

The Prints of  
Pieter Bruegel the Elder

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What could be the relevance of sixteenth century Netherlandish art theory to the interpretation of Bruegel's paintings? To many readers this will seem a puzzling question, since art theoretical matters have almost entirely been neglected in the study of sixteenth century Netherlandish art. Sometimes, it seems, they are not even felt to exist. But there was at least one lively theoretical controversy in Bruegel's time that deserves to be brought to the fore rather more sharply than it has so far. The two main documents for the controversy raise an issue of considerable significance for the study of his work as a whole; and they happen to highlight some of the chief interpretive problems that occur when one considers the meaning of his paintings and prints. But I will not begin with theory and end with the problem of allusion; the two problems are too complexly interwoven to do that. They also point to several further desiderata for future research in the field.

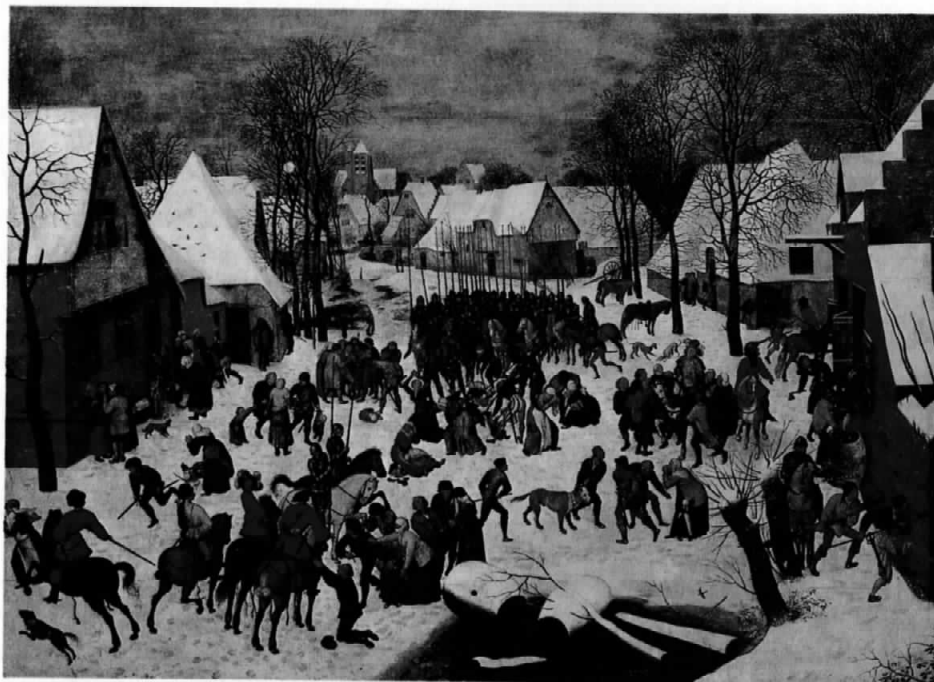
But first let us remember the broader political context. The revolt of the Netherlands, as we have seen, may be said to have begun in August 1566, when small groups of rioters broke into churches and chapels throughout the country and destroyed the images in them. I have written much elsewhere about these tumultuous events—and, in particular, about their consequences for the fate of works of art; but here the issue is the extent of their implications for the work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who produced his greatest works in the three or four years before his death in 1569. These were the days of the great hedge sermons, those clandestine outdoor meetings which the regent Margaret attempted to suppress; of the iconoclastic riots; of the repressive regime of the Duke of Alva; of the introduction of Spanish troops into the Netherlands; of the fearsome placards forbidding every kind of activity which might be thought to promote heresy; of the imposition of the tax known as the "Tenth Penny"; and finally of the terrifyingly wide-ranging Council of Troubles, which the Duke of Alva set up to examine anyone even remotely suspected of heresy, sedition and rebellion. Thousands were examined, condemned and executed; and informers had a field day.

How, if at all, were these events reflected in Bruegel's work? The case of the painting of *Dulle Griet*, the 'Crazy Margaret' (in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum in Antwerp) raises the problem. It has usually been taken to illustrate what seems to have been one view of an excessively bold woman; or perhaps of excessively bold women. The view was both current and rooted in Flemish proverbial tradition. This fierce harridan is not only armed to the teeth; she is so brazen that she would even do a robbery in front of flaming Hell itself. Indeed, she carries off bags of money before the very gates of Hell. In this she is assisted by hordes of smaller women who are themselves so bold that they would even "tie the devil to a cushion", as the old Flemish proverb has it. But is this really all there is to the picture, where Bruegel makes his indebtedness to Bosch so clear? Could this really be all he intended, a painted diatribe against overbearing women? Van Mander tells of how a few years earlier he finally gave up his girlfriend because she lied just once too much; but even if this story were true, it could be hardly be sufficient to account for this crazed Margaret. Is it then, as Walter Gibson has suggested, a painted polemic against the great and sometimes fierce female rulers of the middle of the sixteenth century, like Mary Tudor and the long line of female regents in the Netherlands, right up to Margaret herself? That may be to make too great a leap from proverbial culture to broad political issues.

Much ink has recently been spilt over this picture, but the interpretation recently proposed by Jeremy Bangs merits serious consideration. Could it not be a quite specific allusion to the case of one *Lange Griet* ("Long Margaret") who was a notorious informer in 1564? She informed on two Protestant ministers who were subsequently executed, and in that year riots broke out, in which she played a prominent role. The question, then, is this: are we dealing with a painting that has largely to do with Flemish proverbial culture, or rather one that makes a specific

topical allusion? The question may be falsely posed, since these are possibly not polarities at all, but rather two sides of the same coin. Let us consider the matter further.

