

BRUEGEL EXTRAS



Hunters in the Snow.

“Have you seen the man peeing in the corner?”

I have been looking at Pieter Bruegel’s great snowy landscape known as *Hunters in the Snow* (1565). I must have looked at it hundreds of times without noticing this “signature

“ - a humorous touch, a man relieving himself, to be found in several of his paintings.

Bruegel’s pictures are full of surprises – the more you look the more you see!

I have been immersing myself in a magnificent book, BRUEGEL: The Master. This publication gives a comprehensive account of the work of the Flemish artist, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and the large format allows for the closest scrutiny of the details of his paintings as never before. Also, it displays some of the scientific research using x-rays that has been looking beneath the paint layers to show us how Bruegel designed and developed his pictures from the drawings to the paint layers.

The large landscapes of the seasons of the year were designed as conversation pieces, so he filled them with very finely painted details in the distance, using skills learned from his mother in law who was a miniaturist. When they were first painted, visitors were encouraged to engage in conversations about these lively scenes and search for meanings in the more enigmatic images.

So, I was in the process of counting all the birds in the picture of *Hunters in the Snow*, when I came across the man peeing! And the bird-spotting exercise brought me to some other delights of the picture. Apart from the three hunters in the foreground who have bagged a small fox, there is another in the distance, with a gun. He crouches by the bank of a small, frozen pond to the right, beyond the main skating pool. Look carefully and you will see the red flash of his gun as he aims at three ducks rising – that makes my total count of over thirty birds! It is only when you get the opportunity to look at the original or books like this one, with same-size images, that details like these can be discovered. Very few commentators seem to have noticed this hunter and his gun looking for tastier game!

Fairly central, and on the bank, there is an old door balanced on a stick set up as a bird trap. The sixteenth century villagers supplemented their pottage with any small wild birds they could catch. It is very similar to the one featured in another Bruegel painting called *Winter Landscape with Bird Trap* (1565).

You can tell it had been a long, cold winter in this scene, because the mill wheel, covered in icicles, at the right of the picture, has frozen solid. The little girl at the bottom right is pulling her friend along on a sledge made from a three-legged stool. I know that works because I have one very like it! And the sea too has frozen. Have you found the horse in the far distance galloping across the ice?



Hidden in the shadows is a man peeing by the archway.



Horse on the frozen sea.

I would like to draw attention to another overlooked image in a Bruegel painting that seems to have been missed by commentators. It is to be found in the middle of *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* (1559) and so, I believe, was intended to influence our interpretation of it. At the centre of the square you will see a well that is like a wheel-hub to the circling activities of the town: church-going and charitable works on one side leading round to play-acting, drinking and merry-making on the other. No one, in all the books I have consulted, * has commented on the pretty girl at the well, who appears to be taking a drink from a bucket. Why would she do that? Looking closely and I believe Bruegel gave her a different and more significant role. He painted the reflection of her face in the water. There is just a hint of colour in the dark but enough to show that the girl is perhaps admiring herself, and enough to hint to us that she stands for the sinful Maid of Vanity. A set of drawings of the Seven Deadly Sins designed by Bruegel in 1558, featured The Sin of Vanity, or Pride, personified as a woman with a mirror.

When Bruegel was designing his picture for *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* he may have had in mind a verse from The Book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"



The yearly round of rituals, of processions, dramas, games and works appear like the annual battle of Carnival and Lent and its pointless jousting for position.

A Carnival character in the bottom left corner, looking very much like the bearded artist himself and with his fingers touching the very signature of *Bruegel*, is wearing a mirror on his back. He is seen throwing dice and taking a chance with another of the revellers dressed in the mask of Death, thus prompting us, perhaps, to giving another careful look deep into this “mirror of life” and so to reflect on the Preacher’s claim that “all is vanity.” Karel van Mander (1548 – 1606) remarked that you couldn't look at Bruegel’s works without laughing, so even in this thought-provoking *Battle between Carnival and Lent* you can experience his down-to-earth humour at almost every turn: a fool needs a torch to find his way in daylight: a group plays a smashing game of catch-the-pot: a man empties a bucket over a drinker: high on a windowsill a scarecrow looks upon these vanities with dumb expression. The bearded gentleman (self portrait?), playing dice with ‘the Devil’ in the left-hand corner, wears a mirror that also reflects the vanities of his world.

