Bruegel, peasants, and politics

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How can we license ourselves to see what was intended to be routinely overlooked in paintings made during a time of oppression, images made not to whip up opposition but nevertheless used to record a conviction? Here it is proposed that there is more embedded history and less modern ambivalence in Bruegel's paintings of the later 1560s than recent scholarship has been geared to analyze and that the current approaches to the work inadvertently lead the viewer to see it as Bruegel intended for the authorities of his day. Bruegel's distinctive and broadening approach to the task of figural composition is examined as a symptom of his Netherlandish identity, both as it is manifested in his intriguingly limited response to what he saw when travelling in Italy (though perhaps if we adjust our expectations for what counts as an influence, the Palazzo Schifanoia Months in Ferrara by Cosmè Tura and Francesco del Cossa might be supposed to have played a part in Bruegel's thought) and in small adjustments made in his later paintings, which may indicate sympathies which could be expressed only covertly. The Rabbit Hunter autograph etching, the small Louvre painting of crippled beggars, and Bruegel's last painting, centered on a gallows, are analyzed as if meant to be fully understood only by those who already knew that the artist held the anti-imperial sentiments, while others should see instead only the welcome continuation of Bruegel's amusing lack of the idealization associated with Italian art and its theory. His responses to what he saw in Italy were, in general, as quirky as his depictions of his homeland, and the motivations extend beyond the religious (more often discussed) to the political. Van Mander's take on Bruegel's art as droll and anecdotal needs to be better balanced with Ortelius's comments about Bruegel's sophistication, and it is time to retire the thesis that Bruegel's pictorial meanings cultivate irresolvable ambiguity reflecting the artist's philosophical orientation.

Key terms: Bruegel; Italy; peasants; proverbs; Spanish occupation.

Bruegel's work has for more than a century been recognized as having explored new norms for painting, with his independence from literary and historical narratives as well as from Italian figural ideals, taken to be central to his accomplishment. How his work was seen during his lifetime and, slightly later, by Karel van Mander has remained more challenging to ascertain. Bruegel lived in a time and place during which a painter needed to appear to be orthodox in his religious and political beliefs.[1] Furthermore, to the extent that Bruegel deviated from the norm as artist, he seemed to do so unassumingly, even self-disparagingly. Yet few would now question his power as an artist nor his self-awareness about his capacities, and the Italian narrative model has been thoroughly knocked from its central position in art theory. Therefore, it may be time to raise again, and in new ways, the question of whether Bruegel's relationship to the powerful in his society was as docile as he made it look. Might he, particularly in his last years, in certain instances have insinuated motifs geared to be recognized by select eyes, under the guise of pictures seemingly meant merely to amuse?[2] The earlier paintings in themselves were deliberately unitalianate, of that there is no question, though the implications of that artistic choice remain debatable. Once conditions in the Low Countries became so oppressive as to begin to instigate the Dutch War of Independence, also known as the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648), might Bruegel have then shifted his work from merely unitalian to something subtly yet distinctly affirmative of his native land, even while cloaked in pictorial inventions the biographer Karel van Mander later deemed so amusing that the artist was known as "Pier den Drol''? And centuries later, might the blinkered gaze Bruegel intended for the Spanish imperial occupiers and their supporters have become normalized, so that any crypto-political themes were discounted or lost along with the highly restricted public with which they had once been surreptitiously shared?

The literature on Bruegel has repeatedly discussed his images of peasants as studies in ambiguity—are they being ridiculed or not?—and more recently, indeterminacy has been taken as itself a prime pictorial theme, one which leaves

[1] Guicciardini (1567) described Bruegel as "grande imitatore della scienza, & fantasie di Girolamo Bosco" (99) ('great imitator of the learning and imagination of Jerome Bosch'), so much so that he was dubbed a second Bosch, and art historians of previous generations routinely questioned Bosch's orthodoxy, an idea now definitely eliminated. On Boschian drolleries and their relationship to Bruegel, see Silver (1999, 37) and on former interpretations of Bosch's work as harboring heretical ideas, Cook (1984, n. 2-11). My thanks to the anonymous readers for their insights and recommendations and to Callie Long for her thoughtful editing.

[2] Film director Roy Andersson cited among his sources for *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2015) Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow*, with its birds on a branch. For him, the painting offered "flawless satire [used] to express the tragic conditions of being" (Andersson 2016).

the viewer on a fulcrum between trusting and mistrusting the image.[3] The literature tends to agree that these images portraying everyday types of people ought not to be categorized as genre painting, pure and simple, nor even as simple effusions of folk culture reflecting the wisdom of adages. Even Bruegel's paintings which might seem least complicated to understand can boast a fundamentally new artistic ambition relative to the work of his predecessors. This much we can agree on. But whether we describe this in terms of our more contemporary concerns with indeterminacy and ambiguity, emphasize the formal accomplishment of these compositions displaying many small-scale figures and vast river valleys, or hypothesize that, as the situation in the Netherlands became increasingly dire, Bruegel's imagery was infiltrated by his feelings about the threats against and sufferings of his fellow citizens, these are more delicate issues, and perhaps the nature of the problem disallows any truly definitive answer. The tendency to suppose that artistic identity is forged early in life is at issue here, for if Bruegel allowed his Netherlandish political identity to infiltrate his already very Netherlandish imagery, he did so in response to the terrible turn of public events during his later life rather than programmatically from the start.

This study entails an analysis of Bruegel's pictorial objectives, in particular his responsiveness to the exceptionally difficult times in which he lived, and secondarily his often nearly ignored reaction (or lack thereof) to Italian models. In both cases his course may be described as indirect yet profound. What has often

[3] Porras (2008, 86, 98) and Porras (2016, 149-151). Alpers (1972-73, 163-176); see especially "this ambiguous relationship to the pleasure displayed" (173). Cf. Eco, "Open Work," [1962], (1-23). See also on the ambiguity of Bruegel's imagery, Carroll (1987, 289-314); Freedberg, *Prints*, "Bruegel himself seems to be ambivalent." Freedberg further states "it is almost as though Bruegel himself has evolved a philosophy that is predicated on the ultimate ambiguity of things" (18-19); Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat (2017, 56-57) in *Pieter*. Keith Moxey, "Pieter Bruegel and Popular Culture," in Freedberg (1989, 42-52) opposed the consensus about ambiguity. Carroll (2008, 31-32, 72) allowed that *Proverbs* and *Carnival and Lent*, both dated 1559, provide "an occasion to reflect upon political concerns." Koerner (2016, 336); cf. 338, invoked Sedlmayr's *Entfremdung* (2000, 323-376). On the menacing bird trap of the *Winter Landscape with Birdtrap* (1565), it should be noted that the trap was not included in the preliminary drawing; Currie and Allart (2012, 198). The lower social classes were still being held up as humorous anti-examples in the following century, though in a nuanced way and not excluding the middle class; see Van Gemert (2014, 25-38), "Stamp." That the Dutch peasants were in many instances themselves landowners, although this was under threat in the 16th century, to such an extent as to cause "the disappearance of the original peasant character of the countryside" Van Bavel (2016, 171-172, 175, 180-81, 185). See also the useful summary of Bruegel scholarship by Meadows (1996, 6-13) and Kavaler (2021, 314), who takes the Flemish peasant as represented in art as protean and potentially ideal.

been taken as ambiguity on the part of the artist may be seen instead as imagery geared to be read in mutually incompatible ways, both valid though intended for different viewership. If we presume that Bruegel was not in a position to think for himself about contemporary events and to insert some potentially quite camouflaged yet distinct element of this experience into his imagery, then we thereby cut him off from modernity and also weaken our conception of early modernity. We risk restricting him to Van Mander's view, that of an artist who manages to be great at the task of being "minor."

