

IN THE ART-HISTORICAL MUSEUM

The Bruegel Room

I fell under Bruegel's spell in Vienna, in the room in the museum there filled with a dozen of his works (fig. 1).¹ Painted between 1559 and the artist's death, in 1569, these twelve pictures seem to belong together as a coherent suite or cycle, despite their different subjects and provenances. A common format contributes to this accord. Except for two, all are big panels: great rectangles well over five feet wide. Most of these monumental spans encompass vast, detailed panoramas balanced on a faraway horizon (fig. 2). Oriented horizontally, along the meeting place of earth and sky, these oblong paintings offer not mere landscape views but rather vistas that transcend what human sight can physically see, entire regions within an expanse too big ever to be the object of a single view. Not landscapes but proper "worldscapes," these paintings display human activity itself from a higher vantage point, almost—though never quite—from the perspective of the eternal. From that elevated place, whatever humanly occurs, whether peasant pastime or Bible story, seasonal labor or children's games, appears like some nomadic migration, evoking the ceaseless mobility of creatures too small and incomplete to call this place a home.²

And yet in Bruegel this perspective, in which nothing human seems to matter much, remains quintessentially humane. Embracing inhuman spans of time and space, and commanding effortlessly the grand public gallery where they hang, these paintings somehow whisper intimately to *you*, the individual beholder, that there is a private message there just your own. The harmonious assurance felt among this artist's works, the sense they give of pointing to some common center, some deep irony that each of us can personally grasp, depends on the masterful consistency of Bruegel's art. Whether he raises a Tower of Babel to the clouds or follows weary herdsman home, Bruegel conjures the same vast world peopled by the same familiar humanity (see fig. 278). Stylistically constant and technically flawless throughout, and imbued with an all-pervasive incandescence that, radiating as if from beneath the painted surface itself, merges with the ambient light of the gallery, these works seem to speak to us in a here and now far transcending the specifics of history and custom that they also scrupulously record. This makes Bruegel the first modern Old Master painter. Portraitist of the people, he has become a supremely popular artist, his compositions the stuff of calendars and jigsaw puzzles, hence the throngs of tourists that jam Vienna's Bruegel room in summer.



To experience Bruegel's paintings in the original, in the midst of life, is to be jostled by a crowd. Mass audiences obscure the aura of many famous masterpieces, turning them into side-shows in the carnival of cultural display. Bruegel, by contrast, makes crowds seem a cheerful extension of his art. Not only are his paintings packed with people—with revelers, with children, with entire armies of the living and the dead—these teeming masses behave like proper crowds. Some cluster in groups that act in unison, dancing, marching, feasting, fighting, building, and playing, while others stand a bit apart and observe the goings-on passively, as would an audience. And when people in Bruegel's paintings play the role of spectator—when they peer curiously through windows and pour through doorways to glimpse some street theater performed outside; when they stare, confused, at the fallen Saul at his moment of conversion to the Apostle Paul (see fig. 322); when they, grown-ups and children alike, on horseback and on foot, hurry toward Golgotha to reserve a good spot to witness Christ's Crucifixion (see fig. 266); and, most of all, when they turn from the diversions that have captured them in the picture to gape directly out at us gaping curiously back at them (see fig. 287)—their painted world gathers us, ourselves people in a crowd, into their inner fold. In Vienna, as in the museums in Berlin, New York, Madrid, Antwerp, and Detroit where the other major Bruegels hang, one can spot this artist's paintings from far off simply by the large and lingering audience they inevitably draw. A supreme portraitist of crowd behavior, Bruegel cleverly reflects and stage-manages his own mass appeal. This is surprising. With his printed images—published in large editions and sold on the open market—he banked on a large viewership.³ But with his paintings, he addressed a select few. Only the most affluent burghers of the super-rich towns of Antwerp and Brussels could commission and behold the paintings we now admire.

After Bruegel's death, the audience for his paintings became even more elite. For three centuries, the Vienna pictures were precious imperial property. The core group was acquired

1 Bruegel Room, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna





2 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Return of the Herd (Autumn)*, from the *Seasons of the Year* series, 1565, panel, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



3 Kunsthistorisches Museum and Naturhistorisches Museum, view of façades from the Ringstrasse

in 1594 by Archduke Ernst of Austria during his governorship of the Netherlands. After Ernst's death, in 1595, they passed to his brother, Emperor Rudolf II of Habsburg.⁴ Entering Rudolf's vast holdings in Prague, they came to rest at the very heart of Europe's totemic treasury. The imperial collections of the House of Habsburg were a truly numinous depository. Possessed of an all-consuming passion for art, Rudolf incorporated the fabulous paintings that he eagerly purchased or commissioned, along with precious specimens of nature gathered in the Old World and the New, into the primeval assemblage of sacred relics and imperial regalia that reached back, beyond Habsburg rule, to Charlemagne and ancient Rome.⁵ There Bruegel's paintings stood, vivid tableaux of "the people" displayed within a setting that could hardly be more elite. Much later, in 1869, after revolution had shaken noble power to its core, the apostolic emperor of the Habsburg line, Franz Joseph I, resolved to put this ancestral treasure on public view. In a grand forum facing the Imperial Palace in Vienna, on the far side of the busy Ringstrasse (the circular boulevard that had recently replaced the city wall), Franz Joseph erected two huge and perfectly symmetrical museums (fig. 3).⁶ On the one side the Natural History Museum displayed the diversity of nature (the old *naturalia* collections) together with the excavated remains of prehistoric (or "natural") European peoples. On the other side the pedantically christened "Art-Historical" Museum displayed artworks—chiefly Old Master paintings of the period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century—as if they formed the ascending ladder of human history itself. And it was there, in 1891, when the imperial museums stood complete, that Bruegel's paintings finally became accessible to the wider public.

