

INTERVIEW

‘For Bruegel, his world is vast’

Michael Gibson is art critic for the Paris-based *International Herald Tribune*. He is the author of numerous monographs, including one on Pieter Bruegel,* and also of a “history of a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder,” titled “Bearing the Cross.”† Karel Vereycken conducted this interview for *Fidelio*.

Fidelio: What first got you interested in the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel?

Gibson: Telling the story of your first encounter with a painter and his works is of necessity anecdotal, so here goes!

As a child, I had a reproduction of “Hunters in the Snow” in my room. Much later, I visited the Vienna museum, where no less than fourteen of Bruegel’s painting are on display, and I was dazzled by the richness of his works. All of this stimulated my interest, and provoked me to undertake more intensive research. What intrigued me also, was the originality of an artist who knew how to preserve his Flemish accent, instead of pursuing the “Italian-style” fashion, like many of his contemporaries in the northern countries.

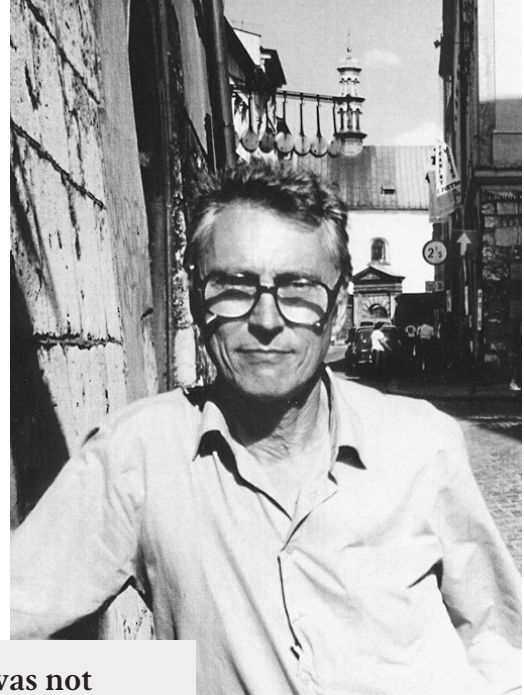
More recently still, a publisher proposed devoting a study to one single painting of the artist of my choice. I asked myself: Rembrandt, Bruegel, Rothko? When it came to

treating a single work, I have to admit that I felt more at ease writing about a Bruegel than about a painting by Rothko. The latter’s work requires being treated as a whole.

Fidelio: According to you, does Bruegel belong to the era which the Dutch histo-

rian J. Huizinga calls the “waning of the Middle Ages,” or is he a man of the Renaissance, breaking with the past?

Gibson: Bruegel certainly represents a break with the medieval mind. This is most obvious in his vision of nature. You have to realize that in antiquity, most of the gods were personifications of the forces of nature: wind, madness, sexual passion, aggression, etc. With the advent of Christianity, something had to be done with these pagan gods, so they were transformed into devils. The forces of nature having thus been rendered suspect, medieval life tended to be



Courtesy of Michael Gibson

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centered more on interior life. This was a novel and formative experience for the European mind, with an exemplary expression being St. Augustine. There were exceptions, of course, even right in the Middle Ages. Albert the Great, for example, studied nature directly, and undertook experiments in botany and other areas. (Given the spirit of the times, this accounts for his somewhat sulfurous reputation, and it was in his honor, if you can call it that, that several handbooks on witchcraft were called the “Little Albert” or the “Great Albert”!)

We should also recall Petrarch’s adventure, when he climbed Mt. Ventoux and, having arrived at the summit, opened the copy of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* which he had brought with him. Consulting the book as one might an oracle, he happened to fall on the paragraph in which St. Augustine noted his astonishment at those who wish

to admire the spectacles of nature, rather than be exclusively devoted to their interior life. Petrarch took this as a reproach, and went back home in a state of affliction.

This type of vision of the world led medieval art to treat nature in a schematic fashion: One did not paint a tree or a mountain as one saw them, but rather as the *ideogram* of a tree or a mountain. In fact, when I take the Periphery Highway around Paris, and I see from afar the artificial rocks of the Vincennes Zoological Gardens, I always

* Published in English as *Bruegel* (New York: Tabard Press, 1989).

† *Portement de Croix: Histoire d’un tableau de Pierre Bruegel l’Ainé* (Paris: Editions Noesis, 1996).

say to myself: There's Mount Sinai! That's exactly how it looks in medieval paintings.