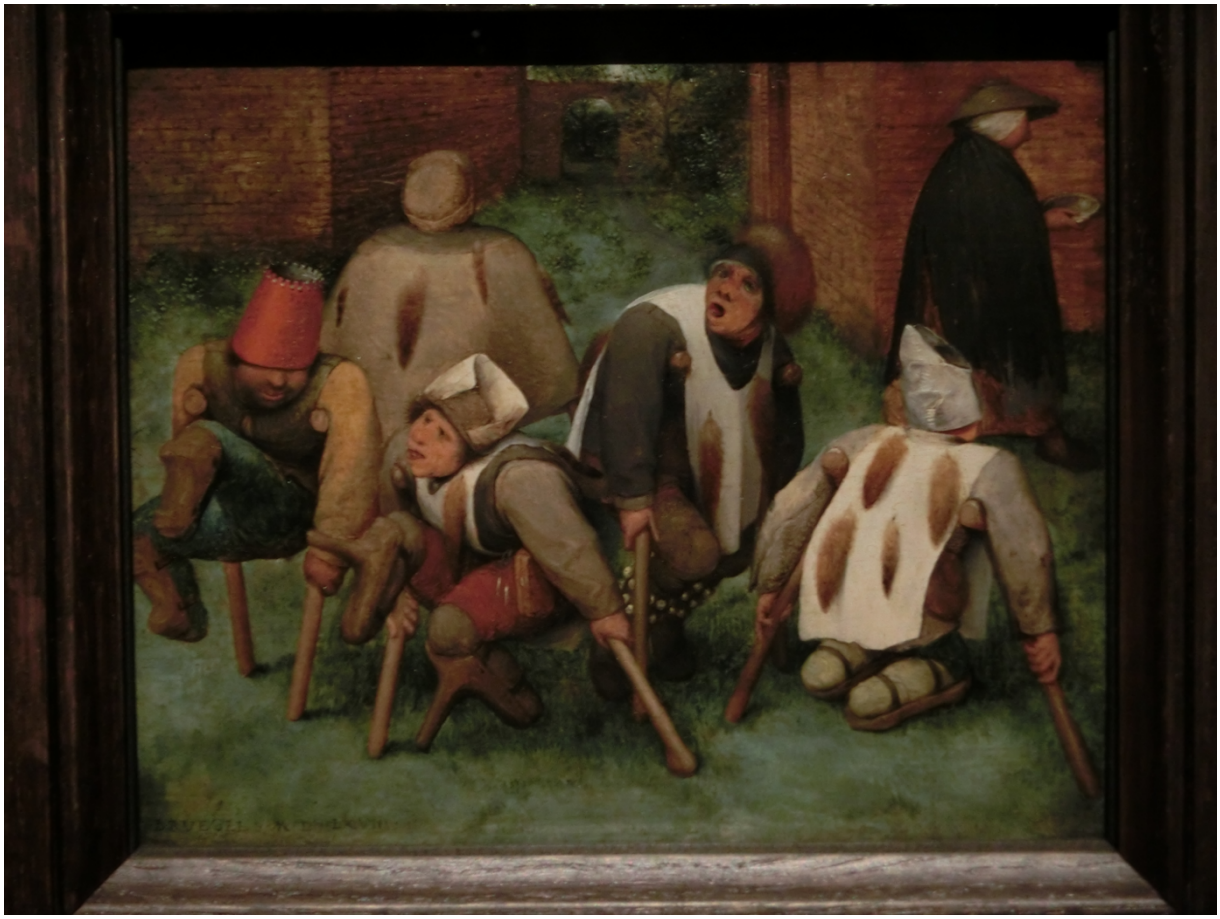

Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Beggars*, 1568. Oil on panel, 18.5 x 21.5 cm. Paris: Louvre. Photo: D.V. Feldman.*

Bruegel's compositions, while owing something to the panoramic norms for landscape established by Joachim Patinir, raise new questions about the sequentiality of the viewer's experience within a single pictorial field without definitive focus. Bruegel's use of images so thoroughly recasts figural narrative painting that he may seem to have repudiated it even when he has not. What he

has done is to radically reinvent what narrative might entail. This is not to deny the basic pleasure of Bruegel's imagery, which makes remarkably few demands upon the viewer. As Van Mander famously said: "a spectator can contemplate [few of Bruegel's pictures] seriously and without laughing.''[4] In this paper we explore the possibility that, in Bruegel's most developed work, narrative (episodic rather than literary) and non-narrative newly co-exist.

One of Bruegel's smallest paintings, called The Beggars or The Cripples or The Lepers, dated 1568, and seen in Figure 1, recapitulates a group which appears nine years earlier in the Battle of Carnival versus Lent (1559), shown in Figure 2. The smaller work repeats nothing exactly, yet it is often considered a mere byproduct of the earlier work rather than a distinctively new effort. There were six beggars in the earlier group, five in the later. The visages of the beggars in the later work are less peaked and gaunt; in the earlier work, two of the faces are haggard to the point of alarming. The beggars of 1568 look more like Bruegel's typically jolly peasants of the paintings of the months. Their headgear has been elaborated: other than the red cylindrical hat acquiring crenellations, the hat on the far right figure is in the shape of a bishop's hat and the foremost figure has a paper crown, thereby implicating a range of social strata and insinuating a flavor of irony into what had in the earlier painting been a depiction of misery.

What most discussions of the Louvre panel and its relationship to the larger composition of 1559 fail to acknowledge is that in 1568 an image of beggars had a resonance that it hadn't had in 1559, particularly an image focused entirely on beggars. The Netherlandish opposition to the Spanish powers included a group calling itself the Beggars (Les Gueux), which counted among its leaders Hendrik van Brederode (d. 1568).[5] The smallness of the painting would support the idea that it was done on Bruegel's initiative, perhaps even with the idea that it was made so as to be easily tucked out of sight. Clearly, it was a painting that did not draw attention to itself. And if the painting excited any comment, the less

[4] Van Mander (1994 [1604], I, 233r). For a gloss on Van Mander's adjectives for Bruegel, "gheestighen en bootsighen" ('lively and whimsical'), (II, 318;) (III, 256).

[5] Manfred Sellink (2018, 282-285), in *Bruegel*, deems the association with *Les Gueux* "interesting" and the Louvre (2021) website now mentions *les Gueux* in relation to the painting. Duke (2009, 70) dates the use of the term from April of 1566, and its rejection by William of Orange to 1572; Duke (146-48) suggests some associations between the Beggars and the insignia of foxtails, which had some customary association with beggars to begin with. Cardinal Granvelle was known as the red fox. The Sea Beggar Guillaume de la Marck had his men wear foxtails in 1563, despite of Granvelle. There also seems to have been a German association with foxtails and several of the Dutch leaders had German familial connections. The begging bowl was also used as an emblem; see Arnade (2008,78-89, 99, 110-11). It should be noted that the iconoclasts were considerably more violent and threatening than the Beggars, though both were targeted by the vengeful Alva. See also Arnade (2008, 170-73).

narrowly framed work of 1559 could be used to explain away the later painting, as art historians have so often done since. The Louvre website until recently included an apologetic note that this small Bruegel was their only painting by the artist, as though its smallness made it less important.

The back of the Louvre panel is inscribed in Flemish, "Cripples take heart, and may your affairs prosper."[6] Cripples, crippled lepers it would seem, need not be taken to refer to the political group derogatorily called the Beggars, but the inference could be made by those so inclined. What most distinctly marks rethinking from the earlier, more comprehensive work is not only the focus on the beggars but also the exit of the woman to the right, a bowl in her hand as though she had just been giving something to the cripples. Could the exiting figure have been added because Bruegel was reflecting on the departure of Margaret of Parma, pushed into resignation late in 1567 by the appointment of the hardliner Alva? As the situation in the Low Countries worsened, she returned to Italy.[7]

Roger Marijnissen tries to explain away the Flemish sentiment inscribed on the back as a phrase that might be offered to cripples begging in the street, as though it were the soundtrack to a neo-realist film. But to write the benediction on the back implies that the intended reader is the owner of the painting, who presumably would have been a sympathizer, at the very least, with the "Cripples" (a circumlocution for les Gueux, whose leader was, in fact, lame),[8] and therefore would have taken the inscription as encouragement. Otherwise, the inscription is very odd. Yet prudently, nothing actually incriminating has been set down—as Marijnissen and others so neatly demonstrate when they see nothing of importance in the Louvre painting other than a reworking and reduction of the earlier painting, after almost a decade.