The problem of Bruegel's politics is raised again in the case of the paintings of the *Massacre of the Innocents* (Hampton Court) and the *Census of Bethlehem* (Brussels). With the *Massacre* one wants to know whether these are the Spanish soldiers recently billeted in the Flemish countryside; and whether the *Census*, so charmingly situated in a recognizably Flemish village, is a biting allusion to the so-called "Tenth Penny" or any of the severe taxes introduced by the Spanish regime and so resented by the populace. We cannot be sure, even though the fashionable view is that both pictures were painted too early to justify such an interpretation:



*Massacre of the Innocents*,  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



*Census at Bethlehem*,  
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

Before moving closer to an examination of the extent to which political events and issues may or may not be reflected in Bruegel's work, it is perhaps worth considering two of the major lacunae in the study of the artist and his times. They may just illuminate the thorny question of his politics, even if—at first sight—they may not seem to do so.

We know a fair amount about his friends and patrons. At the highest social levels there are his connections with figures like Cardinal Granvelle, and with rich merchants such as Nicholas Jonghelinck. Unlike many of the other wealthy merchants of the time, notably Gilles Hooftman, Pieter Panhuys and Emmanuel Rademacher, we can almost certainly be sure that Jonghelinck remained orthodox. Apart from his intimate connection with the administration, his name does not occur on that extraordinary document in the Antwerp archives, *Les moyens à remedier à Anvers* which systematically lists every heterodox figure in the city. This is a more reliable and revealing document than usual, as it appears to have been compiled with the aid of inside information. Thus it reveals the names of the most prominent dissimulators like the great printer, Christopher Plantin. But it is Jonghelinck's remarkable collection of paintings, with its sixteen Bruegels and twenty-two Frans Florises, that needs a more thorough examination. Here were to be found series like Bruegel's *Months* hanging in close proximity to Floris's *Labours of Hercules* and to several of his other mythological scenes. There must be a great deal to be gained from a closer analysis of the contents of this collection, in which two streams of Antwerp painting—to which we shall return—hung side by side.

Bruegel's heterodox connections are perhaps even better documented, from the great geographer Abraham Ortelius (for whom he painted the beautiful *Death of the Virgin* in Upton House, here represented by the print Ortelius himself commissioned, No.86)—to Plantin and the engraver Philips Galle. But too many commentators have been over-eager in assuming that Bruegel's friends provide adequate evidence of his religious attitudes. This is clearly insufficient. His paintings do not seem to reflect a particular and consistent viewpoint, and there is no proof, either documentary or artistic, of a specific religious adherence on Bruegel's part. It is entirely likely that he should sometimes have adopted a critical stance towards the obvious abuses in the Catholic Church, and on other occasions have shown a reasonable and intellectual sympathy with the more liberal groups of his age. Probably the most one can say of him is what the Calvinist Saravia, rightly or wrongly, said of the famous Stoic philosopher and scholar Justus Lipsius—the greatest vacillator of his times, perhaps—to the Archbishop of Canterbury: "The reason why in these large-scale religious differences he committed himself to no party was because he did not wish to offend any of his friends who were of varying religious persuasions." However anodyne and unexciting this may sound, there is not a single document that pertains directly to Bruegel's outlook—let alone an official, or, for that matter, an autobiographical one.

Perhaps the most important lacuna in the study of Bruegel and his circle is the lack of attention that has been paid to his artistic contemporaries. To judge from the extant literature on the subject, one would scarcely believe that fellow artists also counted amongst his acquaintances and friends. Aside from the then-famous Frans Floris, there is Maerten de Vos, whom we know to have been Lutheran and with whom, it seems likely, Bruegel travelled to Italy. These are two of the Italianate painters of his time, if they may provisionally be described this way, but there are also painters like Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer, whose methods of hiding clues to the real meaning of their works within the pictures themselves provide illuminating contrasts to Bruegel's own method of doing the same. Pieter Baltens, with whom Bruegel worked on an altarpiece for the guild of Fishmongers in Mechlin swiftly turned into a minor emulator; the subject matter of Maerten van Cleef, who joined the Antwerp guild of painters in the same year as Bruegel, provides close contemporary parallels with that of the far greater master; and we need only go through the guild lists to find the names of other artists whom Bruegel must have known. Willem Key, for example, was dean of the painters' guild in the year of Bruegel's entry into it; a few years later one finds not only the all-too Italianate Crispiaen van den Broeck, but also Cornelis van Dalem, the far too little studied painter of a number of ravishing and curiously deserted farmyard scenes. Later on, Jacob Grimmer is mentioned. These painters at least—and a good number of others have been omitted in this rapid survey—must have been well-known to Bruegel, if only on the basis of the guild connections. Here historians of art should come into their own. Other aspects of Bruegel's life may be satisfactorily dealt with by political, social and theological historians, but art historians have yet to assess the degree of cross-fertilization in the artistic life of Bruegel and his peers. We still know too little about who else was painting in

Antwerp and Brussels at the time of Bruegel's activity there.

The present state of our knowledge about Bruegel and his circle may therefore be summarized as follows: we have a fair amount of information about his patrons and his closest friends; rather less about his artistic acquaintances. But here our chief aim is to examine one intellectual issue within his circle that hardly seems to have been discussed at all.

It has often been noted that before the seventeenth century there is no body of artistic theory and discussion in the Netherlands comparable to that in Italy. There is no Netherlandish equivalent to Alberti or Vasari, for example, before van Mander, although a possible exception is provided by Lampsonius's *Vita* of Lambert Lombard, that oddly stilted and antiquarianizing painter who was born in Liège and died there in 1566, two years before Bruegel himself. This document was published in 1565 by Hubert Goltzius, through the mediation of Abraham Ortelius, to whom it is dedicated. But apart from an open espousal of the *disegno* rather than the *colore* cause, it is more concerned with artistic biography and an insistence on the status of the artist in general than with the more theoretical issues. It is entirely Vasarian in tone, apart from the obligatory references to classical artists and a passing reference to Politian and Alberti.

Lambert Lombard's own letter to Vasari, written in April 1565, casts an interesting though possibly exceptional light on contemporary Flemish attitudes towards the art of the past. Lombard asks Vasari to send him some compositions by Margaritone, Gaddi and Giotto, so that he can compare them with certain old glass paintings and bronze reliefs. The works of such artists, says Lombard, please him more than the art of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, however defective they may be in the imitation of nature. But painting between Giotto and Donatello was coarse and ungainly, just as Netherlandish and German art was before the advent of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, Schongauer and Dürer. Jan van Eyck opened artists' eyes to the potential of colors, but the trouble with his successors was that they did not follow nature; they simply filled their works with pretty colors. Here is an issue that will recur again.

