A BRUEGEL EXHIBITION IN
THE PRINT GALLERIES

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On March 12, 1943, there will be opened in the Museum’s print galleries an exhibition of sixteenth-century prints after drawings and paintings by Peter Bruegel the Elder that have been selected from the collections of the Museum. The old prints will be supplemented by photographs and facsimiles of drawings and paintings by Bruegel.

The Flemish prints of the mid-sixteenth century are little known to either the collectors or the general public in America. Many of them were regarded as exceedingly “queer” during the period when this country was gaining its first acquaintance with old prints. During the following period their offenses against the prevailing aesthetic dogmas prevented them from being taken seriously by men of taste. Almost without exception they were “reproductive,” they were thick with “subject matter,” and they were “illustrations.” They were the expression of lusty enjoyment, not only of the body, which though wicked was tolerable, but of the mind, which was utterly intolerable. To the greenery-gallery in the chaste vicariates of Whistler and Haden there seemed no place for vitality such as this. The basic trouble with these prints was that they were interesting to everybody except those to whom that fact rendered them odious and common. They were made for children of all ages from nine to ninety, for fighting men, for contemplative men, and for men who were glad merely to live and observe the world.

During the last thirty years of almost continuous warfare and political upheaval the tastes of the sheltered dovecotes of the Victorian era have been rather rudely upset by the discovery of a number of things about what is worth while when one has to fight for it. When he reached Switzerland, the American who took the last train from Berlin on a certain December seventh had a two-inch steak and some Scotch and wasted no time on sweetbreads sous cloche or petits fours. It was not only fact but allegory.

Peter Bruegel the Elder was born presumably at Bruegel, a little town near Eindhoven, on the Dutch side of what was later to be the Belgian-Dutch border. Neither the day nor the year of his birth is known, but there seems reason to think that it was closer to 1525 than to 1530. Such evidence as is supplied by his own work suggests that he came out of the landscape tradition of Mattys Cock and Cornelis Massys, but nothing is really known about his schooling or early life. In 1551 he became a member of the guild of painters at Antwerp. Presumably he shortly afterwards went to Italy and made the acquaintance of Julio Clovio, the famous miniaturist, who was in Rome from 1553 to 1556. Clovio was doubtless more important to Bruegel for his collections, his friends and patrons, and his culture, than for any inspiration to be got from his work. It is not entirely impossible that Clovio and his group did more than anything else to give Bruegel the education that resulted in his revolt against the classicizing taste which they typified.

After Bruegel’s return to the Low Countries, probably about 1556, the year following Charles V’s abdication, he formed some kind of a business connection with Hieronymus Cock, the art dealer, print manufacturer, and publisher of Antwerp, by which he provided Cock with drawings to be engraved. The first of these drawings are said to have been after Hieronymus Bosch, but much the greater number were of Bruegel’s own invention. In 1563 he removed from Antwerp to Brussels, where, that same year, he married the daughter of Peter Ccelck of Alost. In 1569 he died. The first half of Bruegel’s activity seems to have been principally devoted to making
drawings for engravings, the second half to that and to painting.

In his own time and for long after, he was regarded as a "comic" artist. In 1910 all that the Encyclopedia Britannica could find to say about his work was the single pejorative sentence: "The subjects of his pictures are chiefly humorous figures, like those of D. Teniers; and if he wants the delicate touch and silvery clearness of that master, he has abundant spirit and comic power." At the beginning of this century there was no picture by him in any public collection in the English-speaking world, and none in any such collection in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Berlin, or Munich. Brussels, Madrid, and Paris each had one; Naples had two; Vienna had fifteen, of which thirteen are still generally accepted. At the present time only thirty-odd paintings are known that are generally accepted as originals by him. Comparatively few people have ever seen more than one or two of them. The Metropolitan Museum rejoices in the possession of one of his masterpieces. A series of Viennese publications, beginning about 1905, and the remarkable volume by Bastelaer and Hulin de Loo of 1907 first called serious attention to him. Today, thanks to "reproductive prints," he is generally recognized as one of the greatest painters and draughtsmen that the north of Europe can boast. For the world Bruegel now exists, as he did in his own time, through the reproductive possibilities of printer's ink.

The Roman print publishers of the second quarter of the sixteenth century were apparently the first to engage in the business of reproduction on a large scale. They were followed towards the middle of the century by a group of Flemings, either from or with their headquarters in Antwerp, a city that by that time had taken the place of Venice as the greatest and richest of Europe's commercial entrepôts. Antwerp was the center of the international print trade, and thither went Italian as well as northern engravers. Hieronymus Cock was the earliest of the great northern print publishers. An engraver and etcher of mediocre ability, he had spent much time in Italy and had made a series of prints of antiquities in Roman landscapes. In the middle

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The Wedding of Mopsus and Nisa, a drawing by Peter Bruegel the Elder for a woodcut.

