a single Olympian glance."

The compositional type was taken up by a number of other Netherlandish artists, most famously Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

The treatment of landscape backgrounds in Early Netherlandish painting was greatly admired in Italy, and Flemish specialists were employed in some Italian workshops, including that of Titian.

Landscape with the Flight into Egypt

(1563) is a naturalistic world Landscape following the conventions established by Joachim Patinir. The ostensible subject, the Holy Family, are small figures in an imaginary panoramic landscape seen from an elevated viewpoint, with mountains and lowlands, water, and buildings. The family are descending a slope overlooking an Alpine landscape, with a wide river valley bordered by hills and mountains. The painting is dominated by tones of brown and green for the land, and the blue of the water and sky. Mary's unusual red cloak (rather than her traditional blue) and white headgear makes her stand out against the blue of the river, while Joseph's greyish clothes contrast with the green and brown background of wooded hills. In the background, the buildings of towns are faintly visible on each side of the river.



On the tree stump to the right, a pagan statue has fallen out of its shrine as the family passed by, symbolising the triumph of Christ over paganism. This was one of a number of miraculous incidents that medieval legend had added to the very brief biblical story. A branch fallen against a tree creates a cross, presaging the crucifixion. Two tiny salamanders, symbols of evil, can be seen below the figures, near the bottom edge.

Bruegel's famous set of landscapes with genre figures depicting the seasons are the culmination of his landscape style; the five surviving paintings use the basic elements of the world landscape (only one lacks craggy mountains) but transform them into his own style. They are larger than most previous works, with a genre scene with several figures in the foreground, and the panoramic view seen past or through trees.

The series on the months of the year includes several of Bruegel's best-known works. commissioned In 1565. Traditional Flemish luxury books of hours had calendar pages that included the Labours of the Months, depictions set in landscapes of the agricultural tasks, weather, and social life typical for that month. Bruegel's paintings were on a far larger scale than a typical calendar page painting, each one approximately three feet by five feet.



The Harvesters (1565), depicting the harvest time in the months of July and August or late summer, is one in a series of six (or perhaps twelve) works, five of which are still extant, that portray different times of the year. As in many of his paintings, the focus is on peasants and their work and does not have the religious themes common in landscape works of the time. Notably, some of the peasants are shown eating while others are harvesting wheat, a depiction of both the production and consumption of food - relating to ideas of language or culture as they occur or change over a period of time. Pears can be seen on the white cloth in front of the upright sitting woman who eats bread and cheese

while a figure in the tree to the far right picks pears. The painting shows a large number of activities representative of the 16th-century Belgian rural life: on the far right a person is shaking apples from the tree, and in the distance, centre left of the painting, a group of villagers can be seen swimming and participating in the blood sport of throwing sticks at a cock. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the painting is housed, calls it a "watershed in the history of Western art" and the "first modern landscape". A sense of distance is conveyed by the workers carrying sheaves of wheat through the clearing, the people bathing in the pond, the children playing and the ships far away.

The Hunters in the Snow also known as **The Return of the Hunters**, (1565) shows a wintry scene in which three hunters are returning from an expedition accompanied by their dogs. By appearances the outing was not successful; the hunters appear to trudge wearily, and the dogs appear downtrodden and miserable. One man carries the "meager corpse of a fox" illustrating the paucity of the hunt. In front of the hunters in the snow are the footprints of a rabbit or hare - which has escaped or been missed by the hunters. The overall visual impression is one of a calm, cold, overcast day; the colours are muted whites and greys, the trees are bare of leaves, and wood smoke hangs in the air. Several adults and a child prepare food at an inn with an outside fire. Of interest are the jagged mountain peaks which do not exist in Belgium or Holland.



The landscape itself is a flat-bottomed valley (a river meanders through it) with jagged peaks visible on the far side. A watermill is seen with its wheel frozen stiff. In the distance, figures rendered as silhouettes, ice skate, play hockey with modern style sticks and curl on a frozen lake.

The 1560s was a time of religious revolution in the Netherlands, and Bruegel (and possibly his patron) may be attempting to portray an ideal of what country life used to be or what they wish it to be. His winter landscapes of 1565, are taken as corroborative evidence of the severity of winters during the Little Ice Age.

