BRUEGEL

PETRO BRVEGEL, PICTORI.

Quis nouus hic Hieronymus Orbi
Boſchius ingenioſa magiſtri
Somnia peniculoque, ſtyloque
Tanta imitarier arte peritus,
Vt ſuperet tamen interim et illum?
Macte animo, Petre, mactus vt arte.
Namque tuo, veteriſque magiſtri
Ridiculo, ſalibuſque referto
In graphices genere inclyta laudum
Præmia vbique, et ab omnibus vllo
Artifice haud leuiora mereris.

MASTERS OF ART

BRUEGEL

Florian Heine

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Front Cover: Pieter Bruegel, *Netherlandish Proverbs,* 1559, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (detail, see page 51)
Frontispiece: Attributed to Johannes Wierix, *Portrait of Pieter Bruegel the Elder,* 1572, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (see page 12)
pages 8/9: *The Fall of the Rebel Angels,* 1562, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels (detail, see page 59)
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INTRODUCTION

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow* and *The Peasant Wedding* are among the most popular paintings in art history. The name "Peasant Bruegel", given to the artist in association with these pictures, by no means does justice to the scope of his work. Bruegel was a close observer, a cultured commentator and an intelligent critic of his time, his country and his circumstances. Although he travelled extensively in Italy he failed to adopt the style of the Italian Renaissance then in vogue throughout Europe. He chose a different one. It is astonishing what one does not find in Bruegel. Among the forty-five paintings and roughly sixty-five drawings known to have survived there are no portraits, no nudes, no depictions of deities, no heroicised figures and no idealised bodies. For his art he had no need of them, perhaps because in his own country he had seen and experienced a world that he would not have been able to capture with such a style essentially derived from antiquity.
In the sixteenth century Antwerp, his hometown, became Europe's most important financial centre and a major trading hub. Some fifty percent of the world's trade goods flowed through Antwerp and Rotterdam. Politics takes root where the money is and, along with it in this period, religion.
In 1477, when Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I married Mary of Burgundy, the Low Countries—which at the time encompassed the present-day Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and a portion of northern France—came under the sway of the Habsburgs. After Maximilian's death in 1519 his grandson Charles V, born in Ghent, was crowned emperor. During Charles's reign an already strong Protestantism spread further throughout Europe. There was no longer only a single Christian truth; thanks to Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam as well as to the ideas of Sebastian Franck, people could choose different faiths. And because then, as now, religious questions were never solely about religion but also had to do with power, politics and social issues, religion was—and is—exploited.
When Charles's son Philipp II succeeded him on the throne the political-religious situation in the Low Countries, especially for Protestants, became even worse than it had been before. Philipp had been raised a strict Catholic in Spain, had never visited the Low Countries and had no interest in them. He had not had a humanist education and, like his father, saw as his most important task the promulgation of Catholicism. Open practice of their religion by Protestants was threatened or wholly forbidden; against it Philipp enlisted the powers of the Inquisition, including death by burning, drowning, beheading or hanging, all of which Bruegel and other artists like Frans Hogenberg pictured time and again in their paintings. Moreover, the Low Countries were obliged to pay high taxes to Spain, arousing massive anti-Habsburg sentiment. This combination of economic and religious concerns led to violent opposition and in August 1566 finally culminated in the Great Iconoclasm, in which hundreds of churches and cloisters were plundered and most of their religious artworks destroyed.

Philipp responded not by giving in but by dispatching Fernando Álvarez de Toledo—better known as the Duke of Alba, named governor of the Spanish Netherlands—with a force of several thousand soldiers. Alba, the "Black Legend", instituted a brutal regime. His assignment was to strengthen the royal power and above all punish the rebellious Protestants. For this purpose he convened a special court, the "Council of Troubles" or the "Council of Blood" as it was popularly known. Between 1567 and 1573 the council condemned thousands of people and had them executed by the most horrific of methods, from beheading, breaking on the wheel and hanging to burning at the stake. The previous atrocities were only compounded.

In 1567 Alba's troops plundered Antwerp and Mechelen and burned a number of their buildings; the Spanish governor had thousands of people executed, whether they had been convicted or not. We read in P. C. Hooft's *History of the Netherlands* from 1642 that "the wheels, the stakes, the trees along the roads were laden with strangled, beheaded, martyred corpses, so that people gasped for a breath of air, as if they were now in a common grave, a house of the dead . . .. There was no end to the banishment and expropriation of property".

It is against such a background that one needs to study the Bruegel pictures, far removed from those of the "Peasant Bruegel". Time and again one has to wonder about his religious and political positions. He moved in cultivated and well-to-do social circles, close to the centres of power that he simultaneously criticised. Perhaps he was simply protected by his artistic ability, which was universally admired. But even this question cannot be answered definitively. What makes Bruegel's art still so interesting after nearly 500 years is the universality of its themes and his treatment of them—the way he rendered them on canvas in a fascinating mix of precision and casualness. Bruegel painted many things in his works that one sees only if standing very close to them, which is often difficult. Assistance for seventeen of his works was provided by Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum on the occasion of its 2018/19 exhibition *Bruegel, The Hand of the Master*. It created the website www.insidebruegel.net, where one finds not only preliminary drawings and underpaintings in x-ray as well as infrared photographs but also the chance to zoom in on the tiniest details. For anyone who wishes to know more about Bruegel's work the site is a great help and sheer delight.