One of the characteristics of the Renaissance was precisely a resurgence of interest in nature, and Bruegel, for his part, is a direct observer of nature. His trip to Italy served to reveal this to him. You can see it clearly in his drawings, but also in some of his paintings. On the road going from Naples to Reggio, one encounters scenery that is literally fantastical, including the Amalfitan Coast, for example, which I seem to find echoes of in some of Bruegel's works. In the same way, we see a reminiscence of the crossing of the Alps in "The Conversion of St. Paul" (1567). St. Paul and his escort reach a high peak, and from there discover deep valleys that open beneath small, cruising clouds. This quality of observation of nature shows that Bruegel is animated by the spirit of the Renaissance.

Fidelio: Nevertheless, Hieronymus Cock, who was Bruegel's first employer, and who directed The Four Winds printing house in Antwerp, was the son of Jan Wellens Cock, who was quite close to Hieronymus Bosch. The latter's works greatly inspired Bruegel, and are full of "interiority." In fact, the theme of the Seven Deadly Sins was already treated by Bosch, before being taken up in Bruegel's engravings.

Isn't it necessary to become familiar with the pictorial language of Bosch, in order to penetrate Bruegel's universe?

Gibson: You have to look at Bosch as primarily a man of the city, even as a man of "Mardi Gras." The subjects he painted were often derived from the carriages that were paraded in the streets during the days of Carnival. This is the case in particular with the "The Hay-Wain," or the "Ship of Fools." These were carnival carriages, evidence of which can be found in the archives of the city of Flanders. "The Hay-Wain," for example, starts from a very simple symbol: the hay represents money, and

all those people are fighting to get a few pieces of straw. Behind the carriage is a procession of all the powerful figures of the day: kings, emperors, popes, etc. And their eagerness to get to the hay is bringing them straight to a place no one wants to go, and which constitutes the third wing of the triptych—Hell. Bosch is a moraliser, who observed the city people, and in a certain way, he was also a solitary figure. In fact, you'll find a recurring figure in many of his paintings (such as on the closed wings of

He obviously documents the carousing aspect of life, but also its macabre aspect.

You will discover beggars and sick people in such horrendous condition, that one of the owners of the painting had the figures that were the most painful to see painted over. We know this thanks to Pieter Bruegel the Younger, who made a copy of the canvas before it had been repainted, which demonstrates this. Today, in the original, in the right foreground, a sheet flaps in the void. Once, this sheet covered up a person with emaciated



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "The Conversion of St. Paul," 1567.

"The Hay-Wain"), the same character with white hair. He seems to be a kind of peddler, and I wonder if it isn't a self-portrait. This peddler wears a desolate expression, and he crosses and observes a more or less desolate countryside.

Bosch no longer reflects the pure "interiority" of the medieval type, but his world is not yet that of nature. It's an urban life, or a fantastical nature. What distinguishes Bruegel is his interest in real nature, which does not preclude an interest in society. He will also deal with the theme of Mardi Gras ["The Battle Between Carnival and Lent"] in 1559, but this work will be more dialectical.

arms and legs with an immense and swollen belly. He was made to disappear. Or, in a kind of a wheelbarrow that someone is pulling, an overlay has caused the disappearance of crippled children. Bosch's approach was mainly moralizing, while Bruegel's approach was to show the extremes. He implicitly juxtaposes the objects and people on the left, to those found on the right. I first observed this method of composition when I wrote about "Bearing the Cross"* (1564).

* Known also as "Christ Carrying the Cross," or "The Procession to Calvary."—Ed.

As for Hieronymus Cock, he undoubtedly asked the young Bruegel, who was just starting out, to produce a few drawings in the style of Bosch, because he estimated there was a demand, and that with a little bit of “merchandising,” such engravings would sell well. This is what made Bruegel return to the theme of the “Vices” (1558) and the “Virtues” (1559-60), themes which certainly were medieval. He returns to them with a certain amount of imagination that

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owes a lot to Bosch, but is also less anguished, even in the representation of monsters.

Fidelio: Can we find a rapport between the *Adages* of Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536), and Bruegel’s painting of the “Netherlandish Proverbs” (1558). Don’t they both involve popular education? Even though we have to acknowledge that the paintings were reserved for a small circle of viewers, it is known that the engravings circulated widely.