But first it is worth reflecting on the four letters to Vasari from Lombard's biographer, Domenicus Lampsonius. This poetaster and amateur artist, a fervent devotee of Italian art and theory, took it upon himself to write two letters to Vasari, one to Titian, and one to Giulio Clovio between 1564 and 1570—all of them unsolicited. Naturally enough, the letters eulogize both their recipients, and, in the case of the letters to Vasari, the art of Michelangelo and the great Roman and Florentine artists of the Cinquecento, especially Raphael, Andrea del Sarto and Daniele da Volterra. But Lampsonius is less concerned with theoretical matters—of which there is barely a glimmering—than with the need for good engavings of the Italian masters just mentioned. Even this seems to have been little more than an excuse to recommend the abilities of the budding Flemish engraver, Cornelis Cort; and he never had been to Italy himself. Predictably, the bulk of these letters is filled with expressions of slavish admiration for the achievements of the art of the High Renaissance, expressions which exceed the bounds of conventional compliment. The only Northern artists to receive favorable mention are Dürer and the great court portraitist Antonis Mor, on whom he appends three poems in the letter to Giulio Clovio.

For the rest, artists' encomia hardly ever rise above the level of the rudimentary citation from Pliny the Elder or elementary versification such as one finds in Lampsonius's later work, the *Pictorum aliquot effigies...* ("Portraits of Some Painters of the Low Countries") of 1572. Indeed, it is usually felt that in the Netherlands there is nothing like the late humanist debates about artistic issues such as the discussions of *disegno* and *colore* and the protracted analysis of concepts like *grazia*, *bellezza* and *decoro*. However, in addition to the moralistic and theoretical discussions about art in the sixteenth century, there are indications of a debate about purely artistic issues which appears to have been as heated as in the South and which has been overlooked until now.

At least two documents, reproduced in the Appendix, show that a number of such issues were a matter of live interest in the Netherlands. One of these has often been referred to, but has never been analyzed properly; the other, while known to some historians of sixteenth-century Dutch literature, has not yet featured in any discussions of Bruegel's art. The first is Abraham Ortelius's long tribute to Bruegel in his *Album Amicorum* preserved in the Pembroke College in Cambridge; the second is the "Invective against a certain Painter who criticized the painters of Antwerp"—as the title reads with tantalizing vagueness—by Lucas d'Heere (the teacher of Carel van Mander)

included in his rare *Hof en Boomgaard der Poesien*, published in Ghent in 1565.

Ortelius's tribute however, is the shorter and the more immediately approachable of the two texts. Although it is about eight or nine years later, it raises fewer new issues—and in a more elegant way.

It begins with a straightforward tribute to the artist, *pictor sui seculi absolutissimus*, "the most perfect painter of his age". As it is this opening passage which is usually reprinted, not much space needs to be devoted to it here. It is suggested that Bruegel's early death may have been precipitated by nature herself, jealous of the painter's ability to imitate her. Now this may at first seem to be little more than a common topos of artistic theory. But in the next section the point is emphasized twice over. First the relevance to Bruegel of Eupompos's statement that he followed no artist but rather nature herself is made clear. Bruegel's pictures are not to be called *artificiosae* ("artificial"); they are said to be *naturales* ("natural"). He is not the best of painters; he must be the very nature of painters (*naturam pictorum dixerim*). Now this too may be a common component of humanist encomia, but the relevance to Bruegel seems to be especially pointed when we think not only of his paintings in comparison with those of his contemporaries, but even more when we consider the famous *naer het leven* drawings, the figural drawings after life. At least some of these are indisputably by Bruegel, even if others have recently been given to later masters.

That the implied difference between paintings which are described as *artificiosae* and those which are *naturales* reflects a real issue at the time is apparent not only from the paintings, as is to be expected, but also from the poem by Lucas d'Heere, as well shall see. A final section is now added, breaking the format of the page, in order to make the following claim: *In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur*, "In all his works there is always more to be understood than he actually painted." What havoc the adoption of this viewpoint has wrought amongst the interpreters of Bruegel's art! It is as if it has provided the license for those critics who always insist on finding more in Bruegel's paintings than even Ortelius can have dreamed. But the statement is an important one, and it is worth dwelling a little on its implications. In recent years a number of writers, most notably Justus Müller Hofstede and Jan Muylle, have rightly criticized the tendency (of which de Tolnay was perhaps the chief exponent) to interpret this passage as an indication that Bruegel concealed heterodox views within his works, and that the works were strongly allusive either politically or doctrinally. Such critics have justly insisted on the fact that the passage is clearly to be situated in terms of standard rhetorical habits, and is therefore more a statement of a particular aspect of Bruegel's artistic abilities than about veiled messages or beliefs. It is, they assert, rather straightforwardly to be seen in the light of contemporary artistic and rhetorical theory. Nevertheless, it does seem to be more than an excuse for yet another classical allusion, in this case to Timanthes, who—as Pliny recounted—only suggested Agamemnon's grief at the sacrifice of Iphigenia, by painting a veil over his face rather than actually painting his tears.