The block on which the drawing was made has been partly cut.
In the 1540s he returned to Antwerp and set up shop at the sign of The Four Winds as an art dealer and print publisher. He soon became the dominant figure in the print trade.

When Bruegel came back from his travels and began to provide drawings for Cock’s engravers, he played his part in a development that was completely to reorganize the business of printmaking and book illustration. What had been a sporadic and piecemeal personal occupation became a highly organized capitalist manufacture. Under Cock’s guidance and with a view to quantity production and business efficiency, the old personality of the copper engraver was split up into two or three different parts. Hereafter the business of the engraver became more and more to engrave and less and less to draw or originate designs. By being made to specialize he could be put to work in a shop and thereby turn out more engravings in a given time. The drawings were provided to him by men whose business it was to make drawings and who could be sent hither and thither much as a press photographer is today. It was not necessary that the engraver making a print after a painting, a statue, or a building, should ever have seen the thing that he was representing. From the capitalist publisher’s point of view it made no difference whether the engraver worked from the original or from a copy of it, and it was advantageous that the engraver should have as little personal style as possible. The more impersonal the engraver’s work the more efficient was the shop practice and the less was the waste of time on the pay roll. It was the Taylor or the Bedeaux system applied to art. In the course of time, and in not very long a time, it had its natural results.

Bruegel began by making drawings after
Hieronymus Bosch for Cock to turn over to his engravers. After a little while the economic idea expanded—why not have Bruegel make original drawings to be engraved in Cock’s shop? In a way it was the beginning of the factory production that today has reached its final development in the making of the comic strip. It may have been done before but certainly never with a draughtsman of Bruegel’s importance or popularity. Whether either Cock or Bruegel had any conception of what the ultimate consequences were to be no one knows, but the fact was that this step was momentous in the history of the printed picture and therefore of European art and culture in general.

The art dealer, buying the object from the artist in order to sell it at a profit or to make reproductions of it, which also were to be sold for a profit, had become the immediate patron of the artist; and the engraver, becoming the art dealer’s employee, had been absolved from all creative obligation and responsibility.

It is important to notice that just about this time, in the middle years of the sixteenth century, there began what was to swell into the flood of engraved book illustration which, in fifty years, for practical purposes, forced the woodcut out of business and thereafter for more than two hundred years turned book illustrations into shop-made copies of copies. The intellectual effect of reducing all pictorial information in the pages of books to the level of second- or third-hand information has been little, if at all, considered by the historians of culture and knowledge, but, as can clearly be seen, it was very important in its operation on the thought and practice of the world, especially during the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century technological developments first introduced wood-engraving
and then photographic processes, and book illustrations again had a chance to be firsthand statements.

So much for many of the aspects of what happened. Immediately and on the artistic side, as luck had it, Bruegel was a very remarkable artist. He not only knew what was going to happen to his drawings, but, knowing it, he deliberately adopted a scheme of draughtsmanship by which his drawings were not works of art to be translated by the engravers according to their habits and incapacities but a series of minutely detailed, exact-size instructions to the engravers as to just where and how they were to lay their lines. His drawings were as precise specifications as any blueprints that an architect turns over to a contractor. The engravers were rather careless about the way in which they followed his instructions, but they probably were fully as accurate in the way in which they followed them as all but very few of their contemporaries were in the way in which they looked at them. In other words, to draw an analogy from photography, very few of Bruegel’s contemporaries were aware that the engravings after his drawings were not in perfectly sharp focus. In hard fact they lost as little as any drawings lost through being “copied in facsimile” for two hundred and fifty years to come and a great deal less than most drawings did. Also Bruegel’s drawings were full to overflowing with “subject matter.” The time not yet having come when the artist was supposed to be a mere emotive recording mechanism devoid of thought and ideas, speechless and knowing no literature, Bruegel was permitted to deal with the images of things, just as the writer has always been able to deal with the names of things, for their associative and evocative values. He was even able to make pictorial puns, and he frequently availed himself of that high privilege of wit.
The result of all this was that a very important part of the content of Bruegel’s drawings passed through the colander of the engraving shop and came out in the prints for the world to see and enjoy.

