

PRESS RELEASE

BRUEGEL. PRINTED

18 JUNE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2026

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Frankfurt am Main, 17 June 2026. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526/30–1569) is regarded as one of the outstanding artists of sixteenth-century Dutch art. His works transport viewers into a fascinating world of humorous visual ideas and enigmatic motifs. Although he is today primarily known as a painter, he made a name for himself early on through his designs for prints. In the exhibition *Bruegel. Printed*, the Städel Museum brings together around forty-five exceptional prints based on Bruegel's drawings. They reveal him as a unique innovator and an inimitable storyteller, whose motifs range from vast landscapes to secular and religious allegories and scenes of everyday life.

Bruegel's prints were created in close collaboration with the Antwerp publisher Hieronymus Cock and his wife, Volcxken Diericx. They convey a vivid impression of the artist's unique visual world, which combines observation and imagination. Drawing on his fondness for the detailed, grotesque motifs of Hieronymus Bosch and his broad knowledge of pictorial and thematic traditions, he developed new forms of representation for traditional themes. His compositions, which frequently employ exaggeration, make the audience laugh while simultaneously prompting reflection. Bruegel addresses human weaknesses and social ills, highlights the grandeur of nature, and simultaneously turns his gaze to everyday social interactions. To this day, his works offer surprisingly contemporary perspectives on fundamental questions of human values.

The starting point for the exhibition at the Städel is Bruegel's prints from the museum's own collection, of which around thirty are on display. This selection is complemented by loans from the Albertina in Vienna and the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich. In addition, the exhibition features two paintings by his son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger, as well as further sheets from the Städel Museum's impressive collection of Dutch prints, including works after Frans Floris, Lambert Lombard and Raphael.

The exhibition is made possible by funding from the Städtischer Museums-Verein.

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Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum, on the exhibition: “With our exhibition on Bruegel’s prints, the Städel once again offers a glimpse into the extraordinary treasures of its Collection of Prints and Drawings, which, with around 100,000 sheets ranging from the late Middle Ages to the present day, ranks among the most significant collections of its kind in Germany. Visitors are invited to embark on an impressive journey of discovery through Bruegel’s multi-layered visual worlds, full of narrative power, subtle observations and surprising details.”

Astrid Reuter, Head of Prints and Drawings before 1800 at the Städel Museum:

“Bruegel’s pictorial inventions were already in high demand during his lifetime. They served not only for entertainment but also formed the subject of scholarly discussions. The particular appeal of his works arises from the interplay of closeness to nature, ingenuity and humorous exaggeration. Valued as imaginative creations offering critical reflections on human values and behaviour, his works continue to inspire discovery, reflection and laughter to this day.”

The Chapters of the Exhibition

The exhibition *Bruegel. Printed* is divided into five chapters. It provides insight into Bruegel’s life and printmaking, sheds light on the work of his publisher, Hieronymus Cock, explores landscapes and the depiction of virtues and vices in Bruegel’s works, and concludes with the reception of his work.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Although Pieter Bruegel the Elder was highly regarded during his lifetime, little is known about his life today. For example, there is a lack of reliable information regarding his birth and origins. What is known, however, is that he joined the Antwerp painters’ guild in 1551 – a decisive step that marked the beginning of his artistic career. Shortly afterwards, Bruegel travelled to Italy, where he remained until 1554. He first found success as a draughtsman for prints, only turning to painting from the late 1550s onwards. After his marriage in 1563, Bruegel moved to Brussels, where his two sons, the painters Pieter Brueghel the Younger and Jan Brueghel the Elder, were born, and where he died in 1569.

Bruegel’s work was created against a backdrop of profound political and social upheaval. Under the reign of Emperor Charles V, who was also King of Spain, the city of Antwerp experienced a period of rapid economic growth in the first half of the sixteenth century, accompanied by a growing interest in art and science. However, the subsequent period was marked by mounting religious and political conflicts with the Spanish rulers in Brussels, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the Eighty Years’ War in 1568.

The allegorical depiction of *Patience (Patientia)*, created in 1557, is one of Bruegel's works in which the political and religious tensions of the time are hinted at. Amidst the numerous scenes surrounding the personification, details such as the burning church, the giant scarecrow wearing a cardinal's hat trapped inside an egg, and the monk sitting in a sort of treehouse can be discerned.