Before reaching the Bruegel room—Gallery No. 10—visitors today must still traverse these vestiges of imperial power. Having strolled between the twinned immensities representing Nature and Culture, they enter the Art-Historical Museum through an aggressively historicist façade. The entranceway's pseudo-Renaissance décor—the result of an unhappy collaboration between the German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper and his prolific Viennese associate, Karl von Hasenauer—was intended to evoke a specific and illustrious past: the artistic epoch of Albrecht Dürer and Raphael together with the political epoch of Habsburg world dominion. What seemed anachronistic to Semper's and Hasenauer's critics looks reasonably authentic today: most visitors to the Kunsthistorisches Museum take the building to be a vintage Renaissance edifice. Ascending the colossal double staircase that gently rises to the paintings' gallery, visitors feel themselves to be elevated (if also dwarfed) before they glimpse a single masterpiece. Halfway up these stairs, with Antonio Canova's marble *Hercules* looming over them, they arrive—tacitly—at art history's old forking paths: the steps to the right lead to the Italian schools of painting, the steps to the left to the northern schools. (In 1891, this crossroads could have been imagined as demanding a choice between beauty and truth, embodied respectively by Latin grace and Teutonic manliness.) But before visitors can make

that fateful decision, they will probably have been swept along by the mass of tourists climbing to the left, bound for the ever-popular northerners. And after a perfunctory glance at Bruegel's Italianizing precursors languishing unnoticed in the first grand gallery, they—we—arrive at last in the Bruegel room, amazed, energized, and not a little unnerved by the crowds.

With its soaring ceiling and awkward plush chairs, the room itself makes tourists feel uncouth and out of place. Like the restless ghost of the museum's imperial past, an invisible security system holds viewers way back from the pictures. Lean too far forward over the post-and-rope barriers and an alarm bell sounds. Trip the alarm twice and a taped voice angrily admonishes, "Please keep your distance!" Soon enough a guard rushes in and scolds the culprit personally. These attendants skillfully feign their shock, since protective glazing and an antiquated lighting system make infractions inevitable. Every curious visitor will press forward to these pictures to make out their details. The activities depicted in *The Children's Games* and *Battle between Carnival and Lent* make visual sense only at very close range; the three *Months* panels, including *The Hunters in the Snow*, hide entire narratives in their distances; and the biblical paintings—most pointedly *Christ Carrying the Cross*—conceal their sacred subjects from those who stand too far away (see figs. 294, 284, 315, and 266). Bruegel made such pictures to be viewed from two distances, each morally as well as physically distinct. At a polite remove, where the museum wants us to stand, we occupy the empyrean vantage point of the painting as whole. There the larger structures of townscape and countryside predominate, and we gaze downward onto human activities with indifference, because we in fact can hardly differentiate them. But, being human, we find ourselves drawn down into the hubbub, which causes us to edge up to the picture, to the point where the composition as a whole gets lost (see fig. 318).

Bruegel's large-scale compositions viscerally draw in their viewers. From our standpoint in the museum, the foreground figures in the famous *Peasant Dance* look just about life-size (see fig. 254).⁷ The painter scales the festivities so that they seem to begin only a few strides beyond us, at the distance we keep from his painting. By way of the couple joining the dance, Bruegel carries us corporeally into the scene, their stomping feet leading ours. And on the generous expanse of ground kept empty for our entrance, where we would step from the museum's polished parquetry onto good, solid earth, he scatters objects that make us stoop—in our world as we would in theirs—to see them: walnut shells, bits of straw, and a clay jug handle (see fig. 257). Even if we do not actually reach out to touch these now truly life-size images, we will, if we visit the gallery with friends, be powerfully tempted to point them out with our finger.