[6] "[K]rupelen, hooch, dat u nering beteren moeg" (Marijnissen 1971, 51); translation is from Louvre website. Dvorak (1941, 58) raised these possibilities (crediting R. van Bastelaer), but supposed, erroneously, that the Beggars were no longer a viable force by 1568. He allowed that the woman might refer to Margaret of Parma.

[7] Steen (2013, 290-293). See also Limm (1989, 30 and Koenigsberger (1968, 264-294). Cf. The Naples *Blind Leading the Blind* executed on canvas (so suitable for stowing away discreetly); Müller has analyzed the painting as "richly encrypted" (756, 785-787), in Melion (2014.)

[8] Van Nierop (1991, 419-443) suggests that they were first called Beggars by a member of Margaret's entourage, as an indication of how they should be treated. They were led by Philip of Bailleul, described in a contemporary source as a cripple. See also Duke (2010, 232-233).

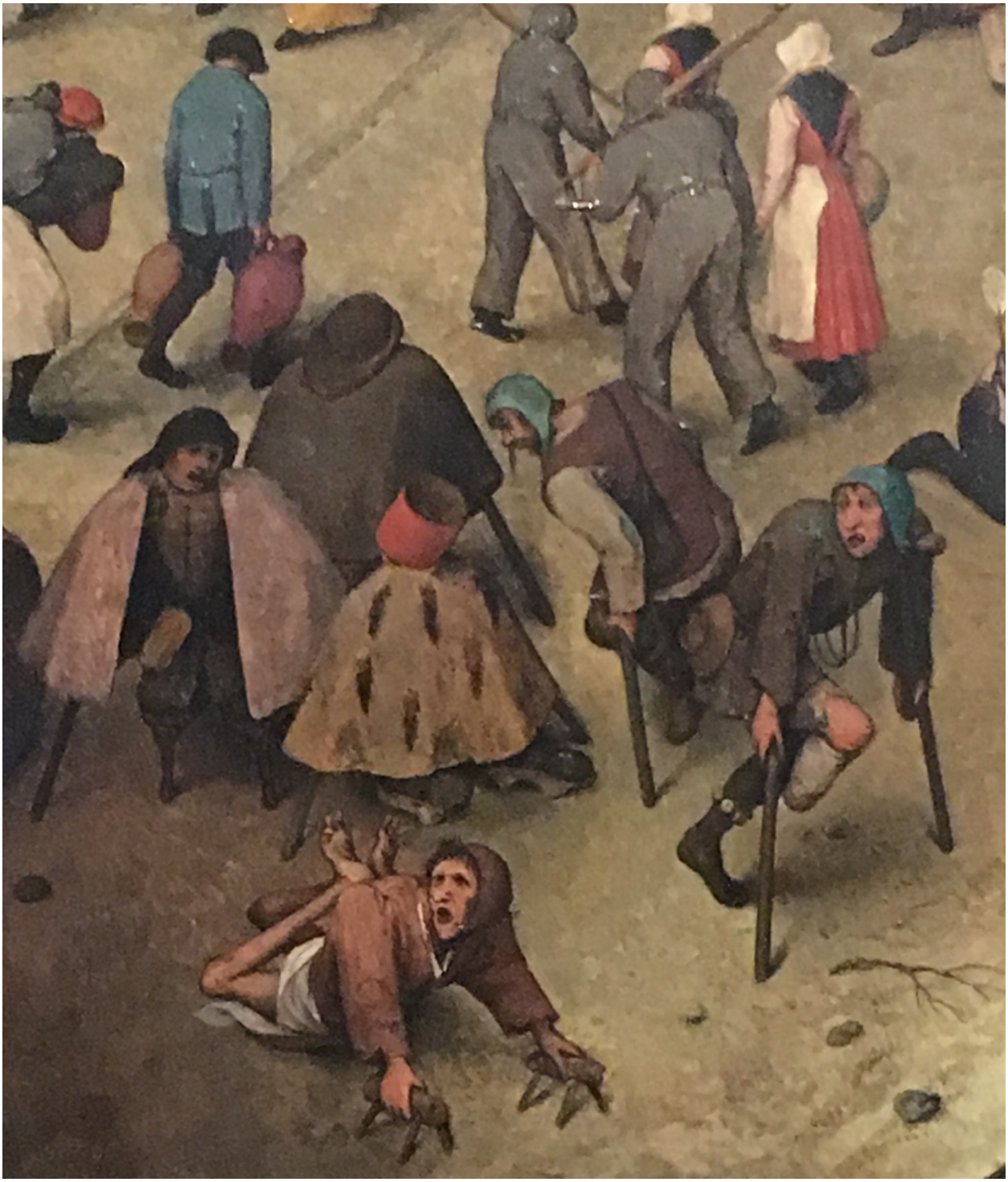

Figure 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Battle of Carnival vs. Lent *[detail], 1559. Oil on panel, 118 x 163.7 cm. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo: author.*

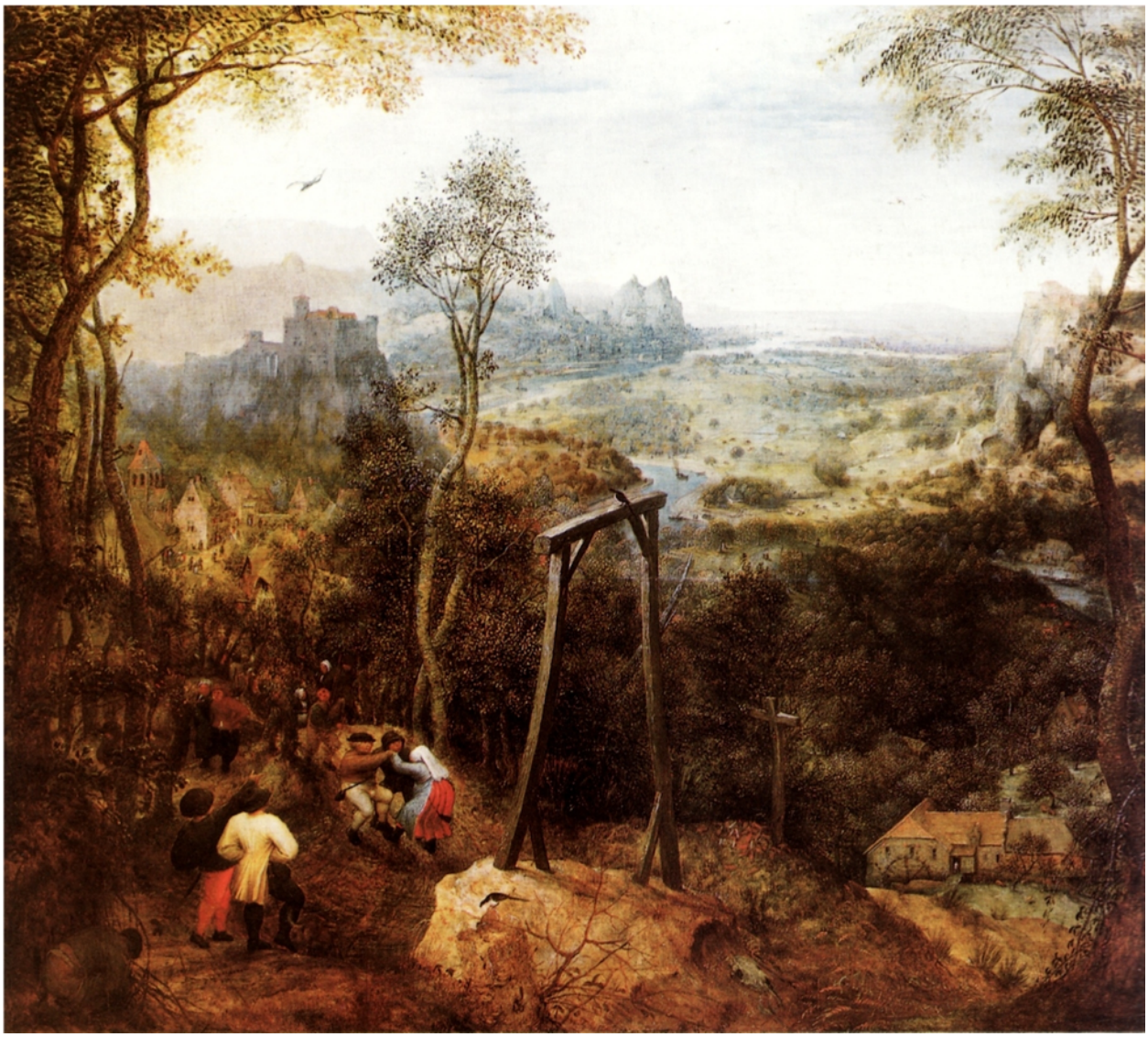

Figure 3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Magpie on the Gallows*, 1568. Oil on panel, 45.9 x 50.8 cm. Darmstadt: Hessisches Landesmuseum. Photo: Wikimedia.*

