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Bruegel the Elder

by E. V. Thaw

On "Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The exhibition of Bruegel the Elder's drawings and the engraved prints derived from them at the Metropolitan Museum of Art offers a true feast for both connoisseurs and iconographers.[1] The exhibit is of special importance to connoisseurs, as it offers insight into the precarious methods of historical attribution. As advertised widely among the reviewers and academics who pay attention to such things, the exhibition claims to include fifty-four out of a total of the sixty-one sheets that are surely by Pieter Bruegel the Elder himself. We can be grateful that certain sheets that were formerly called Bruegel the Elder by most art historians of my era are included as object lessons in the radical revision of the artist's graphic oeuvre in recent years.

This "new" Bruegel is based almost entirely on the work of the late Hans Mielke, whose catalogue raisonné of the drawings was published in Belgium in 1996. He radically reduced the number of authentic Bruegel drawings, deeming spurious the great alpine landscapes that were formerly claimed to spring from the artist's well-documented trip to Rome. (Some of these panoramic scenes have been universally admired as opening a new chapter in the art of landscape: their precise observations merge with the concept of the sublime. One of these drawings, given to Bowdoin College early in the nineteenth century, has long been thought to be the earliest old master drawing of any merit to reach our shores.)

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Reductionism is the easiest part of art historical attribution. One can rather quickly build a reputation for discrimination and probity by denying the master's hand in works that cannot be proven genuine except by documentation. It is much harder to argue the reasons for accepting a work, especially a somewhat untypical one, and to be so persuasive that one's opinion achieves general acceptance. Thus reductionism plays a large part in the study of many artists' oeuvres. The

exhibition "Rembrandt After 300 Years," for instance, which took place at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1969, began a process of revision of Rembrandt's work that continues today. The noted expert Seymour Slive of Harvard supposedly remarked: "one more conference on Rembrandt and he will cease to exist as an artist!" The most famous recent example of somewhat blind reductionism was the Dutch Rembrandt committee's removal of the Frick Collection's *Polish Rider* from the Rembrandt corpus. A change of personnel on the committee restored the mighty *Polish Rider* to authenticity—even though its provenance could not be traced before 1820 or so.

One of the drawings that seems most unlikely to match the accepted style of the elder Bruegel landscapes has recently been given to the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Although the excellent connoisseurs-cum-collectors George and Maida Abrams acquired the drawing as the work of another hand, Hans Mielke saw it on his deathbed, and the drawing has thus been included as one of the sixty-one anointed sheets.

The Morgan Library's great mountain landscape, one of the most admired drawings of my time, is perhaps the cause of Hans Mielke's whole rethinking. Mielke found a watermark in the paper on which the Morgan sheet is drawn that, it is claimed, is found only on paper dating from the mid-1580s and later. Bruegel died in 1569; he cannot, therefore, be the creator of this landscape. I would prefer to think that someone has misdated the earliest use of that watermarked paper rather than to believe that the Morgan drawing is by the "Master of the Mountain Landscapes" (as is the Bowdoin drawing also).

There is much more one could say about this kind of periodic revisionism in the scholarship of attributions. It seems to be a cyclical phenomenon: one day another drawing that *must* have been created before 1570 will turn up with a Strasbourg Lily watermark, and thus the whole set of mountain landscapes will be restored to Bruegel the Elder. In the meantime, some experts claim the "Master of the Mountain Landscapes" is either Jacob or Roelandt Savery, lesser artists of the next generation, who either were inspired by Bruegel or were outright faking him. Many of the disputed sheets, in fact, have very plausible signatures. This must cause a great deal of mayhem in museum print rooms. Of the drawings at the Courtauld Institute in London of the great Bruegel collector and connoisseur Count Seilern, only one out of seven is now accepted.

