

Pieter Bruegel

The Biography

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The Remarkable Composition

Nowadays the timeline is straightforward, easily taught to schoolchildren: Jan van Eyck dominated painting in the Low Countries in the fifteenth century; Bruegel dictated the sixteenth century; Rubens and Van Dyck were the leading lights of the seventeenth. But not so for the first visitors to the spacious galleries of Antwerp's Royal Museum of Fine Arts in 1850. No one had heard of Pieter Bruegel, nor had ever seen a work by him. To be sure, he had been mentioned in early books by Lodovico Guicciardini (*Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi*, 1567) and Karel van Mander (*Het Schilder-Boeck*, or *The Book of Painters*, 1624), the founding fathers of Netherlandish art history, but how many people actually read these books—if they could get their hands on a copy at all? Van Mander's brief biography of Bruegel sets the tone from its opening line: 'Nature was wonderfully felicitous in her Man, and was in turn marvellously captured by him, when, in an obscure village in Brabant, she selected the gifted and witty Pieter Breughel to depict her and her peasants with the brush, and to contribute to the everlasting fame of painting in the Netherlands.' 'Bruegel the Peasant' would prove to be a stubborn perception. A few experts were vaguely aware that Pieter Bruegel's sons and grandsons were also painters, that these descendants were often also named Pieter, and moreover that they had produced many copies of their forebear's paintings. Confusion guaranteed. The Musée Napoléon, in its day, exhibited several authentic Bruegels from the Viennese imperial collections: no one noticed them. Of all the painters from the Low Countries, Pieter Bruegel was the last to be rediscovered and studied—only, in fact, in the course of the twentieth century. And the honour of that rediscovery falls to a young Antwerp collector: Fritz Mayer van den Bergh.

(Sir) Fritz Mayer van den Bergh embodied the centuries-old bond between Antwerp and Cologne. His mother, Henriette van den Bergh, was the daughter of an Antwerp shipping agent and liqueur distiller. Fritz's father, Emil Mayer, was a businessman from Cologne who had settled in Antwerp. Collecting was in the family's blood: an uncle of Emil Mayer, Anton Joseph Essingh of Cologne, left behind a spectacular collection of antiquities at his death in 1864. The following year, at the auction of this inventory of 2200 lots, Essingh's Antwerp kin purchased five paintings, some glasses and several pieces of porcelain. Fritz was then seven years old. The Mayer-van den Berghs lived in a seventeenth-century townhouse at Lange Gasthuisstraat 19-21, where Fritz Mayer would reside his entire life. Even before he went to university he started collecting coins—a common starting point for collectors of his day. He then moved on to locks and keys, stained-glass windows,

weapons and tapestries. He bought his very first painting in 1891 in Bergamo, Italy, where a year later he also purchased a portrait, by the Renaissance master Bronzino, of a scion of the de' Medicis. He thoroughly researched the portrait, consulting Italian and Belgian art historians; he had it reduced to its original dimensions, bought an antique frame from the art dealer Bardini in Florence, and delved into books and family trees to determine the identity of the model. This illustrates Mayer's analytical inquisitiveness and perseverance in tackling his pursuit. But in 1893 his attention turned abruptly to the art of the Low Countries, his investigations focusing ever more sharply on Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The dearth of Bruegel's work in museums in Antwerp, and indeed all of Belgium, had caught Mayer's attention. And he had undoubtedly made painstaking studies of the authentic Bruegels in Vienna in the course of his travels. He had purchased his first print after Bruegel from a dealer in Kortrijk as early as 1890. In 1893 a Brussels dealer sent him twenty-two old prints after Bruegel: an incredible find in itself, but also the perfect aid for studying the style and themes of the master. The real prize, though, came in 1894.