In the mid-16th century, the Netherlands was a dangerous place for voicing opposition. The very high-ranking Counts of Egmont and Hoorn, both members of the Order of the Golden Fleece who fully expected their status to protect them, were beheaded in Brussels in June 1568.[9] Bruegel may very well have witnessed

[9] On the Counts' distance from both iconoclasts and Beggars, and even from the Reformation, see Arnade (2008, 184-187.) Tanis and Horst (1993) examine Joris Hoefnagel's etching *An Allegory of Spanish Tyranny*, 1570. It is estimated that 1100 people were executed, and 9000 dispossessed and banished (27). For a printed image of the execution by Frans Hogenberg, made in the same year, Arnade (2008, 189-90) and a smaller one by Wolfgang Meyerpeck (Rijksmuseum 2021). See also

the executions, which took place a twelve-minute walk from his house.[10] There is no doubt that Bruegel would have been obliged to operate with great subtlety had his work contained even the slightest comment on current events, especially so after those shocking executions, although his will to do so might very well have grown even stronger. Circumstances demanded that it be entirely plausible to take his images as devoid of innuendo. The small painting of cripples as they beg can be taken as a genre scene, the figures as connected only circumstantially. However, if instead, we see it as an allegorized version of the local history, as suggesting les Gueux, Margaret, and the pitiful situation of the opposition in the Low Countries, its unusually small size becomes part of its interpretation, part of the tale of oppression. It could be easily tucked away, and when it was not, Bruegel might hope that his trusted friends would see more in the painting than any other casual viewers. The painting could always be defended as no more than a derivation from the larger and earlier painting, especially since noticing the beggars or the exiting woman as possible allusions might mark one as a subversive. As long as Bruegel was characterized as an amusing painter, this afforded a degree of protection against being thought a troublemaker. It was a reputation worth cultivating.

In that same perilous year of 1568, Bruegel signed and dated the Magpie on the Gallows, shown in Figure 3, and left it to his wife, according to Van Mander, who indicated that the bird (there are actually two) referred to gossipers. There may be some implicit misogyny in Van Mander's implication that women need to be warned against gossiping, or even some desire to distract from the oddity of the subject. His account informs us that the medium-sized painting was meant to be kept within the family, and that is useful information. In the front left corner is

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Vöhringer (2013, Chs. 8-9, 116-140) and Kaschek (2018, Ch. 1) "A Historiographical Introduction" and, on the situation in 1559, G. Schwerhoff, "Virtue or Tyranny? Pieter Bruegel, *Justitia*, and the Myth of the Inquisition" (107-109).

[10] Perhaps he even made drawings, which he later asked his wife Mayken to destroy, those works that Van Mander intriguingly alludes to. Van Mander reported that Bruegel on his deathbed ordered Mayken to burn certain drawings, either because he "was sorry'' or lest she get into trouble for them (1994, 233v, 234r.); "Veel vreemde versieringhen van sinnekens sietmen van zijn drollen in Print: maer hadder noch seer veel net en suyver geteyckent met eenighe schriften by, welcke ten deele al te seer bijtigh oft schimpich wesende, hy in zijn doot-sieckte door zijn Huysvrouwe liet verbranden, door leetwesen, oft vreesende sy daer door in lijden quaem, oft yet te verantwoorden mocht hebben," translated by Stechow, *Sources*: "Many of his compositions of comical subjects, strange and full of meaning, can be seen engraved; but he made many more works of this kind in careful and beautifully finished drawings to which he had added inscriptions. But as some of them were too biting and sharp, he had them burnt by his wife when he was on his deathbed, from remorse or for fear that she might get into trouble and might have to answer for them" (40). Sybesma (1991, 467) proposed that the Berlin drawing of *Beekeepers* might be one such problematic drawing which escaped destruction.

a man defecating (a motif far from unprecedented in Netherlandish painting).[11] Close to the defecating man stand two men, clearly not peasants, surveying the scene. The one in the white coat displays a commanding air. Two peasants dance beside the gallows, as a man seems to intervene, perhaps spreading gossip, or perhaps a warning.

The Spanish rule had long depended upon informers.[12] The magpie commonly suggested gossip, as Van Mander's description makes clear, though in the aftermath of the shocking executions of 1568 the combination of an instrument of execution and the bird associated with malicious word of mouth may not be purely coincidental. Van Mander indicates that Bruegel made this unusual painting with no intention of selling it; whether he knew himself to be in failing health when he made it, we do not know. Do we really want to accept without qualm that he painted it as a warning to a gossiping wife, the mother of two fine artists and the daughter of two artists as well?[13] He placed a disrespectful act in the foreground, a cross in the middle ground beyond the gallows (another instrument of execution; moreover, an empty cross might suggest distance from Rome and its crucifixes), and dancing peasants (potentially emblematic of Netherlandish folk).[14] Given these elements, to a viewer thinking about the circumstances of 1568 the painting might suggest very local concerns: an execution ground, an allusion to dangerous rumor-mongering, an emblem of religious faith, a scatological motif as a sign of disrespect, and solidarity between the lower social classes and the Netherlandish dissenting elite. And yet, for a viewer who expected of Bruegel beautiful landscapes populated by festive peasants, this work could pass without problem. Art historians have frequently since commented on the beauty of the atmospheric perspective and the absence

[11] Gobin (2018, 7-24) cites a proverb to explicate defecation nearby a gallows as a subversive act.

[12] Parker (1977, 62-63). Jeremy Bangs, "Pieter Bruegel and History," *Art Bulletin*, 60.4, (1978, 704-05), cites the paid informer against Reformation preachers, Lange Margriet, in 1564.

[13] Bruegel's *Calumny of Apelles* drawing in the British Museum from the late 1560s is, on the one hand, a traditional subject for an ambitious artist to attempt, and, on the other hand, potentially a vehicle of protest. It is far enough from Bruegel's normal subject matter to be curious. Frayn offers a critique of obtuse art historians that includes offering several interpretations (some more fanciful than others, including *The Calumny of Apelles* and the *Death of the Virgin* in grisaille) linking Bruegel with anti-Spanish sentiment (1999, 190-99, 262-68, 296-97). On the small grisaille of the *Death of the Virgin*, dated 1565, as potentially transmitting a plea—a hope—for tolerance and against condemning one's fellow Christians, cf. Freedberg (1989, 59); see further Kunzle (2001, 61) and Vöhringer, *Politik*, (125, 131, 163).

[14] On Spanish perception of Netherlanders as overly given to drink and festivals, Arnade (2008, 176-177).

of any clear subject matter other than a gallows with a magpie.[15] They thereby inadvertently once again attest to the suitability of Bruegel's work for evading the suspicion of the authorities.