LIFE

Probable Pieter Bruegel self-portrait in: *The Way to Calvary*, 1564, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Aside from dated drawings and paintings there are only a few fixed points in Pieter Bruegel's biography. He was born sometime between 1525 and 1530, probably in or near the Dutch city of Breda. We do not know precisely where. The little we do know comes from the pen of Karel van Mander (1548–1606), a painter and writer who in 1604 published his *Schilder-boeck* (*Book of Painters*), a book about the lives of the most important painters since antiquity, virtually a northern version of *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* by Georgio Vasari (1511–1574), with which the Italian became the "father of art history". The problem with van Mander's narrative is that it appeared thirty-five years after Bruegel's death, twenty-six years after that of his wife and five years after the demise of his mother-in-law. We cannot know how reliable this biography is—but it does provide a few clues. Much the same can be said of his portrait—what did Pieter Bruegel look like? His artist in the famous drawing *The Painter and the Connoisseur* (page 34) is definitely not a self-portrait but it is possible that he did insert himself as a silent observer at the right edges (see detail opposite) of his *The Way to Calvary* (page 77) and *The Sermon of Saint John the Baptist* (page 91). The closest likeness is the one by Dominicus Lampsonius (1532–1599), who as a painter and writer published in 1572 a collection of portraits of Netherlandish artists (*Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies*) including one of Bruegel (page 12). Although published after Bruegel's death, it is highly probable that the portrait is authentic, for said collection was begun with and during the lifetime of Hieronymus Cock, Bruegel's publisher.

Pieter Bruegel probably received his training in the workshop of the highly versatile painter Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–1550). Van Aelst had travelled widely, from 1524 to 1525 in Italy and in 1533 to Constantinople. Produced in his workshop, in addition to large altarpieces, were designs for stained glass and tapestries and even building plans. Moreover, as early as 1539 he was the first to translate into Flemish the *Seven Books on Architecture* (published beginning in 1537) by Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554), one of the most important architectural treatises of the sixteenth century. A French translation followed in 1545. Van Aelst's wife Mayken Verhulst (c. 1518–1599/1600) was considered one of most important women painters in the Netherlands and was especially successful as a miniaturist. In this complex environment Bruegel seems to have received a very comprehensive introduction to his craft and art.

In 1550 Bruegel helped to produce an altarpiece for the glovers' guild in Mechelen. The main artist was his colleague Pieter Baltens (c. 1527–1584), while Bruegel was responsible for grisaille paintings on the outer wings. The altar, Bruegel's only work commissioned for a church, has not survived. In 1551 the artist was enrolled as a master in the Guild of Saint Luke in Antwerp and from 1552 to 1554 he journeyed by way of France to Italy and then explored the country. It is unclear which cities he visited there and how the young master financed his travels.

Attributed to Johannes Wierix, *Portrait of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, 1572, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Bruegel was accompanied on a portion of this journey by his friend and colleague Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598), who later underwent training as a cartographer. In that capacity, in 1579, he published the first modern atlas, the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, which was also a financial success. Their route to Italy probably passed through Dijon, a book publishing and printmaking centre. We know of only selective stops along the way. Bruegel got at least as far as Reggio Calabria and given its proximity to Sicily one would presume that he also crossed the strait. In 1561, long since returned to Antwerp, he produced the drawing for his largest print, the *Naval Battle in the Strait of Messina* (page 13). He subsequently journeyed to Rome by way of Naples where he did a painting of its harbour (now in the Galeria Doria Pamphilj, Rome). In Rome he worked with the very well-known miniature painter Giulio Clovio (1498–1578). There Bruegel drew a peaceful view of the Ripa Grande, Rome's river harbour, which, sadly, has not survived (page 14). From his early drawings his very delicate draughtsmanly style can already be detected: no long, bold lines, only many short strokes and dots with which he was able to create dense, virtuosic landscapes.

We know no more about which cities Bruegel visited in Italy beyond Naples and Rome, whether he saw Florence, Venice or Milan; nor do we know about his actual return route. All that is certain is that the latter led across the Alps. It appears that it was there that he had his most profound experiences of landscape, for the amazing size of the mountain wilderness made a lasting impression on the young painter. Only very few drawings from his journey survive but there must have been hundreds of them, a fund from which he drew for the rest of his life.

It is evident that the Italian sojourn deeply impressed the young artist in terms of landscape but in other artistic respects he remained his own man. Bruegel was definitely inspired by landscape prints from the Italians Domenico Campagnola (1500–1564) and Titian (c. 1488–1576) that were marketed throughout Europe. But unlike most artists who travelled in Italy he did not adopt the