

BRUEGEL ABC

BRUEGEL. PRINTED

18 JUNE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2026

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

About Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526/30–1569)

When we talk about works by Bruegel in the exhibition “Bruegel. Printed”, we mean prints based on his drawings and produced in close collaboration with his Antwerp publisher. These prints launched his career and acquainted a broad public with his name. More than 60 of his drawings have come down to us. It was only after 1560 that he produced most of his approximately 40 known paintings, the works for which he is primarily appreciated today.

It is not known exactly when or where Pieter Bruegel was born. In 1551 he registered with the Antwerp painters’ guild as “Peeter Brueghels”, the spelling he used until 1559. From then on he signed his name “BRUEGEL”, the spelling we have therefore decided to use for our show. He travelled in Italy and France. In 1563, he married Mayken Coecke van Aelst, who came from a family of painters, and moved to Brussels, where he would remain until his premature death. Bruegel’s sons Pieter the Younger and Jan the Elder also became successful artists. Along with numerous others in their milieu, they contributed to spreading Bruegel’s imagery far and wide.

A – Antwerp

Was one of 16th-century Europe’s major commercial cities. It owed its prosperity to its location on the Scheldt and important long-distance trade routes that made it a key transport hub for spices, textiles, gold, and silver. It attracted merchants as well as artists and scholars. As a book-printing centre, Antwerp was the ideal address for the “Aux Quatre Vents” publishing company for which Bruegel worked successfully. Its circumstances began to worsen during the Eighty Years’ War (1568–1648) that led to the Netherlands’ division. The Scheldt blockade caused its economic significance to dwindle from 1585 onwards.

B – Bosch, Hieronymus

Contemporaries dubbed Bruegel the “new Hieronymus Bosch” because he drew on that painter’s richly detailed, enigmatic, grotesque imagery. Whereas around the year 1500 Bosch’s demons and hybrids were also understood as frightening visions of the hereafter, in Bruegel’s day—just 50 years later—they were a source of delight. Yet Bruegel associated the fanciful motifs with moral admonitions that, often enough,

made viewers choke on their chuckles. As a successor to Bosch, he developed his own pictorial realm combining fantastical motifs and religious content with observations of his own lifeworld.

C – Cock, Hieronymus

We know from the sources that Bruegel sold his paintings to educated and wealthy contemporaries such as Cardinal Perrenot de Granvelle and the merchant Nicolaes Jonghelinck. His print publisher Cock also targeted humanist-minded buyers and collectors in Antwerp and beyond. This is evident not least in the Latin inscriptions. Owing to the production of large editions, individual prints were significantly cheaper than paintings. With their richly allusive and humorous motifs and themes, the works lent themselves well to erudite discussion while also providing aesthetic enjoyment.

D – Drawing

Bruegel's drawings served not only as designs for prints but were also appreciated and collected as works in their own right. Their precise execution made them virtually ideal bases for the engravers who transferred the compositions to printing plates in all detail. Only a few of the works were drawn more freely. These examples testify to the fact that Bruegel trusted especially adept engravers to translate his inventions without precise specifications. The good condition of his known drawings shows that they were handled with caution.

E – Engraving & Etching

Engraving and etching were among the 16th century's most important printmaking techniques. Both use a metal plate in which the motif is incised. In engraving, this is done by cutting precise tapered lines. In etching, an acid-resistant coating is applied to the printing plate; then the image is drawn on that surface with an etching needle in a process much freer than in engraving. The length of the plate's subsequent exposure to acid determines the depth and blackness of the lines. The prints made from Bruegel's designs frequently combine the two techniques.

F – Family

Bruegel's family was decisively involved in his business operations. After his death, his wife Mayken Coecke took charge of the Brussels workshop. Above all their eldest son Pieter adhered closely to his father's imagery. He catered to the tremendous demand for Bruegel's compositions by producing numerous copies of—and variations on—the originals. "Bruegel" was soon a virtual "brand name".

H – Humanism

Based on publications by ancient authors, a rapidly spreading educational movement known as humanism took hold in Italy. It put the human being's role in the world centre stage and examined morals and religion anew. One of its most influential exponents was Erasmus of Rotterdam, who sojourned repeatedly in Antwerp. Important venues of intellectual exchange and cultural life in the city were the so-called rhetorician chambers (rederijkers)—convivial gatherings dedicated to promoting poetry, theatre, and art. Bruegel's publisher Hieronymus Cock was a member of the prominent Antwerpian rhetorician chamber "De Violieren" (Violet).