The first important original drawings that Bruegel made for the engravers were those for the set of Large Landscapes. They were composites from memory of things that he had seen while passing through the mountains on his way to and from Italy. Even today they more than hold their own in any exhibition of landscape prints. When they were made they were as nearly as possible complete innovations, unlike any landscapes that had previously been made on the copper. The earlier landscape prints had no sweep to them, no invitation to either the walker or the horseman, no distances, no adventure—and such little air as was in them was still. These prints of Bruegel’s were great panoramas, full of incident and weather, the most perfect of invitations to wander and see life. Their hills were real hills, their valleys real valleys, their river mouths real river mouths. Their mountain ranges had personality and character, as though they were great antediluvian, anteplutonian living creatures, sprawling and swimming in the earth and its atmosphere. They showed forth one of the greatest pictorial discoveries ever made by any artist.

Later on Bruegel was to make the drawings for some other landscapes, smaller ones this time, of the quiet villages and village streets of daily life in flat Brabant. Again there was a great discovery of subject matter—one so obvious and so simple that it took genius and stiff persistence of character to see it through the blind spots with which the accumulations of tradition destroy the vision of all but the very greatest. Out of these smaller landscapes there came in the next century the landscape etch-
ings of Rembrandt, just as out of the Large Landscapes came the landscapes of Rubens.

But Bruegel was not content with landscape and went on to deal with men and the content of their minds. His contemporaries and other men for long afterwards called him a “comic artist,” because, instead of representing gods and goddesses of kinds that never had lived on land or sea, he drew and painted men and women as they were and are and because he represented these men and women at work and play instead of in stylish attitudes. Earlier artists saw the peasant and the little man from what may be called a slumming point of view, more or less as some few people once in a lifetime go to Coney Island to see a strange sight but carefully not to mingle with the teeming populace. The Germans, Dürer and his fellows, had looked at the ordinary man, on the rare occasion when they did see him, as a curiosity, as something which they set up on a slide under a schoolroom microscope—“Now, Tommy, it’s Matilda’s turn to take a peek at the horrid things.” The French and Flemish miniaturists had looked at the little man and the laborer as they looked at the cattle and the growing crops—as assets that were impersonal and devoid of emotion and thought. The Italians had quite simply ignored the little man. Bruegel, on the contrary, a traveled and an unusually intelligent man, depicted the ordinary fellow and the peasant sharply and with full understanding of his human personality and predicament. His people are all busy about their little affairs of life and death, intent and self-absorbed, thoughtless of any audience, each a world of adventure and toil all in himself. No one had ever before drawn men as they are when they forget that anyone may be looking at them. Not very many artists have succeeded in doing this since Bruegel’s time, for it is even yet a very rare and wonderful thing. He was the first and one of the last to draw that many-headed, many-legged, single thing we call the crowd. Had Bruegel been asked why he went to his equivalent of Coney Island he doubtless
would have answered with another question, "Where else would a fellow go?"

When Degas stopped drawing Semiramis attitudinizing on the Walls of Jericho and took to drawing the laundresses, the sempstresses, and the girls of the ballet, he took with him all the intellectuality that had gone into his youthful academic subject matter. By leaving the great of an impossible world of idea and coming down to the little of a very concrete and actual world Degas found that his intellectuality was vastly enriched and widened instead of being lost. There was even more to see with the eye than ever before—all the unpredictable irrationals of brute fact instead of the smooth, vapid rationality of abstractions—and also there was full sweep for understanding, cynicism, sympathy, and all the other qualities of mind and heart that are called into existence only by concrete human beings doing concrete human things.

And so it was with Bruegel also.

Unfortunately there is no time or space here to discuss the subject matter of Bruegel’s prints, his illustration of common locutions and proverbs, his treatment of “emblems,” and the curious, topsy-turvy, upside-down, sometimes cynical, always personal interpretation he gave them, nor to talk about the several remarkable prints in which he reflected the religious beliefs of the sect to which Plantin, the great printer, belonged. The descriptive labels on the prints tell about some of this, but for the greater part it must be left to the imaginative sympathy and understanding of the visitors to the exhibition.

As for the social background of the time and the conditions prevailing in the Low Countries during the century that saw the provinces split in two, the northern half to become the Dutch Republic, the southern half to become the Spanish Netherlands, reference may be made to Charles de Coster’s great novel La Légende... d’Ulenspiegel. For the political and other history the readiest account is to be found in the pages of Motley. In this present time of war
and conflict of ideals, of savagery and heroism, there is little better reading than that to be found in these two books with their story of human lives, flaming faith, and patriotism. Those interested in the development of Bruegel's work and its detailed interpretation are referred to the books by Dvorák, Bastelaer and Hulin de Loo, Friedländer, and Tolnay, which may be consulted in the Museum Library.