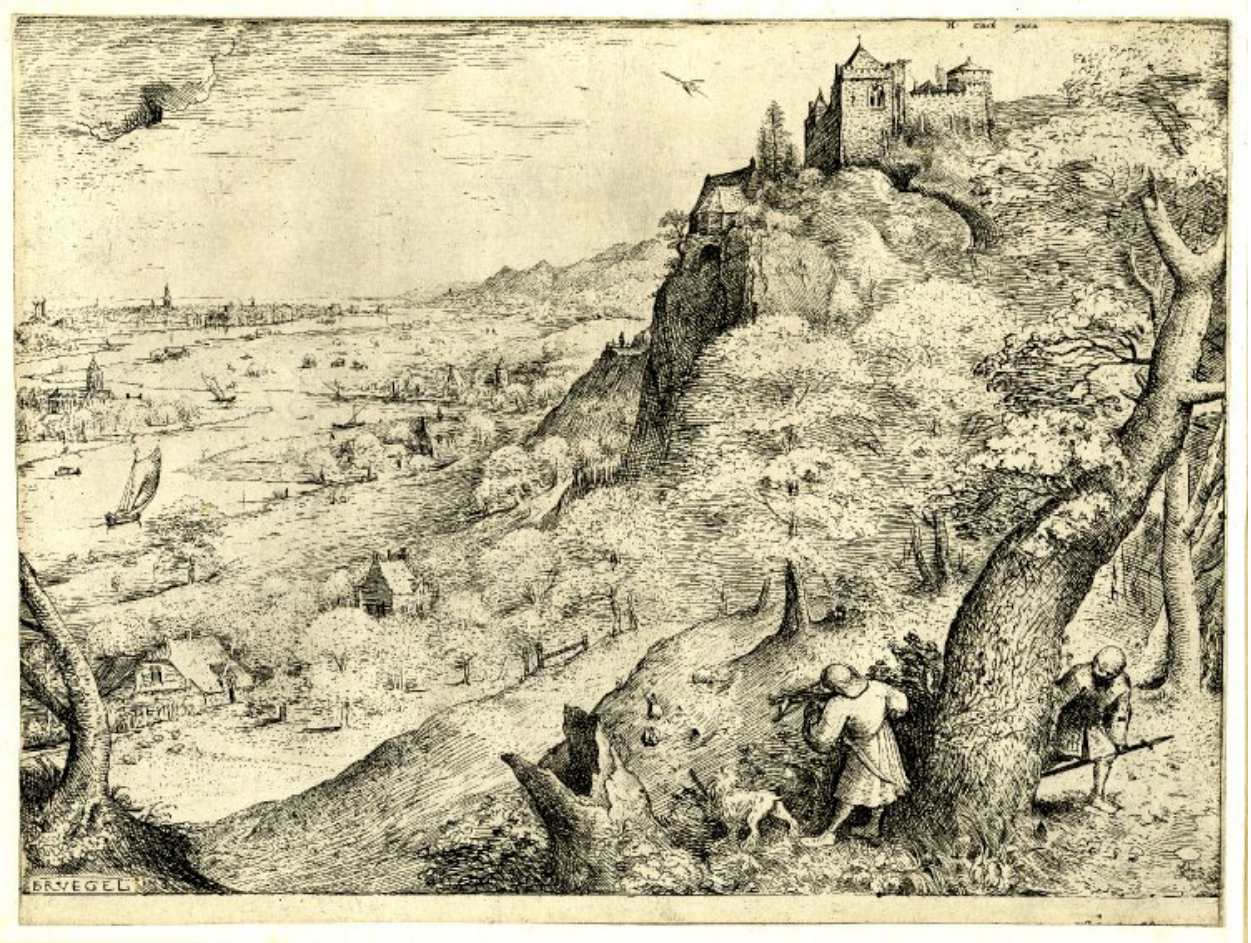

Figure 4. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Rabbit Hunt*, 1560 (?). Etching, 22.3 x 29.4 cm.*
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

[15] Kavaler (1999, 212-13, 220-23) sees the trio as dancing all together; Sellink (2018, 290-291), in *Bruegel*, considers theories that relate the work to contemporary politics or religion "unsubstantiated." Arnade, 2000, 831-833 demurs at Kavaler's dismissal of political readings and calls the *Gallows* painting, "provocative." Weismann (2015, 130-32) supposes the woman in red is being arrested and that the painting has hidden political and religious reference. Honig (2019, 215) mentions Bruegel's Protestant cousin Gillis van Conixloo, but finds the artist's intentions ambiguous.

The only surviving etching Bruegel executed himself, the Rabbit Hunter, seen in Figure 4, shows an isolated ordinary man on a steep hillside, hunting rabbits with a crossbow, while a figure armed with a spear sneaks up on him from the rear. Joseph Koerner rightly declined to allow the image to be summed up in a proverb about the hunter being hunted, but then sublated the proverbial reading into a statement of ontology, noting "the hunter hunted, the trapper trapped, the viewer viewed: these reversals encapsulate something ineffable about our being in the world."[16] Others have expostulated about the delicate and startlingly effective (given the novelty of the medium for the artist) technique with the needle, which so evocatively renders the shimmering foliage.

What has been stunningly absent from discussion of the work is the possibility of its relevance to the political situation in the Spanish Netherlands. The matter has been somewhat complicated by the work's re-dating, from 1566 to 1560, as seen in Figure 5.[17] But given that there were objections to the continued presence of Spanish troops in the Netherlands from the time of Margaret of Parma's installation as Regent in 1559, partly due to resentment that a local noble had not been chosen instead, and even more anger and fear by 1566, the exact dating does not seem in this case crucial to the question of interpretation.

The issue is rather whether a political interpretation of an image by Bruegel is considered an option. Many art historians are remarkably quick to dismiss this possibility, at least in part due to the assumption that Bruegel's place in the history of art depends upon his break with the norms of the classicizing, Italianate, theoretically bolstered history painting. For these art historians, the assumed ambiguity of Bruegel's images is essential to his accomplishment.[18] If he

[16] Koerner (2016, 41). Sullivan (2003, 34) cites Latin proverbs as essential to the interpretation.

[17] Freedberg (1989, cat. no. 62, 168). The date used to be read as 1566 (by Bastelaer, for instance), and since as 1506, in confusion for 1560, partly because the reversed drawing in the Fondation Custodia, Paris, which bears the clearer date 1560, was attributed to Bruegel by Mieke in 1996, after having been long and widely taken to be a copy. Müller (2018, 335) labels the drawing's inscription "authentic?" *Bruegel,* Orenstein (2001, nos. 81-82); cf. *Renaissance of Etching*, 2019, no. 124, (259-60) and *Bruegel*, (2018, 135-37) where Sabine Pénot explicates the etching by reference to adages and Terence. Carroll (2008, 30-31) described resentment against Philip II in the late 1550s.

[18] Freedberg (1989, 1819): "ambiguity is precisely what arises acutely in the case of the interpretation of any number of Bruegel's prints...it is almost as though Bruegel has evolved a philosophy that is predicated on the ultimate ambiguity of things.'' Alpers (1983, 34): Bruegel is cited, along with Vermeer and Velázquez, as an artist whose lack of traditional moral or literary meaning requires "a notion of representation, or a concern with what it is to picture something.'' Velázquez's painting is deemed ambiguous. Porras (2016, 149-51) invokes `fluidity' in her interpretation of this painting and suggests its theme is "the impossibility of knowing just how history will record the present moment, or which rumors will prove true and which will be forgotten." See also Porras (2008, 97): "from a strictly commercial viewpoint…the painting appeals

is understood to be telling a story in this etching, even a slight story with no literary source, rather than describing a vista or invoking a proverb, this could undermine much of the current interpretation of his oeuvre as breaking with the basically Albertian model, perfected by Raphael and soon to become the norm of art academies, the first of which was founded in 1563.