Of course it is not surprising to find such a statement coming from Ortelius. Here the hermeneutic issues become denser and more problematic. Is there not an interpretive parallel between the ways in which we formulate the problem of artistic strategy and those in which we express the problem of personal belief? The theoretical issue merits considerably further expansion, but cannot immediately be resolved. What could be said—broadly—is that just as in Bruegel's paintings there was more than met the eye, so in Ortelius' own actions outward appearances belied his true beliefs. But while Ortelius's connections with that extraordinary but oddly elusive group, the Family of Love, are well established, it has now become clear—as a result of the work of scholars like Cantimori, Ginzburg, Rekers and Hamilton—that the whole phenomenon of dissimulation was widespread in the sixteenth century, and not only confined to the Familist or any other of the so-called Nicodemist groups. The Family of Love, like the other Libertines and Nicodemists, believed that the crux of faith resided in the personal imitation of Christ (often entailing a variety of highly idiosyncratic inward devotions), not in outward religious affiliation. One was perfectly at liberty—indeed it was expedient and advisable to do so—to follow the external practices and ceremonies of a particular church, whether Protestant or Catholic; but in spiritual terms such adherence was irrelevant and indifferent. Attitudes like these were viewed with horror by the Catholic authorities above all—but one can understand their attraction. They had strong ecumenical and irenicist overtones in a time of appalling religious strife. Furthermore, when even mildly deviant beliefs were liable to be severely punished, it is not surprising that those who held heterodox views should wish to cloak them under the guise of conventional behavior. Nor would one expect works of literature and art which conveyed a heretical message or made a heterodox point to appear anything but conventional and

straightforward. But recognition, now, of the necessity for dissimulation does not entitle us to read extravagantly unorthodox or seditious meanings into the works of a painter like Pieter Bruegel.

Let us examine more closely some of the modes of conveying the meanings of a picture in the Netherlands during the 1550s and 1560s. In order to do so, the work of Bruegel may be compared with that of his slightly older contemporaries, Pieter Aertsen (1508–1573) and Joachim Beuckelaer (c.1530–1573). The paintings of these men also appear to contain more than it seems, at any rate at first sight. But their method of supplying clues to the apparently hidden significance of a picture is entirely different from that of Bruegel. In Aertsen and Beuckelaer meaning may be hidden but it is usually explicit; in Bruegel it is implied but hardly ever made explicit.

Amongst the most puzzling pictures by Pieter Aertsen are his representations of kitchen and market scenes. At first sight, a painting such as the Rotterdam *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* appears to be little more than a kitchen scene with an extensive depiction of vegetables and poultry. But when we take the trouble to look into the background we find a clue to the real meaning of the painting. The scene there is an illustration of Christ's visit to the house of Martha and Mary, where Christ reproached Martha for being careful and troubled about many things—domestic things in short. But only thing is needful, said Christ in Luke 10:42, and "Mary hath chosen the good part"—namely faith. The clear implication of this picture, therefore, is that one should not be diverted from faith, from the *amor dei* ("the one thing needful", the love of God) by sensual distraction, the *amor carnis* (the love of flesh). Furthermore, I think we may now be sympathetic to Emmens's proposal that at least some of the pictures of this kind may be taken to be recommendations of the contemplative over the active life—Martha being the personification of the active, and Mary, who chose the good part, of the contemplative. Such works are fairly characteristic of a large group of pictures by both Aertsen and Beuckelaer, where all the spectator has to do is to look for the clue in the background in order to discover that the painting is not what it seems.

Two paintings with a similar subject, one by Beuckelaer, and the other by Bruegel, may usefully be compared. At first sight, the picture by Beuckelaer in Stockholm of a *Fish Market with Christ Presented to the People* seems little more than the representation of a fish market. But then, as usual, one finds the clue in the background: a depiction of the people mocking Christ. The foreground, it is apparent, refers to the Lenten eating of fish; but the very superabundance of fish puts one in mind of the criticism both by Erasmus and by the *rederijkers*, the Rhetoricians—those great amateur players of the sixteenth century—who insisted that true faith does not consist in excessive devotion to external religious practices. This makes a mockery of faith, like the people mocking Christ in the background. Or, to put it in other terms, the believer, the good Christian, should not be seduced by outward aspects of religion, such as the eating of fish during Lent (and one can see the obvious associations with carnality), but rather should remember to imitate Christ's suffering, as exemplified by the scene of the *Ecce Homo*. The clue to the meaning of this picture—that which enables the beholder to determine its moralizing content—is hidden in the background; but it is explicitly hidden.

In Bruegel's painting in Vienna of *Carnival and Lent*, on the other hand, the key is not to be found explicitly within the picture. Its meaning depends on a much wider knowledge of context. It too is not simply a representation of practices associated with Lent (in this case the Carnival procession on the eve of Lent). To provide a key to the picture as a whole would, in the present state of our knowledge about it, be impossible, but some of the more telling elements are worth recalling. The figure of Lent we may suppose to have been intended as a personification of the Catholic church. Not only is she on the same side of the painting as the church building, she wears on her head a classic symbol of Popery, the beehive (one remembers Marnix van Sant Aldegonde's almost exactly contemporary satire on Catholicism). Carnival, on the other hand, must represent Protestantism, or perhaps Lutheranism in particular, as Stridbeck has suggested. The figure of Carnival is opposed to that of Lent; we know that Protestants retained Carnival but abandoned Lent; and this gross figure's head is topped by the satirical pie, which, like the red, yellow and white flag borne by the runner in front of him, and like the lute-player behind, are probably to be seen as acid allusions to the major Protestant groups. Both personifications are derogatory enough.

But for the purposes of comparison with the Beuckelaer, the criticism of Lent in Bruegel's *Carnival and Lent* should be analyzed more closely. Here criticism is not pointed by reference to a particular biblical scene, sequestered

in the background. It is up to the spectator to disentangle the moral gloss from the whole genre-like portrayal of a contemporary event. The people who go to church wear the *blauwe huyck*, the typical blue cloak or hood; they are hypocrites, unlike the people behind the ridiculous figure of Lent distributing alms to the poor. The implications of this pictorial juxtaposition were spelled out by the rhetorician Jan de Brune: true following of the rules of the church is represented by those who help the poor—not, as in *Carnival and Lent*, by the ridiculous figure of Lent in the foreground, or by the children with their trivial games who follow her. These foolish figures eat the meagre bread and pretzels of Lent; and one child even has a fish placed pathetically and all scrawny on his head.

Of course there is much else in this picture, and many further layers of meaning. But this brief outline may just be sufficient to make plain the moral overtones of an apparently genresque scene. The apparent meaning of both the Beuckelaer and the Bruegel is immediately clear. The latent meaning, however, depends, in the case of the Beuckelaer, on the perception of the significance of the background scene; in the case of the Bruegel, on its wider contextual status.