The Peasant and the Bird Thief

It is this inevitable finger-pointing that trips the museum's alarm, causing the Bruegel room to reverberate with the rough music of reproach. After tripping the bell yourself, you begin to watch for others doing it. A moment ago you were the bull in a china shop. Now you are the smug insider nodding knowingly to the guards. This human comedy begins in Bruegel's pictures themselves. Already an impious crowd has invaded a quiet and beautiful world. And already there begin deep shaming rituals wherein our self-consciousness primordially consists, in which beholders suddenly find themselves beheld, and those mocking from the sidelines become the center of the larger prank. One summer day several years ago, when a rainstorm drove Vienna's tourists indoors to the museum, I got so obsessed with spotting offenders



4 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant and the Bird Thief*, 1568, panel, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

triggering the alarm that I did not notice it was I who had become the culprit. While gaping at the crowd, I had backed right up against a little masterpiece, causing all hell to break loose. Turning around to gain some distance, I fell at once into a painted trap (fig. 4).⁸

Less than half the size of the other Bruegels that now surround it, this signed and dated panel hails you individually as you wander the galleries: an aggressive image of motion directed to people by nature on the move. Bruegel centers on a striding peasant—probably a cowherd—whose eyes, gesture, and body accost you before you have time to retreat. His directness fits his character. He is the type who gets intimate with *everyone*, exuding a confidence that what seems funny to him will seem funny to you, unless you yourself look funny to him, say by turning away, in which case he will be pointing at you. It helps that he seems already to look past you, that his intimacy thus is brief, and that what he shows—once you get there—has become *your*, not *his*, affair. And it helps that he is a man of the country, and that whoever he meets, whether it be patricians in 1568 in Brussels, where Bruegel painted this picture, or tourists in Vienna today, will be of the city, and therefore will feel off balance facing a countryman on his own ground.

His elbow thrust forward like a prow, the peasant gazes and marches straight at us, giving uncanny muscle to all that the painting will demand. This is an art-historical first. No painting



5 Detail of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant and the Bird Thief* (fig. 4)

before had ever invaded our space as frontally as this.⁹ We look *across* at the peasant's face and upper body but straight *down* on his legs and feet, as if at the instant we glimpse his present standpoint his face will have pressed right up against ours. Yet the peasant's purpose in confronting us is to point a finger rearward, in the exact opposite direction of his stride but in sync with the vector of our gaze. And thus, with a velocity doubled by his forward momentum, we are catapulted into the picture and toward the peasant's discovery: the tree-climbing boy in signal-red trousers (fig. 5). Further, we discover that it is a nest that the boy is reaching into and that the things in his hand are *birds*, crying in terror and fluttering their wings to escape. Drawn into this tiny drama at the heart of the picture, tempted to gesture toward it with *our* finger, we bear down on the painted surface, where details (the splayed feathers of the panicked birds) dissolve into lovely scribbles of pigment.

In pointing it out, the peasant implies that this detail will be visually hard to get. Our spotting it within the work of art becomes analogous to the peasant's coup of spying the bird thief in nature. And both these accomplishments are akin to, and also far outstripped by, the feat of the bird nester, who has not only glimpsed but also grasped the birds. Observe the deviousness of his approach: whereas the peasant rudely points—and we ourselves look—straight at the birds, he, the thief, cleverly snatches his quarry from behind, his free left arm circling around the tree and into the nest in our direction. Of course, our getting caught up in the picture's event pales by comparison with the surprise felt by the birds that, just before, rested safe and hidden in their nest. The thief's free-falling hat animates the catastrophe. Setting the painting's tempo, it indicates that the “now” we sluggishly grasp unfolds rapidly, as do other events that will in the next instant occur.

On the ground behind the peasant, an abandoned sack sets forth events that led up to the present. Before climbing the tree (Bruegel lets us imagine), the thief quietly laid aside his bundle, whereupon the peasant, heading out from his rustic home, passed that bundle, surmised its purpose, and sought, and then spotted, the crafty thief just as his fingers closed suddenly and expertly round the frail bodies of the ambushed birds. But what happens next, in a future that, with the striding peasant, rushes fast upon us? Will the nest robber descend the tree with the birds now firmly in hand? Will he lose his grip and crash to earth? His tumbling hat suggests the precariousness of his own situation. Shaped, sized, and colored like the nest—indeed virtually identical to a falling nest—the hat projects calamity beyond the birds to the painting as a whole. Resembling both the hat and nest, the thief’s sack extends a mesmerizing play of forms that animates the strange, bent-over tree at the picture’s right, with its pollarded crown and inward curve that echo the form of the sack, as well. Activating our sense of an ending, intimating that the restless present is about to be resolved, these auspicious correspondences heighten the terrible urgency of the “now” of life. Omens of an impending doom that never comes, they also seem meaningful without actually meaning anything.

Bruegel’s paintings are filled with moments like these: ominous proximities of half-related things, suggestive similarities of shape and color, objects curiously isolated through the purified geometry of their painted forms. Meaningful without ever yielding their significance, such passages vex especially the historian of art, who wants a symbol clearly to symbolize and expects the story properly to end.¹⁰ Seeking to draw conclusions, we expect our objects to be conclusive, as well. By placing art primarily in *history*, in a chain of causes and effects completed in the past, we assume that what the artwork captures has already ended and we analyze that result. But Bruegel’s plots never end. In rapid progress when first beheld, his pictures remain permanently ongoing. His body striding forward and his finger pointing back, and circled by the ceaseless flow of waters, the peasant plunges forth into the very midst of life. There the future lies hidden, be it ever so near. This makes Bruegel’s paintings a unique epiphany in the Art-Historical Museum. Their endings remain as inscrutable as our own.