I – Inscriptions

"Bruegel Inventor": We find this inscription— or one like it—on many of the prints exhibited here. They identify Bruegel as the draughtsman of the compositions translated into prints by professional engravers. Whereas the latter are often named only with their monogram, if at all, there is regular reference to the publisher Hieronymus Cock. The addition "excud[it]" means "published it". Many of the prints also contain a commentary which, in combination with the image, offers further levels of interpretation.

L – Landscape

Landscape depiction took hold in the Southern Netherlands as a new and independent art genre in the early 16th century. It had been prompted by the desire for comprehensive knowledge of the world and increasing interest in geography as a basis for trade and travel. Bruegel's views mark the transition from the world landscape—an expansive imaginary landscape view showing God's creation—to real observed nature. His compositions are distinguished by harmonious representations of the scenery and the different seasonal moods.

M – Models

Bruegel's works testify to his broad knowledge of art, which often served him as a basis for his own work. Already his early success as a print designer for the "Aux Quatre Vents" publishing company was founded in the orientation he took from Bosch. Yet he was also familiar with German print making of his time as well as with Italian artworks from which he repeatedly adopted — and recontextualized — mythological and religious motifs.

N – Networks

As written sources are all but lacking, we can make only indirect inferences about Bruegel's networks. His contacts to artists and his collaboration with the publisher

Cock as well as the engravers working for Cock are especially important in this context. Bruegel's collectors moreover provide an impression of his milieu. The cartographer Abraham Ortelius, for instance, was verifiably a life-long friend. We know from a detailed posthumous dedication in Ortelius's *Album Amicorum* (friendship album) that he held Bruegel in high regard.

O – Original

As a rule, prints are produced in multiple copies, and a given work on display in this exhibition can accordingly be found in several different collections. Nevertheless, comparison of the individual prints reveals that each of them is unique and thus an original. Early examples are often especially distinct, exhibit few flaws, and are therefore especially appealing to collectors. The later the print, the more scratches and other traces of the plate's wear are visible.

P – Paper

In Bruegel's day, paper was made primarily from textile fibre. The latter was mixed with water to form a pulp that was then strained with a paper sieve. The sieves were often embossed with a pattern that left a watermark on the paper. Ideally, it is possible to determine the paper mill and the date of a sheet's making on the basis of the watermark. Soft, thick paper was considered best for engravings and etchings because it absorbs the ink especially well. If the paper does not lie completely flat on the plate during printing, it can result in creases of the kind visible in some of the works here on view.

Q – “Aux Quatre Vents”

Bruegel carried out his works on commission from the Antwerp publishing company “Aux Quatre Vents” (To the Four Winds) founded in 1548 by the painter Hieronymus Cock and his wife Volcxken Diericx. To produce high-quality goods, it took top-rate draughtsmen, engravers, and printers as well as a publisher with excellent business sense and a feel for current topics. The company was moreover well connected and sold its works far and wide. Depending on the motif and the production year, various engravers were involved in translating Bruegel's drawings into prints, while Cock, for his part, had the last word on all decisions. Some of the prints were coloured and then sold at significantly higher prices.

R – Religion

In the 16th century, the Catholic town of Antwerp was a major arena of religious conflicts. The ruling Spanish Habsburgs persecuted Protestants increasingly from the 1520s onwards. Bloody clashes between followers of the various religions were

nothing uncommon. Bruegel, for his part, belonged to the Roman-Catholic church but was open to other faiths, as we can infer from his contacts and the literature he referred to.

T – Travel

In Bruegel's time, travel across the Alps was difficult and dangerous. Artists often made the long trip in order to study ancient works and ruins on site and connect with fellow artists. Bruegel travelled from Antwerp to Italy via Lyon in 1552/53 and visited Rome, Naples, Reggio di Calabria, and Messina. En route he carried out numerous landscape studies of which he later made repeated use. He also explored Italian landscape printmaking and entered into contact with artists whose prints he took back with him when he returned to Antwerp in 1554/55.

V – Van Mander, Karel

We find the earliest detailed information on Bruegel's life in the *Schilder-Boeck* (Painters Book) by Van Mander (1604). Written more than three decades after Bruegel's death, this biography is an important source but nevertheless to be consulted with caution. Van Mander's descriptions shaped the image of the "peasant Bruegel" as a poorly educated artist. Bruegel's complex works and humanist-influenced milieu, however, speak a different language.

W – Whims and drolleries

Fancifully absurd hybrid creatures blending man and animal, literal translations of proverbs into imagery: Bruegel's works pursued various strategies for making the viewer laugh. In this context, laughter served not least of all as a way of recognizing and even questioning one's own shortcomings with a sense of humour. Frequently referred to as whims or drolleries, Bruegel's grotesque depictions follow classical and medieval pictorial traditions. Already his first biographer, Karel van Mander, recounted that the artist was nicknamed "Pieter the Droll".