But first one more comparison of paintings with the same subject by Aertsen and by Bruegel may be made. In one of Aertsen's most typical scenes, the *Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery* (also in Stockholm) an amorously engaged couple is set amidst a great quantity of market produce. Their actions are underlined by the presence of birds and onions whose obscene connotations are well-known or perfectly obvious. But the moralizing point, as we have come to expect, is made by the scene in the background—predictably of *Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery*. How different is Bruegel's representation of the subject (No. 88)! While it is possible that both the print and the picture on which it depends could be read as a plea for tolerance, in the way that Christ pleaded on behalf of the adulteress, there are no clues to this kind of latent meaning, apart from the words "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" on the engraving and which Christ inscribes, significantly in the vernacular, on the steps before the Pharisee. The clues depend on a context, now unfortunately lost to us, which would probably have been provided by the owner of the picture or the commissioner of the engraving after it, and which, as in the case of all the pictures we have been considering, would have depended on the use to which it was put or the place where it was hung. As I have noted, many of Bruegel's friends belonged to a clandestine group which fervently believed that the only hope for concord in their troubled times was by a spirit of tolerance towards the many heretical groups. They believed that what mattered was the inward imitation of Christ, not the following of the external practices and ceremonies of the faith. Such beliefs were themselves heretical, and the practice of dissimulation was consequently widespread. Men like the printer Plantin, the geographer Ortelius, the engraver Philips Galle and even the king's censor Benito Arias Montano dissimulated their true beliefs precisely by following outward ceremonies of the church, and by appearing to be conventional Catholics. It seems likely, on the basis of this and much other evidence, that the painting should be read in similar terms to these. Its outward appearance—its apparent or manifest meaning—may have belied its true but latent meaning.

But here a note of caution should be added. Even if Bruegel regularly painted more than it actually seemed, and even if some of his paintings contained heretical statements or allusions, the messages they conveyed can only be determined in terms of their beholders. Indeed, the painter's intention is not really the issue at all, for that is notoriously difficult to recover. The significance of Bruegel's pictures depends entirely on their social context and the ways in which they were capable of being read at the time. This may all seem very obvious, but it is too often forgotten by art historians who fail to take into account the possibilities of interpretation open to a particular social group. In Bruegel's *Carrying of the Cross*, for example, some commentators have seen a covert statement of Anabaptist beliefs. Christ is shown almost lost amidst the great crowds dispersed over the vast and bleak landscape—no Golgotha this, but some fanciful interpretation of a recognizable countryside, bar the characteristically outlandish rock formations. But can we say, on this basis alone, that Christ's humanity is thus assimilated to that of the crowd's, that his humanity is like theirs, theirs like his—a sentiment that was to receive such emphasis in Anabaptist thought? And is the merchant in the foreground one of that breed who notoriously spread the Anabaptist message? Then there is the problem of the scuffle on the left of the picture: Simon of Cyrene is seized by soldiers in order to help Christ carry the cross. He struggles against doing so, and is supported by his wife, from whose bodice a rosary conspicuously hangs. Heterodox or Anabaptist criticism of outward piety, or merely one of Bruegel's characteristically trenchant allusions





*Carrying of the Cross,*  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



*Sermon of John the Baptist,*  
Szépművészeti Museum, Budapest



*Peasant and the Birdnester,*  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

to religious hypocrisy, Erasmian at the most? The fact is that unless one can show that the painting was specifically made for an Anabaptist patron, and that such a subject was capable of conveying such complex allusions at all, then the claim must remain irrelevant. It is far more likely that it would have been read in the same straightforward way as the many similar representations of this subject by Aertsen, Beuckelaer, Herri met de Bles, the Brunswick Monogrammist and Pieter Balten—to cite only a few examples. When a particular pictorial tradition is as strong as this, then all that can be ascertained are the kinds of responses it was capable of evoking, not a particular meaning. All the art historian can do is to attempt to recover the potential sets of meaning for a particular context.

There is still another painting by Bruegel that exemplifies the problem acutely. The *Sermon of Saint John the Baptist* in Budapest has often been taken to reflect the outdoor sermons held by clandestine reformed preachers in the days preceding the great uprising of 1566, and has even been said to indicate his sympathy for these outlawed and troublesome groups. Would it not have been perfectly natural for Bruegel to use elements from contemporary scenes such as these without suggesting sympathy for one side or the other? Even this, however, seems unlikely, when one takes into consideration the fact that precisely these elements—the armed guard, the unassuming presence of John the Baptist and so on—are to be found in many other paintings of the subject by Netherlandish artists before and during Bruegel's lifetime, especially in several paintings by Herri met de Bles and Pieter Balten.

It is all very well to seek contemporary allusions in Bruegel's work, but examples like these suggest that such features are perfectly explicable in terms of established iconographic and pictorial habit. Even if these paintings were sometimes capable of being taken as political statements, they could also have been read in a traditional and straightforward way. There is a danger of failing to take into account that what one might call the positional meaning of a symbol may only be determined by its relationship to other symbols in the total social system; and that iconographic contamination is one of the characteristics of all signs, even though in any given context only a few of the meanings of a polyvalent symbol may be stressed.

These are the problems encountered in dealing with an artist who is supposed to have painted more than actually appeared on the surface. In some cases the matter seems to be quite straightforward. Thus in Bruegel's painting of *Two Monkeys* in Berlin the monkeys have often been interpreted on the basis of the widespread use, in emblems and literature, of the monkey as symbol of the soul chained to its sensual earthly desire (the nut), from which it cannot escape to the spiritual. But recently Monballieu has made an equally plausible but altogether different proposal: that the picture, of the kind called a *singerie* in sixteenth century inventories and literature, may well be taken as an allusion to the *seigneurie*, the city government of Antwerp (its spires are significantly to be seen in the background), then wholly submissive to Spanish chains; and that it is a complex statement of the relative jurisdictions of the city and a local lord.