*However, I have just read that Alexandra van Dongen does remark on the maid at the well, but without making the vanity connection. Her book details objects and people from the painting *Carnival and Lent* called, *Conversation Pieces: The World of Bruegel* by Alexandra van Dongen, Abdelkader Benali, et al. Hannibal, 2018.

Two Peasants Binding Faggots

Pieter Brueghel The Younger, *Two Peasants Binding Faggots*. (c.1620 – 50) oil on panel. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, may be illustrating a forgotten proverb about interference.



When I first left school in 1960, I worked in the forestry department of an estate, making pea-sticks, bean-sticks and faggots. The faggots were used principally in the composition of jumps at racecourses.

An old forester taught me how to keep the sticks tightly together without string or wire. He was 75 years old and still working half a day in the woods. He showed me an old trick that he called “winding a withy.”

You take a thin hazel or willow sapling, put your boot on the thick end, and then starting at the top you simply twist it tighter and tighter in your hands until it splits all the way down its length. As you twist you also need to keep a watch on the split and encourage it down the length by bending it back and forth or it will just break off near the top. Once it has split it becomes pliable like a cord. You then bend over the top bushy bit to make a loop.

Keeping it twisted you can then thread the withy under your bundle and draw the thick end through the loop. There is a knack to it, but you then pull tight the bundle and continue twisting until the split withy curls in on itself producing a “lock” right on the loop of the other end. You then poke the thicker end of your withy into the now tight bundle of sticks so that it stays fixed and tight. It is very efficient and economic.

The painting shows the thin man pulling tight before producing the final twists. The fatter man is helping to squash down the bundle, but he also appears to be trying to tie it up as well.

Perhaps there was a proverb like “it doesn't take two to wind a withy” - that is similar in meaning of “too many cooks spoil the broth!”

You might be interested in a little demonstration I performed for a talk I gave about Bruegel's *Wedding Feast*. It involved the distribution of the bowls of rice pudding or gruel. Bruegel was a cunning painter; the real subject of a picture was not always placed in the centre and one had to search sometimes even to the edges. For example the hazards of life might be indicated by a skater fallen on ice, or birds beneath a trap. I believe Bruegel arranged the feeding of the guests at the wedding with a similar sense of precariousness. The plates arranged on the improvised serving board are placed in such a way that when the first one was lifted, as seen in the painting, the whole lot would spill to the floor. I made a model to prove it



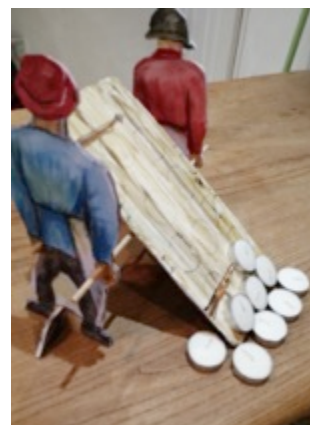
The door balances on the poles.



The bowls are placed as in the painting. It balances.



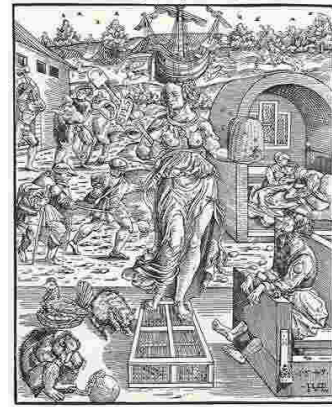
One bowl is removed and the door tips....



... spilling all the bowls to the floor.



Two Chained Monkeys 1562 Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Gemäldegalerie of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



Detail from *Hope* - woodcut by Heinrich Vogtherr the Elder 1545

Hoping for Freedom?

What is the meaning of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting of two monkeys chained in an archway?