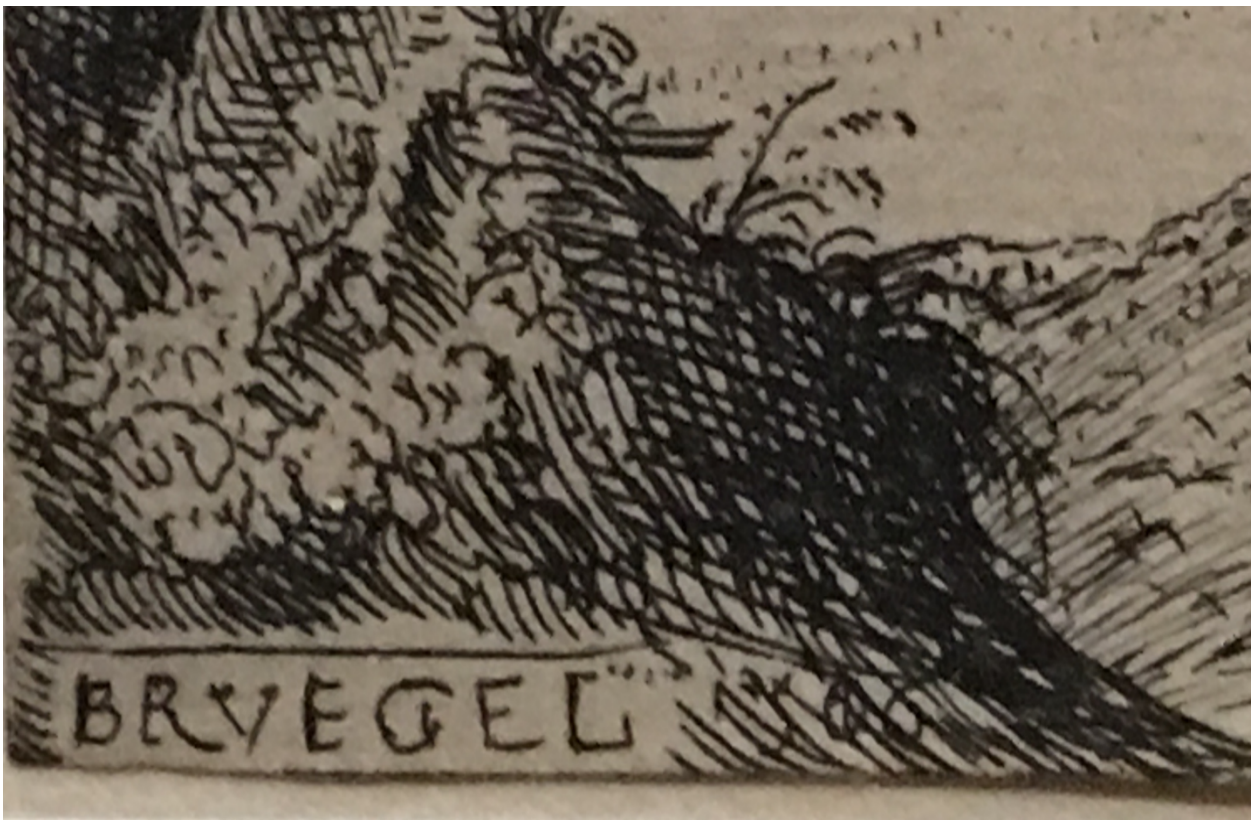

Figure 5. Detail of Rabbit Hunt*. Photo: author.*

Art historians who have wanted (not without reason) to champion Bruegel as the anti-Albertian-istoria artist were thus thoroughly blinkered against any hints of political allegory. And they were partly right: he was by temperament an artist who invited the viewer to look at what was essentially familiar and to see it in a new light, rather than to extend the experience of the library.

Compounding this reluctance on the part of art historians, if Bruegel was telling a story that alluded to the conditions stoking unrest in the Low Countries, he would necessarily have arranged for its camouflage. An art of very quiet protest could not but try to distract the viewer with superficial delights, so that any

to the broadest possible audience," i.e., the supposed ambiguity in how peasants are presented in Bruegel's paintings allowed for a wider market.

political content was buried where the painter was confident imperial eyes would not recognize it. But then, who outside of the artist's immediate circle could certify its existence? No one, which was exactly Bruegel's aim. He was not painting for posterity. Only those whom he trusted would understand what he had done.

Bruegel's art is not generally one of suspense, unless it be of an amusing sort, such as a heedless figure about to trip and fall on uneven terrain. So when, in the Rabbit Hunt, real danger lurks, the viewer must be curious. An anonymous, ordinary figure is being stalked by a soldier. Some have seen only a spear-bearer, rather than a soldier. One catalogue entry circumspectly and diffidently reports, "it has also been suggested that the man with the spear is not hunting rabbits, but is a marauding soldier stalking the first man,"[19] thereby providing collateral evidence that Bruegel's image was sufficiently subtle to avoid trouble from the Spanish occupiers. Yet even if the viewer does not identity the figure with the spear as a soldier (and the disparity between crossbow and spear would seem to be significant), he menaces an unsuspecting man who is concentrating on an ordinary action. Bruegel took up the etcher's needle and made the major effort of working the plate himself, so it is worth wondering whether the subject matter and the medium seemed to him an important match, an image that would spread widely the idea of danger, without overtly conveying a warning. The work seems less an experiment in a new medium than a project too important to trust to a professional. Although it is true that the receding landscape possesses a finesse and delicacy beyond the efforts of professional etchers whose lines had to hold up for large editions, the figural elements relate to one another tautly, even as they are integrated with the uneven terrain.

Bruegel's etching readily passes as an image of rabbit hunting, since that is clearly taking place. That the civilian hunter may be about to become a victim of a military outrage is harder for the viewer to process. There was little precedent for political art that was not of the broadside type. Here we have an anecdotal incident set in a vast landscape. If it is not a landscape subject primarily, but a figural drama camouflaged within an ornamental landscape, then it was formed around a narrative conceit, however minor and undeveloped. Narrative norms are sometimes taken as necessarily a sign of cultural intrusion from Italy. Bruegel was typically quite impervious to such infiltration. However, this etching, if understood

[19] Freedberg (1989, 168), in "Allusion and Topicality in the Work of Pieter Bruegel, The Implications of a Forgotten Polemic,'' finds such a "chilling note" "not uncharacteristic" of Bruegel, but as a contrast to the "serene landscape" rather than insinuating any topicality. Cf. Koerner in Butts (1995, 27) where the image is taken as a meditation on contingency, on what we cannot see. The man with the spear is glossed as a kind of personification of death, but, again, without any topicality.

as an ad hoc narrative with a political message rather than one more example of visual ambiguity, might instead help us to reconceptualize both Bruegel's relationship both to narrative and to Italian art as being nuanced, and even sophisticated. His Way to Calvary (1564), with its foreground figures in the style of Rogier van der Weyden and its anecdotal approach to telling a terrible tale, supports both tenets, in that it asserts both its northern identity and its sophistication about narrative style.

The argument that loyal Catholics collected Bruegel's work, or those of his sons, and therefore there can be no latent dissent coded in the imagery, fails on two grounds: the first is that any content associated with dissent was meant to be disguised, and the second is that the Netherlandish resistance was itself complicated.[20] It included Catholic loyalists and a range of people for whom religious identity was in flux. Those resisting Spanish oppression often meant to resist the Inquisition without necessarily denying their feudal loyalty to their prince and without necessarily renouncing Catholicism. Even those reluctant to read political content in Bruegel's imagery have often ceded that The Preaching of St. John the Baptist, dated 1566, although it could appear to be a straightforward Biblical subject, suggests association with the so-called "hedge sermons" of the Reformers.[21] The Conversion of Saul, dated 1567, shows huge armies crossing the mountains. Even those reluctant to find political references have entertained the idea that the figure on horseback, placed centrally and seen from the back, might allude to the Duke of Alva's journey from Italy, after acquiring troops in Sicily.[22]

Van Mander explicitly denies the artistic place of politically informed imagery, in general. When describing the art of Herri met de Bles, Van Mander

[20] See also Kascheck (2012, 34-38). Meganck (2021, 419) associates certain paintings with Hapsburg functionaries, especially Jan Vleminck in the case of the *Census at Bethlehem*.

[21] *Bruegel* (2018, 233, 244-245); Duke (1990, 128-130); Arnade (2008, 81, 86); Gregory (2005, 7, 75-87). Beggar's badges that used the sickle moon to refer to the Turks, with the slogan, "Sooner Turk than Papist," Thompson (1972, 293). The quizzical and alert man leaning against the tree to the left, wearing a ruff and clearly of some status, distinguished by a drooping moustache, may have suggested the Beggars (that the moustache might have an association with the Turks; see van Nierop (1991, 431-432).