Gibson: The engravings are indeed most often based on popular sayings, such as “Big fish eat little ones” (1556);

“*Elck*” (“Everyman”) (1558) (“the selfishness of each is cause of unhappiness”). Or, “The Ass in School” (1556) and “The Alchemist” of 1558—in other words, the “total failure” (“*al-ghemist*”) [Flemish pun—Ed.]—which pokes fun at the alchemist ravings of the day. We could do the same today with respect to astrology!

Fidelio: What is surprising, is the degree to which the patrons allowed so much freedom in the execution of the works. Even during the Italian Renaissance, the person paying for the work imposed a whole series of specifications with respect to how the subject should be treated. Bruegel seems to have escaped these often capricious demands.

Gibson: We don’t know much about the relations that existed between Bruegel and his patrons. But we think we know a few things about his personality. Quite contrary to a tendency to say that the artist-historian Karel Van Mander embellished his description of the life of Flemish artists, I would be tempted to give credit to what he says about Bruegel in his *Schilder-Boek* (1604). I even imagine that Van Mander met Bruegel’s widow, who, if I recall cor-

rectly, went to live in Antwerp after the death of her husband. Van Mander has some rather juicy things to say about the painter.

How, for instance, he and his friend Franckert, dressed up as peasants, would show up at a peasant wedding and pretend to be members of the family of the bride or groom. This amused him no end, and he took advantage of these occasions to observe popular life in a spirit of independence and sympathy.

We can also imagine that in the cultural environment of the day, which had a strong tendency towards tolerance, of openness toward the beliefs of

others, and of mutual respect which reigned in Antwerp at the time, Bruegel might have been able to propose a subject for a painting and have this idea accepted. But all this is hypothetical. If one worked for a church, things would have gone differently. But this was before the days of the Counter-Reformation, which imposed a strict ideological framework upon iconography—just as strict, one might say, as in the days of socialist realism! Once in effect, certain subjects were admitted and others no longer were. Subjects had to be represented in just one manner. Humor, irony, and the picturesque are banned. Look in contrast at illuminated medieval manuscripts! You can find all kinds of figures in the margins, but also dogs, birds, flowers, etc.; it’s delightful, it’s alive. The art of the Counter-Reformation is for me a dead art, at best theatrical.

Fidelio: Are you referring to specific documents?

Gibson: Yes, this is an historical fact. Beginning with the Council of Trent (1545-53), images begin to be regimented. Within a few decades, the entirety of religious artistic production becomes a stereotype. But, the bulk of Bruegel’s work pre-dates the period of the great repression, and he dies in 1569, shortly after the arrival of the Duke of Alba (1567) and before the definitive installation of the Inquisition in the Low Countries. In reality, he lived in a period of grace, between the Middle Ages and the moment when the Counter-Reformation will close the shutters.

Fidelio: Since the article by Popham in 1931, we have known that Bruegel had ties of friendship with the humanist geographer Abraham Ortelius [Ortelius]. Ortelius was a member of the “Schola Caritatis,” a “religious sect based on tolerance” of Hendrik Nicolaes, of which the printer Plantin was also a member, as was the cartographer Mercator, the engraver Goltzius, as well as the religious thinker and associate of William the Silent, Dirk V. Coornhert. Bruegel’s best friend and amateur art-lover

Frackert was also an associate. Since then, it is admitted that Bruegel was not “Bruegelian” in the sense of a “sausage eater,” but an erudite humanist. Was Bruegel a sympathizer, or an opponent of reform?

Gibson: The “Schola Caritatis” group called for tolerance, precisely. Bruegel undoubtedly felt a certain sympathy for the preachers of reform. They can be found in “St. John the Baptist Preaching” (1566). This has to do with the Calvinist prayer meetings that took place on a clandestine basis in the woods; it’s what used to be called the “Hagepreken.” People left the cities in great numbers to attend them. For a time, the guards at the city gates were assigned the task of keeping a list of who would go to these meetings, so many people began to ask, “Did you see me?,” “I hope you got my name down.”

Many people were disgusted by the treatment that was inflicted on heretics, who were tortured in an abominable manner. The manner was specified in the placards of the emperor Charles V: Men must perish by the sword, women were to be buried alive. Bruegel was therefore a humanist, and opposed this kind of violence. He was not a dogmatic, he was someone who appreciated living individuality. That’s why he participated in the peasant festivals, and he represented them on canvas without any demeaning of them, even while he showed their brutal and primordial side, along with their dignity. Because he really does give them heroic proportions borrowed from the characters of Michelangelo!