Cultural life in Antwerp in 1894 was dominated entirely by the World Exposition, which was held in the area known as Nieuw Zuid (New South) adjacent to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts. Halls and pavilions were built to showcase Belgian industry, while an imported Congolese village, a Wild West show (starring Bill Pawnee) and an Oriental quarter provided exotic diversion. The Expo's showpiece was the neighbourhood dubbed 'Old Antwerp'. Driven by nostalgia for the city's glorious past, the festival committee, with the support of well-heeled locals, constructed a picturesque replica of the old city centre, including a church, a chapel, the old City Hall (precursor to the present one, which dates from the sixteenth century) on the Grote Merckt (market square), many step-gabled homes, inns, and water wells. Unlike the real-life historic Antwerp, this mock-up was fitted with plenty of public toilets. A replica of the impressive Kipdorp Gate served as the entry to Old Antwerp, where visitors could take a meal at an inn or go shopping: there were butchers, pastry bakers, jewellers, lacemakers, silversmiths, carpet weavers, booksellers, gold-leather embossers and a handicapped artist who painted with his toes—all in sixteenth-century costume. One could attend an open-air theatre performance or a marionette show in the Poesjenellenkelder,¹ where the chimneysweep Pasmans and his cohorts entertained the audience with carefree folksy humour. The widow Mayer van den Bergh subsidized a splendid house on the east side of the Merckt: Huize de Drie Koningen ('The Three Kings'). The façade was based on that of the rectory of the St. Walburga Church (demolished in 1817), and the relief above the front door depicting the three kings neatly suited her connection to Cologne: the city was famous, after all, for its relics of these three wise men, kept in the cathedral since the twelfth century. Whenever they visited Old Antwerp, the homeowners wore appropriately lavish sixteenth-century garb. Thus attired, they received King Leopold II at the World Exposition's grand opening on 5 May. From May through November 1894, Fritz Mayer van den Bergh immersed himself in the atmosphere of Bruegel's Antwerp, dressed as Bruegel might have dressed, and witnessing festivities as Bruegel would have seen. The festival committee, assisted in authenticity by the art historian Max Rooses, brought Old Antwerp to life with a series of spectacles inspired by resplendent events from the sixteenth century. One often-performed pageant was the Ommegang, based on the annual Sinksen (Pentecost) and Maria Hemelvaart (Assumption of Mary) processions, including the legendary giant Druon Antigoon, St. Margaret with her chained dragon, and floats in the form of a ship and a whale.² They likewise re-enacted the last medieval tournament held in Antwerp in 1594: Belgian soldiers on horseback portrayed the Knights of the Golden Fleece and the other participants.³

¹ 'Poesjenellen' is a bastardization of 'Pulcinella', a classic character from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, known in England as 'Punch'. The theatre was in the *kelder*, or basement.

² 'Ommegang' is a generic name for various medieval pageants celebrated in Belgium. Druon Antigoon is a Flemish folklore character who lived in Antwerp; the ship symbolized Antwerp's wealth; the whale recalled a whale that swam up the Scheldt river and was killed by local citizens, who then extracted its oil.

³ The Order of the Golden Fleece was a Roman Catholic chivalric order founded by Philip III in Bruges in 1430.

Their armour was specially ordered in Milan. The Blijde Intredes (Joyous Entries) of Margaret of Austria (1507), Charles V (1516), and Philip II (1549) were re-enacted in sumptuous processions. And the grandest festivity from Antwerp's golden age, the traditional Flemish poets' festival called the 'Landjuweel van de rederijerskamers' from 1561, was relived fourteen times in the streets and alleys of Old Antwerp.⁴ The neighbourhood bustled. The Sint-Annakapel hosted a wedding and the baptism of one Emelia Delphina Antverpia Recchia. The Lord Mayor of London paid a visit, and King Leopold II occasionally nipped into the Poesjenellenkelder. Methusalem Verhoeven published a weekly *Chronicle, printed at Plantijn's printing shop*, one issue of which included a humorous account, in pseudo-sixteenth-century tone, of a literary gathering of the Cologne chamber of rhetoric. 'There, at table, sat the old Isengrim Methm. Verhoeven, eavesdropping on all that was being told and sung. His representatives in Old Antwerp, the rhetoricians Walter Kuyckius and Antonius Moortgatius, sat alongside him, partaking of the tasty victuals, and they drained glass upon glass, just like *all those other dirty Bruegels* [my italics].' Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, as principal of the company, received the members of 't Broederschap oft Confreyre Onser Vrouwe van theilige herte Jesu⁵ in Huize de Drie Koningen.