[22] E.g., Koerner (2016, 369, n. 76), who also acknowledges of the *Blind leading the Blind* that this parable would have acquired new resonance in 1568, though he doesn't name the Spanish, saying only that outsiders had imposed martial law. Zupnick (1964, 284, 288) thought that Bruegel's earlier art (1559-1564) contained more 'ambiguities' – which might suggest political criticism – than the later work; Ferber (1966, 213) analyzed the engraving of *Money Boxes* and the *Massacre of the Innocents* along similar lines; Gregory (2005, 89-104) argues for more than mere suggestiveness, arguing instead on behalf of a full-blown "topological process of contemporization." Silver (2014, 794, 800-803) argues that "no viewer could have failed to associate with Alba both the alpine imagery and the presentation of soldiers in contemporary armor and uniforms." Bakker (2012, 152) sees "an appeal to Alva to undergo a moral `conversion."'

asserted that the political interpretation he had heard mooted (criticism of the Pope) had to be wrong, simply because that wasn't the way art was made ("art ought not to be satirical").[23] Whether he really thought so, or whether he wanted to avoid sparking worry among the patrons of art about such possibilities, may be debated; nevertheless, Van Mander's biography of Bruegel, written thirty-five years after the artist's death, has often been cited as evidence against interpreting his paintings as other than amusing. However, it is clear that Van Mander would never countenance such a reading because of his personal bias about the nature of art.

Bruegel's taste for dissimulation (demonstrated by dressing up like a peasant to attend their festivals) together with his insistence on honesty (he rejected a woman who couldn't stop lying)—both as reported by Van Mander—suggest that disguise, and specifically, disguise compatible with honesty, was a theme in his life. The same may be true of his art. Like the artist himself at festivals, his paintings may pretend to be one thing while actually being another. And what has been seen as Bruegel's disinclination to narrative may instead be understood as a narrower disinclination toward the classicizing aesthetic. His peasant pictures, as a group, may be thought of as transgressive in relation to that standard. But it does not necessarily follow that his pictures decline the task of narration. Instead, they tell snippets or fragments of stories, sometimes featuring large, lumbering peasants and at other times whole galaxies of minor players, including women, children and the disabled. Bruegel distributes and disperses the viewer's attention, rather than recording his own experience or studying the peasant class like an ethnographer. His is distinctively an art without dominating events, and yet containing many interactions. His characteristic and distinctive compositional strategy, the making of expansive, semi-organized space, a vast visual panoply, all may be supposed to have a basis in the experience of actual festival spaces.[24] His pictures, made to delight, owe something to that real-life visual field. Their scattered pockets of activity as an aggregate have a moderate, but only a moderate, coherence, like fairgrounds still today, full of stories glimpsed and overheard, forever fragmentary but knit into a whole that has a special kind of cohesion, not simple narrative coherence but a formal or tonal coherence. It is not that any one action ties the whole together, but the kinds of actions taking place display a fundamental compatibility. He distributes the viewer's attention in a way that seems mere happenstance and yet is carefully plotted and calculated, not for the sake of serving a text, nor even a phrase, but to create a world which the

[23] (1994, 219v). On Van Mander's role in promoting the art of Rudolf II, see Müller (1993, 17-20).

[24] Jonathan Rosenbaum, writing for the Criterion Collection dvd of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) in 2006, compared the restaurant sequence to Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus* and *Procession to Cavalry*.

viewer had to learn to experience, to wander about in and toy with, inventing micro-narratives at will. Bruegel provided a realism that wasn't purely visual, but experiential or phenomenal, and whose relationship to established narrative norms was oblique.

The question of Bruegel's relationship to narrative is distinct from that of his attitude toward Italian art. It remains stunningly distinctive that what most impressed him on his trip to Italy was the Alps.[25] Other than in the Babel paintings (whose relationship to the Colosseum might be thought unflattering to Rome),[26] Bruegel did not leave a record of reacting much to what he saw there. He collaborated with Giulio Clovio. He visited as far south as Sicily. It is possible that Bruegel stopped at Ferrara, as Rogier van der Weyden had before him and as did Joris Hoefnagel (a fellow friend of Ortelius) after him.[27] Certainly it was an important court, known for its patronage of painting and poetry. It is also true that Duke Ercole II's wife, Renée of France, was notorious as a Protestant sympathizer and shielder of heretics. If Bruegel did visit Ferrara, he almost certainly would have seen the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes: and there he would have found the most ambitious existing cycle of the months (ca. 1480), one remarkable in its time for its featuring of peasants. They are strikingly prominent, though not integrated into the landscape as Bruegel would shortly accomplish, and there is no fraternizing between peasant and landlord, as in Bruegel's images. There are other pre-existing cycles of the months (Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trent, for example, as well as in various books of hours), but Ferrara's distinctively achieves a kind of monumentality independent of classical models. Even though his own paintings bore no patent debt to the Palazzo Schifanoia cycle and his theme had nothing to do with the glorification of an autocrat, it is hypothetically possible that Bruegel started thinking about the months as a possible large-scale pictorial theme because of the spectacular and unusual cycle he saw in Ferrara.[28]

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[25] Bruegel's mother-in-law, Mayken Verhulst, who is thought to have trained Bruegel's sons after his death and who published Serlio's treatise on architecture after her husband's death, was similarly underwhelmed by Italian formal models; DiFuria (2019, 157-177). On Bruegel's Babel, Carroll (2008, 75-83).

[26] Kaminska (2014) describes the ambient in which Jonghelinck would have displayed the *Tower of Babel* (1563) now in Vienna, but argues that it was in relation to Antwerp that it would have been discussed. See also Carroll (2008, 75-83).

[27] Harris (2005, 306).

[28] For a study of Bruegel's trip to Italy, based on landscape drawings, that proposes he stayed on the west coast, see Lichtert (2015, 39-54) and for a reconsideration of Bruegel's relationship to Italian art, Kavaler (2017, 80-85). See also Kaschek (2009, 104, 148-419). Müller)1999, 18-19) and for speculation on his religious inclinations, (21-39). That it was crucial to early scholars working on Bruegel that he was free of Italian influence, Cuvelier (2021, 360-62).

When Bruegel painted his own cycle of months, circa 1565, the Netherlands was in the grip of famine caused by harsh weather and failed crops, setting up the conditions for the revolt which was to come. His ambitious landscape cycle might have been prompted, at least in some part, by the plight of the farmers and laboring folk, and also in celebration of the special tie the locals felt to the land currently occupied. The tenor of some of the months, the cold ones in particular, contrasts with the celebratory air of the Ferrara frescoes, which were made to celebrate the beneficent rule of the Duke. The landscapes feature the same close association of lower- and upper-class figures that characterize, for instance, the Wedding Feast (Vienna) or the Landscape with Gallows (Darmstadt), and which might be thought to signify local patriotic feeling against the occupying forces. The compositional type of the vista looking from on high down a river valley to the horizon reflected his experience on that trip—a trip that literally widened his horizons, one which exposed him both to elements he resisted as well as to some he adopted. The etching of the rabbit hunter, like the Suicide of Saul, suggests that he associated those plunging vistas with fearful emotions rather than pleasurable ones. It is not hard to imagine that crossing the Alps by horse could be a terrifying experience for a person accustomed to a characteristically level terrain.

The stories Van Mander tells about Bruegel have been used to confirm his distance from the Italian model with its emphasis on dramatic and literary narrative. We have argued here on behalf of seeing Bruegel as a practitioner of a new kind of narrative, deliberately fragmented and even incoherent of content to a degree, united formally by using the complexity of landscape as flexible armature, potentially also as a distraction. He insinuates inconsequential microhistories while displaying the vast world.

It was not merely this alternative approach to narrative that Bruegel's pictures activated. His peasant paintings provided a novel sense of relief for the viewer by no longer demanding to be looked up to subserviently and expectantly, the way altarpieces must be. Bruegel developed a pictorial point of view that contrasted with that generated by traditional ruling elites. He used the peasant population as the signifier of a generalized anti-subservience implied by endemic disorderliness. He employed an additive compositional model instead of working toward classical and organic completeness with its Italian referentiality. It was not only his choice of figural subjects and his compositional preferences, but also the new manner of displaying art, in private houses of citizens belonging to a new urban and bourgeois culture, that enabled a radical change in how narrative was used: not to grip the mind and emotions of the spellbound viewer, but instead to provide an occasion for looking together, casually, and companionably.