Other seemingly straightforward cases include the Vienna *Peasant and the Birdnester* and the poignant *Blind Leading the Blind* in Naples. The first one we are supposed to interpret in terms of a well-known Flemish proverb, the second in terms of a biblical parable. To us, the old Flemish proverb "He who knows where the nest is has the knowledge, but he who robs it has the nest" seems amusing but cryptic; in the middle of the sixteenth century, however, it was clear enough. It was understood as an encouragement to direct action, usually in matters of courtship. But this seems hardly applicable here. Can one go further, turn the proverb upside-down, and say with Boström that "Bruegel has here given expression to his pessimistic view of human nature, and contrasted the active and the wicked thief with the passive man who is virtuous in spite of adversity"? Despite the brambles, the sword-like iris, and the brook into which the nobly simple peasant seems about to tumble, there are just too few clues to go any further.

And similarly with the *Parable of the Blind*. Matthew 15: 14 goes "if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch"; and *that* may at first sight seem sufficiently applicable to the picture. But what of the church in the background? Does it stand, when combined with these awfully deprived stumblers, for some form of spiritual neglect and unawareness, or is it simply a necessary adjunct to the landscape setting? We cannot certainly know.

These examples illustrate, perhaps more clearly than some of the earlier ones, the ways in which Bruegel's method of pictorial dissimulation, if we may put it that way, differed from that of his contemporaries. Pictorial clues of the order provided by Aertsen and Beuckelaer are never included in Bruegel. One was doubtless expected to deduce from one's knowledge of the context of his works the true meaning of what was painted, rather than what was actually

painted on the canvas or panel. In this sense, therefore, there is, after all, a precise justification for Ortelius's claim that in all Bruegel's works there is always more to be understood than he actually painted, *in omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur*. It goes beyond the issues of rhetoric *tout court*.

After this long excursus, we come back to the art theoretical problems. The penultimate sentence in Ortelius's tribute, probably added as an afterthought, is taken from the Neo-Platonist Eunapius's *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* published by Plantin, in Latin, in Antwerp in 1568. It criticizes those painters who prostitute their work by prettifying it, and by adding some grace of their own, thereby completely distorting what they are supposed to represent, and departing both from the model before them and from true form. Almost every word and phrase here—especially *gratia, representatam effigiem, exemplari proposito* and above all, *vera forma*—is pregnant with art theoretical implications. Contrary to what one might think, however, this is not merely an extrapolation from the notion that painting should follow nature. Of course it does suggest the exhortation: Follow nature. Do not deck out your paintings with all sorts of adornments and embellishments. But that the process of decking out one's works was a particular and contentious issue at the time becomes perfectly clear when one reads Lucas d'Heere's invective. Before dealing with it, however, the general content of Ortelius's tribute to Bruegel should briefly be recalled. It begins with the usual encomium, and protracts the praise it contains by emphasizing at length Bruegel's ability to imitate nature. His works have an intellectual and imaginative content beyond what actually meets the eye. He is free from the fault of adorning his paintings with superfluous attractions—*ab hac labe purus noster Bruegelius*. This is a bald account of what is in effect a moving tribute.

Lucas d'Heere's *Invective against a certain painter*, published in the collection of his poems which appeared in 1565, is quite different. Of course, it is of exactly the opposite literary genre, an invective against an unnamed but presumably living painter, rather than an encomium for a dead one. Instead of the measured tones of Ortelius's Latin, it is composed in vigorous Dutch verse. Instead of praising by allusion to the best classical sources, it damns by descending to the level of the popular language of abuse. To some extent it belongs to the same literary genre as Clement Marot's row with Sagon, but its importance goes far beyond its tenuous connection with French poetry. Let us examine more closely the ideas it contains. The painter against whom d'Heere inveighs has apparently criticized the works of Frans Floris (of whom de Heere was a pupil) and his school. One recalls that Floris was far and away the most popular and successful painter of the time. In the first place, the quidam painter, a *brodder* (that is, a botcher, or bungler), a *dwasen bottaert* (that is, a foolish oaf), worse than Momus (that asinine critic of mythology) is said to despise the beauty of Floris's works (and by implication their classical beauty), which was otherwise acknowledged by all.

In the third stanza, the grounds for the quidam painter's disapproval are elaborated. He calls the works of Floris *suuckerbeeldekens*, "sugary little pictures", because they are adorned, *omdat si verciert sijn*. At this point one remembers that according to Ortelius this was precisely the fault of which Bruegel was free: he did not adorn his pictures. So here is one theoretical issue that seems to have been in the forefront of artistic debate in mid-sixteenth century Flanders. Ortelius implies that Bruegel followed nature so accurately that he had no need to adorn his pictures further. D'Heere's approach to the problem is a different one, as is apparent from his very following words. He appeals to a well-known concept, at least in Italian art theory. He makes it clear that although Floris' paintings are richly adorned, they come entirely within the bounds of decorum: they are only *verciert, becamelijc en rijcke* (that is, they are only adorned, becomingly and richly) where it is fitting, *daert behoort en betaemt*. And in this respect the quidam painter is completely unskilled, *Daerin sijt ghi self gh'heel onghemaniert*. It should perhaps be noted that in this context the Dutch word *onghemaniert* does seem to carry with it some of the overtones of the Italian *maniera*. In any event, his paintings are more like carnival dolls (*kaeremes poppen*) than anything else. The suggestion is that he does not know either how to adorn them, or—at least—how to adorn them within the bounds of decorum.

A further battery of abuse follows, but apart from an expansion of the notion of sugaring one's art, and from an allusion to the lack of grace in the quidam painter's work, which is rather like Ortelius's similar remark about Bruegel, there is not much more that need concern us here. But in the penultimate stanza whatever suspicions we may have

about the identity of the quidam painter are reinforced. The claim is made that even though this painter had been in Rome, you would not be able to guess it from his works, as Balthasar Gerbier was to put it in his extremely rare Funeral Tribute to Hendrick Goltzius of some fifty years later (and as the inscription to the print of the *Ass at School* No. 17, similarly notes of going to study in Paris), "even if a donkey goes to Rome he does not return as a horse". We know that almost every Flemish painter of the sixteenth century made the well-nigh statutory journey to Italy, and that their subsequent works are pervaded with reminiscences and reflections of their Italian experience. Of Bruegel alone may this not be said. His Italian journey and his stay in Rome are well documented, and yet there is nothing like the adoption of Italian forms or ideas that we see in the artists of his circle discussed at the beginning of this essay. Now of course there are Italian and classical or traditional elements in his work. But not by any stretch of the imagination could the paintings which contain them be said to be either "Roomachtig" or "antijcx", Roman or antique: "classical", in short.

