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PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER (1525/30–1569)

Little is known about the life of Pieter Bruegel. It is thought that he trained in the studio of Pieter Coecke van Aelst in Antwerp and was also instructed in the art of miniature painting by the latter's wife Mayken Verhulst. In 1551 he was admitted as an independent master to the Antwerp painters' guild. From 1552 to 1554 he travelled through France and Italy. Back in Antwerp he worked for the publisher Hieronymus Cock. From 1562 he mainly worked as a painter. In 1563 he established himself in Brussels, where he died in 1569. Bruegel's artistic career lasted a mere eighteen years or so. With his relatively small oeuvre, however, he revolutionized landscape and genre painting. In this, engravings after his works played a fundamental role, as unlike his paintings and drawings they were already widely disseminated by the 17th century. Hardly any other artist has undergone such changes in identity over the centuries: from the 'new Bosch', 'Peasant Bruegel', humanist, moralist or Christian painter to satirist and social critic. We repeatedly seek new paths of access into the work of this great master. An acute observer, Bruegel often holds up a mirror to the viewer, something that makes his work highly immediate and sometimes unsettling, thus giving it a fascinating connection with the here and now.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

1525/30

Pieter Bruegel the Elder is born, possibly in Breugel or in Antwerp.

c. 1545–50

Bruegel probably receives artistic training in the studio of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (Antwerp and later Brussels), whose wife Mayken Verhulst instructs him in miniature painting.

1551

Bruegel paints the exterior (and Pieter Baltens the interior) of an altar for the glovers' guild in Mechelen. This first documented work is not preserved. // Bruegel joins the Antwerp painters' guild as a free master.

1552

Earliest preserved dated drawings.

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1552–54

Journey to Italy, probably via Lyon, presumably with the painter Maerten de Vos and the sculptor Jacob Jongelinck.

1553–54

Stay in Rome, collaboration with Giulio Clovio. Travels to southern Italy as far as Reggio Calabria.

1554

Journey back to the Netherlands, probably via Venice and the Alps.

1554–63

Bruegel is established in Antwerp. He works principally as a draughtsman for the publishing house of Hieronymus Cock ('Aux Quatre Vents').

1557

Earliest preserved dated paintings.

1559 onwards

Bruegel signs his works 'BRVEGEL' in Roman majuscule script, probably to emphasize the humanist claims of his art.

1562

Bruegel devotes himself increasingly to painting.

1563

Move to Brussels; marriage to Mayken Coecke, the daughter of Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Mayken Verhulst, in Notre-Dame de la Chapelle / Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Kapellekerk.

1563–68

Principally active as a painter in Brussels. Still working for Antwerp clients.

1564

Birth of his son Pieter.

1568

Birth of his son Jan. // Last dated works.

1569

Pieter Bruegel the Elder dies in Brussels. His grave is in Notre-Dame de la Chapelle / Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Kapellekerk.