The essence of these paintings as a new kind of picture exacting no tribute, no prayer, and hence their status as relatively frivolous objects, allowed them to act as coy receptacles for subversive content when a deteriorating political situation spurred the artist in that direction. Perhaps there are quite personal references even in earlier paintings that we cannot identify.

Still, it is not to be supposed that Bruegel invented his new kind of pictures for the sake of latently expressing his political discontent, but that the pictures he had invented, with their more additive aesthetic, allowed for this amplification of purpose when the times seemed to demand acknowledgment. He was protected by the jovial aspect of the imagery, which had been devised by Bruegel as a young artist working in the wake of Bosch and which tended, in the absence of religious subject matter, to catalyze viewers' feelings that the paintings had no serious raison d'être. It has been argued here that his immediate circle would have seen in some of the work elements to which the occupiers were meant to be blind, supposing that they ever saw the paintings. Like other artists and writers working during times when overt challenge was not tolerated,[29] Bruegel devised discreet, privately satisfying ways by which to criticize the powers he could not otherwise curb.

After the death of the artist in September of 1569, the geographer Abraham Ortelius made an addition to the page dedicated to Bruegel in his Album Amicorum ('album of friends'): "Multa pinxit hic Bruegelius que pingi non possunt" ("Bruegel painted here many things which cannot be painted." This surely alludes to Pliny's Natural History, Book XXXV, where the same is said of Apelles. Ortelius immediately followed this with Pliny's praise for Timanthes, "in omnibus eius operibus intellegitur plus semper quam pingitur" ("in all of his works more is to be understood than was painted").[30] Art historians have often supposed that this oddly double compliment ought to be dismissed as routine encomium, despite being directed at an artist who, distinctively, rarely seemed to care about antiquity and its norms. However, the double reference, made without citing any particular pictorial feat such as Apelles's rendering of lightning, might well raise our suspicions as to whether Ortelius was not here actually praising Bruegel's subtlety under the guise of praising his naturalism.[31] Ultimately, if the visual evidence

[29] E.g., the illustrated *Monster Cockroach* of 1921 by Korney Chukovsky, in which no one dared see a reference to Stalin, or Callot's etchings of 1633 *Les grandes misères de la guerre*, in which the wartime life of soldiers is described with painful verity rather than the more routine idealization.

[30] Ortelius (1969, 21-22, 12v), Stechow (1966, 37), Gibson (2003, 5), Popham (1931, 187).

[31] See on Ortelius, Kaschek (2009, 66) and on the evidence for Ortelius's evolving religious thought, including his attention to reticence and subtlety, see Harris (2004), esp. (116-117).

allows for understanding more than what was painted, as Ortelius plainly stated it did, we owe it to the artist to weigh the possibility very carefully.

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Bruegel, paysans, et politique

Comment pouvons-nous nous permettre de voir ce qui était destiné à être systématiquement ignoré dans des peintures réalisées à une époque d'oppression, des images faites non pas pour attiser l'opposition mais néanmoins utilisées pour obtenir une condamnation? Ici, l'on suggère qu'il y a plus de contenu historique dans les peintures de Bruegel de la fin des années 1560 et moins d'ambivalence moderne que la recherche récente a bien voulu en analyser. De même, les approches actuelles de l'œuvre semblent inviter le spectateur, par inadvertance, à voir celle-ci telle que Bruegel la destinait aux autorités de son temps. L'approche distinctive et élargie de Bruegel au travail de composition figurative est étudiée comme un symptôme de son identité néerlandaise, à la fois telle qu'elle se manifeste dans sa réponse étonnamment limitée à ce qu'il a vu en voyageant en Italie (bien que si nous limitions nos attentes à ce qui compte vraiment comme influence, le Salon des Mois du palais Schifanoia, à Ferrare — de Cosmè Tura et Francesco del Cossa —, pourrait avoir joué un rôle dans la pensée de Bruegel) et dans de petits ajustements apportés à ses peintures ultérieures, qui peuvent indiquer des sympathies ne devant s'exprimer qu'en cachette. L'eau-forte autographe du Chasseur de lapin, le petit tableau du Louvre représentant des mendiants infirmes et le dernier tableau de Bruegel (dont l'élément central est le gibet) sont analysés comme s'ils étaient destinés à être pleinement compris uniquement par ceux qui savaient déjà que l'artiste avait des sentiments anti-impériaux, alors que les autres ne devaient y voir que la suite bienvenue de l'amusant manque d'idéalisation de Bruegel associé à l'art italien et à sa théorie. Ses réponses à ce qu'il a vu en Italie étaient généralement aussi originales que ses représentations de sa patrie, et ses motivations s'étendent, au-delà du religieux (très souvent discuté), jusqu'au politique. Le point de vue de Van Mander qui considérait l'art de Bruegel comme drôle et anecdotique doit être pondéré par les commentaires d'Ortelius sur la sophistication de Bruegel. Il est temps d'abandonner la thèse voulant que les significations picturales de Bruegel cultivent une ambiguïté insoluble reflétant l'orientation philosophique de l'artiste.

Bruegel, boeren en politiek

Hoe kunnen we onszelf permissie geven om iets waar te nemen dat eigenlijk bedoeld was om routinematig over het hoofd te worden gezien in schilderijen die gemaakt waren in een tijd van onderdrukking, afbeeldingen die niet waren gecreëerd om oppositie op te wekken, maar die toch een zekere veroordeling wisten vast te leggen? In dit artikel wordt geopperd dat er meer historische inhoud en minder moderne ambivalentie in

Bruegels schilderijen van de late jaren 1560 zit dan de recente wetenschappelijke analyses hebben willen aantonen, en dat de huidige benaderingen van het werk de kijker er onbedoeld toe brengen het waar te nemen op de manier zoals Bruegel het de autoriteiten van zijn tijd had voorgeschoteld. Bruegels kenmerkende en verruimende aanpak in het uitvoeren van figuratieve compositie wordt onderzocht als zijnde een kenmerk van zijn Nederlandse identiteit, zowel in zoverre als het zich voordoet in zijn veelbeduidende summiere reactie tegenover hetgeen hij observeerde toen hij door Italië reisde (alhoewel, misschien als we onze verwachtingen aanpassen voor wat telt als invloed, zouden we kunnen stellen dat de Villa Schifanoia-maanden in Ferrara van Cosmè Tura en Francesco del Cossa een mogelijke rol speelden wat betreft het denken van Bruegel), alsook in kleine aanpassingen in zijn latere schilderijen, wellicht wijzend op sympathieën die slechts heimelijk konden worden uitgedrukt. De handtekeningets van *De konijnenjacht*, daarnaast het kleine Louvre-schilderij van kreupele bedelaars en het laatste schilderij van Bruegel, gecentreerd op de galg, worden geanalyseerd op de wijze waarop het lijkt alsof ze gemaakt zijn om slechts volledig te kunnen worden begrepen door diegenen die reeds door hadden dat de kunstenaar negatieve gevoelens jegens het bewind koesterde, terwijl anderen juist alleen de welkome voortzetting zouden zien van Bruegels grappige gebrek aan idealisering die wordt geassocieerd met Italiaanse kunst en diens theorie. Zijn reacties op wat hij in Italië vernam, waren over het algemeen net zo eigenzinnig als zijn afbeeldingen van zijn vaderland, en de motivaties reiken verder dan het godsdienstige (vaker besproken) en wel tot op het politieke toe. Van Manders kijk op Bruegels kunst als koddig en anekdotisch behoort beter in evenwicht te worden gebracht met de opmerkingen van Ortelius over Bruegels verfijning. Het is tijd om de stelling teniet te doen dat de bedoelingen achter de afbeeldingen van Bruegels hand een onoplosbare onduidelijkheid zouden cultiveren, getuigend van de filosofische oriëntatie van de kunstenaar.