Writing in the "opinion" section of *Nature*, art historian Martin Kemp points out that Old Masters are popular subjects for Christmas cards and states that "probably no 'secular' subject is more popular than ...*Hunters in the Snow*".

The Gloomy Day is set around February and March, portrayed by the bleak atmosphere and leafless trees. Villagers are cutting trees for the fire. The paper crown around the boy's head and the eating of waffles are references to the Carnival time prior to Lent. The sky, the ships crashing against the shoreline, and the preparations suggest that harsh weather is coming.



Winter Landscape with Ice-skaters and Bird-trap (1565) shows a village scene where people skate on a frozen river, while on the right among trees and bushes, birds gather around a bird trap. It may make reference to the winter of 1564/65 which was, according to the records, particularly harsh and has become known as the original or oldest

exemplar of the most successful painting of the Brueghel family dynasty, of which there are 127 documented copies. At 38 x 56 cm. it is smaller than many of his landscapes.



The scene doubtless has a deeper meaning, linked to an allegorical interpretation of human existence which was widely held in the 16th

century. This conception sees the devotee as a pilgrim crossing a life dotted with dangers and temptations, which he must avoid to reach salvation. Birds traditionally symbolised the soul. Thus, bird traps, such as the trap on the right in the foreground, were used in the literature of the time to symbolize temptations by the devil, and therefore the destiny for lost souls. Skating scenes in art often portray the uncertain (slippery) nature of existence. Skaters and birds are brought together here to suggest both the obliviousness of the people to life's allurements and their vulnerability to the looming perils.



Bruegel also painted religious scenes in a wide Flemish landscape setting, as in **The Census at Bethlehem** (also known as **The Number-ing at Bethlehem**) (1566), one of the first paintings in western art to feature a significant snow landscape. It was painted in the after-math of the winter of 1565, one of the harshest winters on record.

Set in a snowy Brabant Flemish village in the evening, the winter scene brings together spiritual and temporal considerations, juxtaposing a ruined building (paganism?) on the right, with the church situated on the other bank (Christianity?) - thus linking past and present. The plague house, isolated on the edge of the water, reinforces the collective message of faith.

A group gathers at a building on the left, on which a sign bearing the Habsburg double-headed eagle is visible. Other people are making their way to the same building, including the figures of Joseph and the pregnant Virgin Mary on a donkey. A pig is being slaughtered. People are going about their daily business in the cold, children are shown playing with toys on the ice and having snowball fights. At the very centre of the painting is a spoked wheel, sometimes interpreted as being a reference to the wheel of fortune. To the right of centre, a man in a small hut is shown holding a clapper, a warning to keep away from leprosy, which was endemic in that part of Europe when the painting was created. In front of the hut is a begging bowl.



As he often did, Bruegel treats a biblical story, here the census of Quirinius, as a contemporary event. As frequently noted in Bruegel's paintings, reference to particular political events has been adduced - in this case, the severity of the Spanish administration in the southern Netherlands. However, Bruegel may well be making a more general criticism of bureaucratic methods.

This is a rare subject in previous Netherlandish art. The ruined castle in the background is based on the towers and gates of Amsterdam.

Pieter the Elder was the founder of a dynasty of painters. He had two sons: Pieter Bruegel the Younger (1564-1638) and Jan Bruegel the Elder (1568-1625) (both kept the spelling of their name as Brueghel). Their grandmother, Mayken Verhulst, brought them up as their father died when both were very small children. The older brother, Pieter Bruegel copied his father's style and compositions with competence and considerable commercial success. Jan was much more original, and very versatile. He was an important figure in the transition to the Baroque style in Flemish Baroque painting and Dutch Golden Age painting in a number of its genres. He was often a collaborator with other leading artists, including with Rubens on many works, such as *The Garden of Eden With the Fall of Man*.

The Brueghel family produced the largest number of major painters of all Flemish families. Other members of the family include Jan Bruegel the Younger (1601-78), Jan van Kessel the Elder (1626-79) (grandson of Jan Bruegel the Elder) and Jan van Kessel the Younger (1654-1708). Through David Teniers the Younger (1610-90), the family is also related to the whole Teniers family of painters and the Quellinus family of painters and sculptors, since Jan-Erasmus married Cornelia, daughter of David Teniers the Younger. The family tree, below, shows only the main branches of the extended family of artists.