It may be argued that one cannot go so far as to claim that Lucas d'Heere's invective was specifically directed against Bruegel. Its tone is probably too strong to have been directed against a painter who, after all, seems to have been almost (but not quite) as well respected as Floris. But the identification of the quidam painter is not so important. These passages merit attention for two reasons. In the first place they provide sound evidence of art theoretical problems and categories in Bruegel's milieu which have not yet been recognized. Of course it would be wrong to give the impression that the awareness reached anything like the level of sophistication that it did in Italy; but it does seem clear that the issues raised not only by Lucas d'Heere but also by Ortelius may be said to have reached the level of a polemic, especially when seen in relation to each other; and that there are important implications for the art historical interpretation of his art. But the issues are also indicative of a tendency in Flemish art as a whole which receives its greatest expression in Bruegel.

Ortelius's tribute to Bruegel is written, fittingly, in measured classical terms, in Latin. But the virtue it extols is Bruegel's unadorned truth to nature. D'Heere's poem, on the other hand, is written—despite its meter—in the coarse language of the Flemish populace. Its aim is to sing the praises of the most classical, the most Italianate painter of the time. These two streams, the autochthonous and the Italianate, the classical and the popular, each have their representatives in Bruegel's artistic circle—although it must be said that at the time the Italian and the classical were accorded a higher status. But in no other painter of his time does one find a similar incorporation of Italian lessons within the popular tradition. In pictorial terms, it is true that whatever he learnt in Italy seems to have been given a less prominent place. But if we consider the intellectual motives for the entirety of Bruegel's oeuvre, we find an unparalleled combination of humanist and popular themes. That is why there are subjects like the *Icarus*, the Towers of Babel, even the *Two Monkeys*, as well as the illustrations of vernacular proverbs and the great peasant paintings of the last years. This is in these pictures that Bruegel makes his commitment to the national life of Flanders, and not to the canons of Italy. It is the national and the natural life of Flanders, distinctively so. The vernacular has acquired the same status as the classical. Bruegel elevates the pictorial possibilities of ordinary peasant life into subjects fit for painting; not for low-level picturemaking, but for pictures of the highest order.

Perhaps his very last painting—now that the great *Storm at Sea* has been given to Joos de Momper—is the enchanting *Magpie on the Gallows* in Darmstadt. It is clearly what might be called a peasant picture, or a landscape with peasants; but its interpretation is difficult. Are we to understand that the gallows loom over these figures as an intimation of mortality, or, more specifically, as a reminder of the mortality of their dance? I find this proposal, made by all those commentators who link Calvin's well-known condemnation of dancing with this picture, unconvincing. The peasants seem so clearly to be dancing in defiance of the gallows. Is the picture then a statement about a simple and happy life in the face of adversity, that one dances despite one's mortality, that no reminder of death is sufficient to halt the pleasures of these country folk? The idea is appealing, even if it is a little sentimental. It seems somehow in keeping with the elegiac tone of the picture as a whole.

But a much harder interpretation is also possible. It is one which almost all acholars have dismissed, in the face of the more attractive possibilities of a moralizing or elevating interpretation. Van Mander remarked that this was the picture bequeathed to his wife, and noted that "by the magpie he meant gossips he would deliver to the gallows". The magpie was certainly the standard proverbial expression for gossip. Now this picture was painted in 1568, the year



*Magpie on the Gallows*,  
Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt

that Alva's Council of Troubles, or Council of Blood, as it was frequently called, was at the height of its fearsome activities. Could it be that it conveyed the idea, not only that informers deliver people to the gallows, but that informers deserved to go to the gallows themselves, rather like Haman being strung up on the very tree he prepared for Mordechai? In this case one deals with a political allusion in the guise of a peasant picture. The peasants are recognizably Flemish, and so are the buildings in the lower right and middle left; no one would mistake this for an Italian or French or Spanish landscape. And yet the ravishing intimacy of the lower half of the tiny picture expands into a vast vista of plain, sea and precipitous mountain that is quite unimaginable anywhere in the Low Countries. The picture may be a political statement, but it is pervaded by the spirit of the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*. On the other hand, we lose hold of this picture if we forget that it is not about ancient mythology, but rather about the rural life of Flanders; that it has a dance in it, but also the gallows and the cross.

The genius of Bruegel resides in the transformation of political statement and political allusion into something that grew directly out of the popular and the autochthonous. He and his friends were thoroughly schooled in the classical humanist tradition, and it may well have been that which helped open his eyes to the possibilities of the Flemish countryside—just as Ortelius celebrated his truth to nature in Latin, while d'Heere, patriotically writing in Flemish, could only damn the painter who had been to Rome, but could not paint in a Roman way. But the difficulty we have in reading these pictures arises precisely from the fact that in them Bruegel relinquished the humanist strain he knew so well and that we might still recognize. We cannot read these symbols because they are codified in the countryside, and not in books; and we find it hard to see politics amidst these idylls. That, in the end, is the lesson of these intractable but beautiful pictures and prints.

**Chief printed sources consulted:**

Auner 1956; Bangs 1978; Becker 1972-73; Becker 1973; Boström 1949; Cantimori 1948; Cantimori 1967; De Toinay 1935; D'Heere 1565; Emmens 1973; Freedberg 1982; Frey 1930; Gibson 1979; Ginzburg 1970; Hamilton 1981; Lampsonius 1565; Lampsonius 1572; Monballieu 1983; Müller-Hofstede 1979; Muylle 1981; Rekers 1972; Rombouts and van Lerius 1872; Stridbeck 1956a; Stridbeck 1956b; Sullivan 1977; Van de Velde 1975.