The stars were marvellously favourable. On 5 October, in J.M. Heberle's auction house on the Breitestrasse in Cologne, a bizarre painting was put up for sale. It was part of the immense collection of a Stockholm jeweller named Christian Hammer. The young art historian Max Friedländer, temporarily employed at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne, had inspected the work. It had been hung so high that he needed a ladder to reach it. Friedländer was keen to buy the painting for the museum, but could not convince his director to do so, and therefore tipped off Fritz Mayer van der Bergh. Mayer's agent bought it for the bargain price of 390 marks. A week later, the panel arrived in Antwerp.

Friedländer wrote to Mayer immediately after the auction: 'I consider the "Bruegel", which appears to be well conserved, above all important because I have never before seen the remarkable composition. I have no reason to doubt that this is an original work by one of the two Pieter Brueghels. The tableau, incomprehensible for me, is quite original. You, of course, are the Brueghel specialist.'⁶

What went through Fritz Mayer van den Bergh when he unpacked the panel and inspected it for the first time? The smoky tableau depicts a hellish, monster-filled landscape, through which rages an aggressive female figure armed with a sword. The auction catalogue refers to it as a '*Phantastische Darstellung*' by Hell Bruegel (alias Pieter Bruegel the Younger), '*Landschaft mit einer grossen Menge Spuckgestalten. Interessantes, gut ausgearbeitetes Bild von bester Erhaltung*'. Fritz Mayer van den Bergh knew Van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* through and through. This source says of Bruegel: 'It is difficult to describe what he portrayed, sorceries, graves, peasantish anecdotes, et cetera. [...] also, a deranged *Griet*, who plunders at [the port of] Hell, which looks on astonished, and is strangely and bizarrely attired: I believe that this and other pieces are found at the Emperor's court.'⁷ On 16 October Fritz wrote to the art historian Henri Hymans: 'Although I have examined the painting at length, I still wonder what it depicts. Perhaps the painter didn't know for certain himself. Could it be the horrors of war? The woman who dominates the tableau, could this be the *Dulle Griet* of whom Van Mander speaks?'⁸ Hymans retained this interpretation in an article he wrote about the panel in 1897. It was the first publication about the painting since Van Mander's

⁴ The Landjuweel was a poetry prize for rhetoricians.

⁵ Brotherhood or Confrerie Our Lady of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

⁶ From 1559, Bruegel dropped the 'h' from his name.

⁷ Plunders at the port of Hell ('*Een roof voor de hel doen*') comes from an old Dutch proverb and forms the basis of the painting.

⁸ In English, 'Dulle Griet' is known as 'Mad Meg'.

reference back in 1604. Hymans also explored the provenance of the work. Van Mander believed the painting belonged to the imperial collection in Prague. Hymans assumed this to be correct and that it had been taken from Prague in 1648 as war booty by the victorious Swedish troops, which would explain how *Dulle Griet* found its way into the Hammer collection in Stockholm, and from there to an auction house in Cologne. The inventories of the Prague collection were drawn up only after 1604 and are moreover incomplete, and therefore offer little help. Another possibility is this: in 1674 the artist Pieter van der Hulst of The Hague placed 'a mad *Griet* by Bruegel' in safekeeping prior to his departure for Rome. Van der Hulst was possibly a descendant of the Verhulst family of Mechelen, to which Bruegel's mother-in-law Mayken also belonged. Between 1691 and 1699 Van der Hulst lived and worked in Copenhagen as a court painter. Could this be how the 'Mad Griet' made its way to Scandinavia, where it would remain until well into the nineteenth century?