

Dissent in the Art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Background notes

Toby Ferris — 6 October 2021



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel*, c. 1563

This talk is about varieties of dissent in the art of Peter Bruegel the Elder, a painter with a notably cryptic style, working in a time of great political and religious upheaval. It will look at traces of political dissent, religious or confessional dissent, and will think about the rebelliousness of his manner of painting and of his artistic sensibility.

Biography

Next to nothing is known with certainty about Bruegel's life. He is thought to have been born in a village in the Southern Netherlands around 1525. Antwerp seems to have been his base for most of the 1550s and early 1560s (although there is no documentary evidence that he lived there). He moved to Brussels around the time of his marriage, in 1563.

Antwerp was one of the great commercial print centres not just of the Netherlands, but of Europe, and while Bruegel is documented working on the outer panels of an altarpiece in Mechelen in 1550-51, it was in Antwerp, and in the world of print, that he made his reputation. In 1552 or thereabouts, he travelled to Italy, where he remained for two or three years, travelling as far south as Sicily and Calabria. On his return, he supplied designs for what became known as the *Large Landscapes* – alpine and sub-alpine fantasies destined for engraving. He went on to provide large allegories (on the Virtues and the Vices), and individual pieces in the style of Hieronymus Bosch.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (engraving by Philips Galle), *Justice*, from the *Seven Virtues*, 1559-1560

He focused on oil painting from the late 1550s (the earliest securely ascribed work is the *Parable of the Sower*, 1557, now hanging in San Diego). Over the next decade he produced singular connoisseur pieces, or easel paintings (not destined for ecclesiastical settings) in addition to his ongoing drawing work. Approximately 42 well-attested panels survive – Bruegel was an assiduous signer and dater of his own work.

He died in 1569, perhaps early in that year (since the last paintings he signed and dated are from 1568) although a date of September is sometimes given. He was in his early-to-mid forties. He was survived by his wife and two sons – Pieter the Younger, and Jan the Elder, both infants who would go on to forge successful careers of their own, the former, in particular, as a copyist of his father's works and of his father's style.

Karel van Mander (1548-1606)

What little we know of Bruegel is fleshed out in a potted biography published in 1604 in a book by the Netherlandish artist Karel van Mander, called the *Schilder-boeck*, which is essentially a Netherlandish pendant to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Van Mander did not know Bruegel, but he almost certainly knew Bruegel's younger son, Jan the Elder, so what he writes may have some authority. He writes that Bruegel took delight in visiting peasant festivals in disguise, and in mixing with their kermises and carnivals; he says that Bruegel was jovial, but quiet in company; and he tells a story that, on his deathbed, Bruegel entreated his wife to destroy certain of his drawings, lest she have trouble with the Inquisition. Whether or not she acted on this advice, we do not know.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Beekeepers, 1568

Historical background

Political state of The Spanish Netherlands

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was born into a Southern Netherlands which increasingly languished under an oppressive Hapsburg Rule, and through the last decade of his life, the decade in which he was active as a painter, the Netherlandish provinces of the Empire were beginning the long struggle for independence, in what would come to be known as the Dutch Revolt and the Eighty Years' War.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Triumph of Death* (detail), 1562

The Southern Netherlands, among the richest lands of the vast Hapsburg Empire, were unified as the Seventeen Provinces in the 1550s following the abdication of Charles V and the ascension of Philip II. This yoking together of disparate provinces, each with its local pride and customs and its particular position along the variegated spectrum of faiths and confessions in post-Reformation Europe, pleased no one except the distant administrations and exchequers in Madrid. In the end, the northernmost seven provinces would break away to form what is now, more or less, the Netherlands, and the southern provinces would morph over time into modern Belgium and Northern France.

Bruegel died on the eve of outright rebellion. The Eighty Years' War is usually taken to have started in June 1568, at the moment the Counts of Egmont and Horn were executed for treason in the Grand Place in

Brussels. Bruegel died months later. But the late 1550s and 1560s as a whole were marked by cycles of protest, rebellion, compromise and suppression. Philip II withdrew from the Netherlands in 1559, taking his Spanish army with him. In 1566, the regent, Phillip II's half-sister, Margaret of Parma, negotiating from a position of weakness, relaxed certain draconian laws banning the promulgation of the protestant confession, and the country was immediately flooded with returning recusant priests and monks, so-called **hedge-preachers** who began a programme of preaching Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anabaptist sermons at illegal assemblies beyond the jurisdiction of cities and towns.

In the summer of that year, a spate of **iconoclasm** broke out around the south of the Netherlands. Churches were raided and their images smashed or burnt. In response, in 1567 the Duke of Alba led a Spanish army back over the Alps. Order was restored with much violence and prejudice, and the moderating influence of Margaret of Parma was removed when she, understanding that the Duke's power of attorney exceeded her own, resigned her position.

It was during this turbulent decade that Bruegel's entire career as a painter played out.

The Religious Context

Bruegel was born into a predominantly Catholic Spanish Netherlands, but one which, like the rest of Europe, had been profoundly touched by the Reformation. Bruegel himself appears to have been a Catholic – he was certainly accorded burial in a Catholic Church. His own faith, however, has been called into question in a number of ways.

There were many Protestant sects active in the Netherlands throughout Bruegel's lifetime. After his death, there would be a broad geographical sorting, as Protestants filtered North to the United Provinces, and Catholics went in the opposite direction. But the mix was more volatile in Bruegel's lifetime. The Inquisition, particularly after 1567 and the arrival of the Duke of Alba, was active, and persecution on the grounds of faith widespread.

Bruegel may have been associated with a clandestine pan-confessional group known as the **Familia Caritatis** (or Familists, or Family of Love), whose core beliefs were that confession – whether Catholic, Protestant, or even Jewish or Islamic – was irrelevant; what counted was an inner spirituality and the motions of the heart. Among its known or suspected members were friends or associates of Bruegel, including the printer Christophe Plantin and the geographer (and commissioner of at least one work by Bruegel) Abraham Ortelius.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1565

Further Reading

The most engaging recent study of Bruegel is Joseph Leo Koerner's *Bosch & Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016). *Bruegel's Winter Scenes* by Tine Luk Meganck and Sabine van Sprang (Mercatorfonds, Brussels, 2018) focusses on a narrower set of paintings, but is meticulous and full of fresh revelation. The best catalogue raisonné is still Manfred Sellink's *Bruegel: The Complete Paintings, Drawings and Prints* (Ludion, 2007). There are excellent studies also on individual paintings, notably Edward Snow's *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in Children's Games* (North Point Press, New York 1997) and Tine Luk Meganck's *Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Fall of the Rebel Angels: Art Knowledge and Politics on the Eve of the Dutch Revolt* (Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2014). And for unrepentant obsessives, Christina Currie and Dominique Allart's *The Brueg[h]el Phenomenon* (KIK-IRPA Brussels, 2012) is an extraordinary three-volume comparative survey of the painting technique of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the copying practice of his eldest son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger.

Toby Ferris is the creator of the web-based series of essays, *Anatomy of Norbiton*, which occupies itself mainly with the art of the Italian Renaissance. His first book, *Short Life in a Strange World*, which detailed an attempt to see all extant panels of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, was published by 4th Estate and Harper Collins USA in 2019. He has written for *The Times*, *Literary Hub*, and Graydon Carter's *Air Mail*, among other publications. He lives and works in Cambridge.

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