## Abraham Ortelius's Tribute to Pieter Bruegel

Dijs Manibus sacrum

Petrum Brugelium Pictorem fuisse sui seculi absolutissimum, nemo nisi invidus, emulus, aut eius artis ignarus, unquam negabit. Sed quod nobis medio etatis flore abreptus sit, an hoc Morti, quod fortasse eum ob insignem artis peritiam, quam in eo viro observaverat, etate provectionem duxerat; an Nature potius, quod eius artificiosa ingeniosaq; imitatione, sui contemptum verebatur, imputavero, non facile dixerim.

AMICI MEMORIAE ABRAHAMUS ORTELIUS LUGENS CONSECRAB.

Eupompos pictor interrogatus quem sequeretur antecedentium, demonstrata hominum multitudine, dixisse fertur, naturam ipsam imitandum esse, non artificem. Congruit nostro Brugelio hoc, cuius picturas ego minime artificiosas, at naturales appellare soleam, neque eum optimum pictorum, at naturam pictorum vero dixerin. Dignum itaque iudico, quem omnes imitentur.

Multa pinxit, hic Brugelius, quae pingi non possunt, quod Plinius de Apelle. In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur. Idem de Timanthe Eunapius in Iamblichio. Pictores qui formosulos in etatis flore consitos (?) [p] ingunt voluntque picture lenocinium quoddam et gratiam de suo adjicere, totam depravant representatam effigiem et ab exemplari proposito pariter et a vera forma aberrant.

From: A. Ortelius *Album Amicorum*, Pembroke College, Cambridge, fols. 12 verso-13.

## Translation of Ortelius's Tribute to Bruegel

That Pieter Bruegel was the most perfect painter of his age, no one—unless jealous or envious or ignorant of his art—could ever deny. But that he was snatched away from us in the flower of his age—I cannot say whether I should attribute it to Death, who thought Bruegel was more advanced in age (sc. than he actually was) when he observed the distinguished skill of his art, or whether I should attribute it to Nature who feared that she would be held up in contempt because of his artistic and talented skills at imitation.

A grieving Abraham Ortelius consecrates this to the memory of his friend.

When asked which of his predecessors he followed, the painter Eupompos is said to have declared that he followed nature herself, not an artist. This agrees with our Bruegel, whose pictures I would not really call *artificiosae*, but rather natural. Indeed, I would not call him the best of painters, but rather the very nature of painters. So I think that he is worthy of being followed by all.

This Bruegel painted many things which are not able to be painted, as Pliny says of Apelles. In all his works more is always to be understood than he actually painted, as the same writer says of Timanthes.

As Eunapius says in his commentary on Iamblichus, painters who paint pretty young people and wish to add some charm and grace of their own completely destroy the image presented to them, and stray both from the exemplar set before them and from true form. From this fault our Bruegel was free.

## Lucas d'Heere's Invective against a certain Painter who criticized the Painters of Antwerp

Invective, an eenen Quidam Schilder: de welcke beschimpte de Schilders van Handwerpen

Waerom quetst ghi u selven? wane siende blent  
Deur haet ende nijt, als de beroofde van sinnen?  
Meent ghi (die een brodder sijt) u te maken excellent  
Met te verachten, die lof end' eere ghewinnen  
Deur heur excellentie? hielt ghi u zotgen binnen,  
Men moght u voor wijsachtigh hauden, t'alder stont,  
Wt overvloedicheit des herten spreect den mont.

Niet so valsch en was Momus schimpigh iugement  
Die Veneris Pantoffel wel dorste controleuren:  
Want ghi veracht heur schoonheit, die elcken bekent  
Onberespelicken te zine achter en veuren:  
Maer gheel tot uwer schande moet alsulx ghebeuren:  
Zullen u nu achten voor eenen dwasen bottaert.

De schilderye van Florus, en sijns ghelijcke,  
Ghi (plompen schimper) suuckerbeeldekens naemt:  
Om dat si verciert sijn, becamelijc en rijcke,  
Niet allome: maer daert behoort en betaemt.  
Tis te verwonderen, dat ghi u dies niet en schaemt,  
Naer dien ghi self daerin sijt gh'eel onghemaniert:  
Want als kaeremes poppen ghi u beelden verciert.

Maer hoe ghi die verciert, en u selven met eenen  
Hoe seer ghi u pluymstrijct, looft, prijs, en laudeert,  
Hoe seer ghi elcken veracht, en wilt vercleenen,  
Ghi en sijt dies maer te minder gh'estimeert.  
Een graci' hedby, dat ghi seer wei stofteert,

Niet soo schilder-stoffeerders doen sonder bedrieghen:  
Maer met u staute blasen, stoffen, ende lieghen.

Oft ghi u werck soo const suykeren en goetmaken  
Dattet (d'welck nu bitterder is dan galle altijt)  
Mocht inder constenaers mont eenighsins soet smaken  
Zo waert ghi doch wat, t'welck ghi nu niet en zijt:  
Ten waer den Coningh van de beesten int spijt  
Vanden Leeu, diett veur u oyt, hier te sine alleene:  
Dits d'eere die u toebehoort en de anders gheene.

Wilt u moeijen met verwen cleerschrijvers Apostels  
Diese wel alle twaelf trecken met eenen treck:  
En daermen int sté van pinceelen besigt grove bostels  
Want het dosjn werck (wat roerdi dan uwen beck)  
En is u maer veel te constigh, aermen gheck,  
Al hebby te Room' gheweest, tis een sober dingh,  
Dat geschiedde, zo den hont deur de vitsen ghingh.

Dat ghi te Room' hebt geweest, en merct men toch niet  
An u schilderye, vul lamme, quade treken,  
Die voorwaer noch Roomachtig, noch ooc antijcx en siet.  
En zaudemen u fauten al tellen: veel weken,  
Pappier, penn' end' inc, zoude my verre ghebreken:  
Maer hieraf en ware u gheen verwijt of queste,  
Const ghi uwen mont hauwen, en doen u beste.

From: L. d'Heere, *Den Hof en Boomgaard der Poesien*, Ghent, 1565, p.87