With all this in mind, let me confirm that the Bruegel the Elder exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is, nevertheless, a sheer delight. One sees so many rare drawings—drawings that are for the most part tours-de-force of the pen and ink medium. How could he have controlled the pen so completely? The best part of the exhibit is the extremely complex, Hieronymus Bosch-like compositions for prints on the subject of the Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues, and great single compositions like the *Last Judgment* (1558), *Everyman* (1558), and *The Alchemist* (c. 1558). Without much pencil underdrawing, Bruegel controlled his rich brown and black ink to produce the most intricate large and tiny figures. His drawings contain foregrounds of massive detail and great distances of increasingly lighter ink tones. His shading and crosshatching expertly and convincingly place every object, person, and monster in real space. In the case of the

famous drawing *The Beekeepers* (c. 1567–68), the virtuoso technique is so refined as to have become a kind of pointilism.

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Unfortunately, the prints made after these dazzling drawings are on the whole disappointing. The prints must have been a sensation in their day, however, and they spread Bruegel's reputation throughout Europe. Although the Met took care to round up brilliant early impressions of these engravings, they nevertheless look harsh and mechanical—especially next to the glowing and subtle emanations from the artist's own hand.

The facts of Bruegel's biography are almost nonexistent. We know neither when he was born nor where. By process of elimination, art historians have made some guesses and have looked to the few accounts published close to his lifetime by such compilers of artists' data as Vasari and van Mander. He is supposed to have studied with Pieter Coecke van Aelst, whose daughter he later married, but his work bears little relation to Coecke and thus testifies to Bruegel's originality. He entered the Antwerp Artists' Guild in 1551 and, before his death in Brussels in 1569, achieved considerable fame for both his paintings and his drawings for prints. His posthumous reputation in the Low Countries must have been considerable: the last years of the sixteenth century and the first quarter of the seventeenth century witnessed innumerable copies and versions of his compositions made by followers, including his sons, Pieter the Younger (who was only five years old when his father died) and Jan (who was not yet two).

It is extremely difficult to resurrect from the very troubled time and place of Bruegel's career what his works really meant to convey. The iconography is so complex and so inconsistent that it is not easy to offer precise analysis. Much of the imagery, of course, is comic and bawdy in the manner of Bosch, but underneath there is deadly seriousness. Bruegel seems to have had an extremely pessimistic view of human nature and a devout religious outlook that does not seem tilted towards either Catholicism or the newly minted Protestantism, whose conflicts were raging across the Netherlandish countries in those times. The great horrors instigated by the Duke of Alba and his forces only started in 1567, two years before the artist's death; still, Bruegel must have been aware of the inquisition in the Spanish-occupied territories in which he lived. The greatest patron among the private collectors who supported his work was Cardinal Granvelle, an envoy of the Spanish court. An early biographer claimed that Bruegel, as he lay dying, gave a number of his drawings to his wife to be destroyed so that she would not be found in possession of them. They might well have been politically or religiously subversive—which is what one would have expected Bruegel's private thoughts to have been.

In spite of my reservations about the "new" Bruegel that these somewhat cocky art historians have put in the place of the earlier construct offered by the likes of de Tolnay, Münz, Stechow, and Dvorák, this show is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I do have a few reservations about the

catalogue accompanying the exhibit, however. As is customary for the Met these days, it is a handsome book. All of the drawing—including those now not deemed original Bruegels—are very well reproduced in the sepia tones close to the ink of the originals. Yet the text, although full of the requisite information, is written for a popular audience and occasionally descends to the level of the simple-minded. The entries and introductions, principally by Nadine Orenstein of the Met's department of prints and Martin Royalton-Kisch, a drawings curator for the British Museum, do not offer definitive scholarly discussions and arguments. Still, I am grateful to the Met that its borrowing power achieved such a monographic exhibition of an artist whose work is so rare. How about a Bruegel painting exhibition soon? Like a Vermeer show, it will be easy; there are only forty of them.

Notes

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1. "Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on September 25, 2001 and remains on view until December 2. The show was previously seen at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (May 24–August 5, 2001). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Nadine M. Orenstein, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum in association with the Yale University Press (323 pages, $60). Go back to the text.

E. V. Thaw (1927–2018) was a preeminent art dealer, collector, and philanthropist.

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