A number of different answers have been put forward ranging from the simple recording of exotic animals to allegorical interpretations where monkeys stood for lust, greed and other aspects of human behaviour.¹

I agree with Rainald Grosshans who thought that the monkeys represented "the hope of a free life that is inherent in all creatures."²

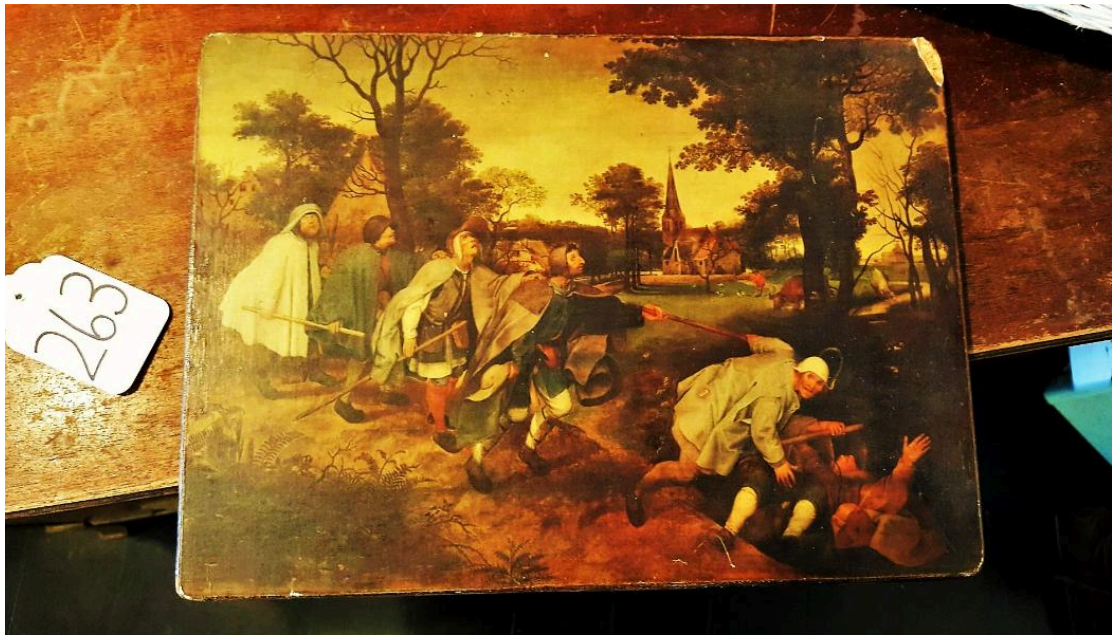
Help in solving this debate could be this evidence to be found in a rare woodcut by Heinrich Vogtherr the Elder (1545)³. His subject was a Christian Virtue that he personified as a woman standing with her attributes in one hand of a beehive and a spade in the other and with a sailing ship on her head. These attributes represented the expectation of wealth that would come from agriculture and trade, because the Virtue's name was Hope (*Spes*); she was the hope of wealth. She also represented the hope of freedom. This was suggested by the birds in a cage beneath her feet and for the man in the stocks to her left. Hoping for freedom too, I think, was the sad looking monkey chained to an iron ball and it was Vogtherr's clear intention.

Comparing the chained monkey of this woodcut with those monkeys imprisoned in the oil painting makes a strong case for thinking that Bruegel intended that they should stand for the virtue of Hope. In the distance is the outline silhouette of Antwerp, so that by implication, Bruegel was hoping for the freedom of his city too, one that had been feeling the imprisoning domination of the Spanish Habsburg dynasty.

¹ Manfred Sellink, *Two Monkeys*, in Bruegel The Master. Thames & Hudson. 2018. p.158.

² <http://www.prestel.com>, Prestel Verlag / Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Rainald Grosshans

³ <http://www.hellenicaworld.com/Art/Paintings/en/Part24372.html>



BRUEGEL AT AUCTION Lot 263.

Someone from America contacted me about a Bruegel painting he had bought and wondered if I could help him authenticate it. This was the picture he sent of The Blind Leading the Blind. It clearly shows a varnished and rather worn *place-mat*, paper on plywood! When I pointed this out to the purchaser, he was highly amused at his own foolishness.