The Publishing House of Hieronymus Cock

Bruegel's prints were produced and distributed by Hieronymus Cock. The publishing house "Aux Quatre Vents" (To the Four Winds), founded by him and his wife, Volcxken Diericx, in Antwerp in 1548, developed into one of the most successful and modern print companies of the sixteenth century. Cock and Diericx established a new business model whereby the publishing house acted as an intermediary between draughtsmen and engravers, financed the production of the printing plates and organised the Europe-wide distribution of the prints. In doing so, they had a lasting influence on the art production of their time.

The publishing house's diverse range included classical, mythological and religious motifs, as well as landscapes, genre scenes and architectural views. Prints in the style of Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516) were particularly in demand. Bruegel also drew on Bosch's motifs in his own works, as demonstrated by the print *The Big Fish Eat the Little Fish* (1557), which powerfully illustrates a widely used saying: the powerful enrich themselves ever further at the expense of others.

The publishing house also distributed reproductions based on works by Italian artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo – a significant innovation in the Netherlands at the time. For example, the reproduction of Raphael's *School of Athens* (1550) by the engraver Giorgio Ghisi, on view in the exhibition, contributed to the work's fame north of the Alps. Following Cock's death in 1570, Volcxken Diericx continued to run the publishing house until her own death in 1600.

The Invention of the Landscape

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, landscape painting established itself in the Southern Netherlands as an independent genre. Pieter Bruegel the Elder played a pivotal role in this development. His views, rendered from an elevated vantage point, enable the grandeur and diversity of nature to be appreciated, even in small formats. They are based on impressions Bruegel gathered during his crossing of the Alps. However, these are not faithful representations of specific locations. Instead, the artist combined various motifs to create composite images, thereby making the diversity of divine creation visible. A striking example of this is the print *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (c. 1555). While the saint depicted pays no heed to his

surroundings, the barely perceptible wanderer on the left of the picture is in the process of exploring the magnificent landscape.

Diableries and Drolleries – Vices and Virtues

Among the greatest successes of the publisher Hieronymus Cock are the series of *Vices and Virtues*. Designed by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and executed by Pieter van der Heyden and Philipp Galle, the prints combine an extraordinary wealth of detail with a clear composition. At the centre are personifications of sins and virtues, identified by inscriptions, symbolic animals and attributes, and complemented by additional scenes. Bruegel found new ways of expressing motifs that were firmly rooted in the Christian tradition. His complex depictions are not always easy to interpret. Additional explanations in the margins provide general guidance on the pictorial content. These are likely to have been added by the publisher.

For his depictions of the vices, Bruegel draws on the fantastical imagery of Hieronymus Bosch, while setting the virtues within his Flemish context. The copperplate engraving *Temperance (Temperantia)* (c. 1560), for example, depicts the personified virtue with a clock on her head and a bridle and spectacles in her hands – symbols of self-control and moderation. The figure is surrounded by the seven liberal arts, which also require balance.

An impressive example of the depiction of the vices is the copperplate engraving *Sloth (Desidia)* (1558) by Pieter van der Heyden. In this work, the personification of sloth is depicted sleeping on a donkey with her head on a pillow held by a demon. Other figures also appear to be characterised by listlessness: a woman at a table can barely stay on her chair, and a man in bed is even too lazy to get up to eat.

The “Bruegel Boom”

The high esteem in which Pieter Bruegel the Elder was held is evident from the large number of reproductions, variations and further developments of his works. A key starting point for this widespread legacy was, alongside paintings and drawings, the prints in particular, such as those on display in the exhibition. Scenes of peasant and rural life were particularly popular, significantly contributing to Bruegel's reputation as the “Peasant Bruegel”. His son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638), played a key role in the widespread dissemination of these pictorial themes; his works often bear a striking resemblance to his father's compositions. The *Dance at the Peasant Wedding*, for example, achieved great popularity: its dynamic figures, expressive gestures and vibrant colours impressively convey the exuberant atmosphere of the celebration.

Artists such as Bruegel's second son, Jan Brueghel the Elder, Jan Mandyn and Lucas van Valckenborch also continued the tradition. They thus met the high demand

from collectors and art enthusiasts of the early seventeenth century – an enthusiasm for Bruegel’s art that is regarded as the “Bruegel boom”.

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Curator: Dr Astrid Reuter (Head of Prints and Drawings before 1800, Städel Museum)

Exhibition Dates: 18 June – 20 September 2026

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

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Opening Hours: Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am–6 pm, Thu 10 am–9 pm

Special Opening Hours: For up-to-date information on special opening hours, please visit staedelmuseum.de/en/visit.

Tickets: €19, reduced €17; Tuesday Special: every Tuesday 3–6 pm €10, admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: €17 per person.

Registration is generally required for all groups, by telephone +49 (0)69-605098-200 or email to info@staedelmuseum.de.

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