

WALL TEXTS

BRUEGEL. PRINTED

18 JUNE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2026**Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings****Pieter Bruegel**

Pieter Bruegel the Elder lures us into fascinating visual worlds. His works are witty, humorous, and full of narrative details and enigmatic symbols. They range in genre from expansive landscapes to depictions of everyday life to religious and secular allegories.

Born in 1526/30, Bruegel entered the painters' guild of Antwerp in 1551 and soon afterwards set off for Italy, where he remained until 1554. He subsequently worked above all as a designer of prints. It was this activity that laid the foundation for his ongoing success; he only turned to painting in the late 1550s. After his wedding in 1563, he moved to Brussels, where his two sons, the painters Pieter the Younger and Jan the Elder, were born. A few years later, in 1569, Pieter the Elder died in Brussels. Bruegel lived in turbulent times. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Flanders was under the rule of Emperor Charles V, who was also the king of Spain. For Antwerp, it was a period of rapid economic growth that went hand in hand with a growing interest in art and science. As time went on, however, religious and political conflicts with the Spanish, who governed from Brussels, began to increase, ultimately leading in 1568 to the outbreak of the Eighty Years' War.

The artist's inventions were already very much in demand during his lifetime. They served not only as sources of amusement but also as subjects of scholarly discussion. To this day, they are appreciated as imaginative fabrications and critical reflections on human values and modes of behaviour. And they continue to take viewers along on journeys of discovery, contemplation, and delight.

Printmaking without Borders

Founded in 1548, the publishing company of Hieronymus Cock and his wife Volcxken Dierix was one of the sixteenth century's most successful and most modern graphic arts enterprises. Taking orientation from the Italian example, the couple established a new business model in which they acted as agents between designers and engravers, financed printing plates, and organized sales Europe-wide. These were innovations that would bring about lasting changes in art production.

Their versatile assortment encompassed motifs from antiquity, mythology, and religion as well as landscapes, genre scenes, and architectural views. Engravings after the manner of Hieronymus Bosch were especially popular. Yet the publishing house also sold reproductions of works by Italian artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo— a novelty in the Netherlands.

The company's name, "Aux Quatre Vents" (To the Four Winds), virtually states its ambitious aim. The graphic artworks, printed in large editions, were to be distributed in all directions and thus reach an international public. After Cock's death in 1570, Volcxken Dierix managed the business until her death in 1600.

The Invention of the Landscape

Bruegel's depictions represent milestones in the development of landscape art. Viewed from an elevated vantage point, the scenes make nature's vastness and diversity experienceable even in small formats. While they draw on impressions the artist gained while crossing the Alps, they are not faithful representations of specific places. On the contrary, Bruegel tended to unite several motifs in a single image to convey divine creation in all its variety. The richly detailed sceneries are populated with working people and wanderers who, vicariously for the prints' viewers, traverse the landscape and threaten almost to disappear in nature's overpowering expanses. The prints published by Hieronymus Cock testify to the growing interest of a broad public in landscape. This interest went hand in hand with a sensitization to an environment both natural and shaped by history and human life that is also mirrored in the increasing importance of topography and cartography in that era. A prominent exponent of the new genre was Bruegel's friend Abraham Ortelius, who likewise lived and worked in Antwerp.

Diableries and Drolleries – Vices and Virtues

The series of vices and virtues were among Hieronymus Cock's greatest publishing successes. Pieter Bruegel the Elder designed the images, and the engravers Pieter van der Heyden and Philipp Galle translated them into prints. Composed in the style of "wimmelbilds", the depictions are confusing at first sight but soon prove to adhere to a clear pictorial system. There is a female figure at the centre foreground personifying the respective sin or virtue. She is identified by a Latin inscription, accompanied by symbolic animals and other explanatory attributes, and surrounded by further narrative scenes.

While vice and virtue motifs were firmly established in the Christian tradition, Bruegel came up with highly original ways of depicting them. For his portrayals of the vices, he drew on the fanciful imagery of Hieronymus Bosch, who repeatedly addressed the subjects of sin and folly in his works. In contrast, he embedded the virtues in his

contemporary Flemish environment, thus associating them with his own era. Often difficult to interpret, the complex scenes undoubtedly served as points of departure for erudite discussion. Explanatory remarks added on the lower edges—presumably in keeping with the publishers' wishes—provide general pointers.

The Brugel Boom

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's wide popularity is mirrored in the frequent adoption of his works by other artists. In many cases they made precise copies, but we also find variations on his compositions and new inventions combining set pieces from different originals. Not only Bruegel's paintings and drawings but also often his prints—the subject of our exhibition—served as the point of departure for this strong successorship. His rural and peasant scenes were especially well-liked. They shaped the artist's persona as the “peasant Bruegel”, which was further reinforced by Karel van Mander's biography of him published in 1604. Pieter Brueghel the Younger was primarily responsible for spreading this imagery. At first sight, his works appear like exact copies of his father's; on closer inspection, however, minor deviations become apparent. Yet Pieter the Elder's second son Jan the Elder as well as Jan Mandyn, Lucas van Valckenborch, and others also carried on the Bruegel tradition. With their works, they all strove to meet the high demand by early seventeenth-century art collectors and art lovers that amounted to a veritable Bruegel boom.