Fidelio: In your essay on “Bearing the Cross,” you bring up very precise references to the political situation of the period. For instance, you point out that the soldiers who lead Christ towards Golgotha are a direct allusion to the “Roode Rocx,” the red tunics that the mercenary soldiers working for the Spanish occupiers wore. Are there other such references, and does this cause art to lose some of its universality, by “dirtying” itself with such immediate issues?

Gibson: Nowadays, the distribution of art through reproductions is taken for granted. But all of these works by Bruegel were painted for the interiors of homes of educated bourgeois, and were only accessible to those close to them.

As far as “Bearing the Cross” is concerned, this work tries to portray what was going on at the time of Christ, but in spiritual terms. It is not supposed to be an historic reconstruction. And to understand what was going on at the time, all you have to do is understand what is going on under our very eyes today!

Bruegel’s approach is to reveal the great and terrible continuity of history, to use the present political situation to make people understand the history of Christ, instead of using the history of Christ to better condemn the extortion of the Spanish. All extortion is wrong. You could say the same thing about Goya: it is not so much a “militant” style of painting, as it is a testimony. It comes after the fact. It is a way of memorializing an event, to prevent an event that was lived in an intense and intimate way from being forgotten.

Bruegel’s paintings are therefore quite different from propaganda. They are all the more not propaganda, in that they were neither printed nor distributed in the form of placards in the streets of Brussels.

Fidelio: Didn’t this view of tolerance end up feeding and preparing the Revolt of the Netherlands?

Gibson: For that, you have to go back and see the entirety of the cultural milieu in Flanders at the time. The secret to this was the “chambers of rhetoric,” which organized writing and poetry tournaments. Their members were mostly from the new middle classes. Every seven years, the entire country was overtaken by a month-long festival, in a “Lanjuweel” [“National Jewel”], like the one that took place in Antwerp in 1561. There would be public declamations, moral sketches, street theater, etc., in a sumptuous decor. All of this created the conditions for the development of

a high level of culture in the entire population.

Fidelio: I’d like to come back to the question of the landscapes. You have said that it’s nature, but in fact these landscapes never existed, neither in Flanders, nor in Italy. Some have called them “Weltlandschaft” [“world land-

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scapes”] or ever “Uberschauweltlandschaft” [“universal panoramic landscapes”].

Gibson: You have to understand that once an artist has understood how nature functions, he can use this knowledge to create landscapes that correspond to a kind of specific “theatre” of nature. This theatrical dimension takes them out of the realm of geological realism, and a kind of transposition becomes operational instead, intensifying something which is natural to begin with, but which the artists imbues with a much more general psychological and spiritual sense.

Fidelio: What message does Bruegel have for our world today? What can be done to get our contemporaries more interested in this painter?

Gibson: The public is spontaneously attracted to Bruegel because they find in his work a reality which is both carnal and universal. Allow me to explain.

Bruegel depicts everything that exists between early childhood and old age: everything from children’s games to the most abominable torture. There is a constant juxtaposition of extremes. Look, for instance, at the group that is approaching Golgotha in “Bearing the Cross.” You’ll see a little boy who is

swiping the bonnet off a little child. The latter is raising his arms trying to get his hat back. And just a few feet away, the poor wretches about to be put to death, heading up to Golgotha. The two robbers, with their gray faces, sitting in the wagon, and the Christ who is there, lost in the immense crowd, so small in this vast human beehive, that he is hard to see. This is an iconographic theme that goes back to Van Eyck, but what is significant here is the simultaneity of comedy and of tragedy, of

fest in his theater. The same goes for Bruegel. It is a world in which the norms of “good taste” cannot be imposed. “Stylistic” good taste disappears. The “natural” state is expressed

In that painting, there is a small crowd of people dancing at the foot of the gallows. In my view, Bruegel was evoking the relief the people would feel upon the departure of the Spanish. They

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Bearing the Cross,” 1564 (center detail).

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This is what gives Bruegel’s works a real “Shakespearean dimension.” For his world is vast. Vast, because of both what was discovered in these times about its unexpected immensity, but also because of everything that goes on in man: his capacity for heroism, and his capacity for malfeasance; his hypocrisy, and his undying goodness. Shakespeare believes in the poetical character of the world. The world is an immense poem which becomes mani-

crudely, sincerely. It can seem vulgar, like the man dropping his pants and taking a crap in the left-hand corner of “The Magpie on the Gallows” (1568). What is important, obviously, is not the showing of a man defecating, but what that act expresses here.

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have finally left: It’s obvious, since there are no more hangings. There is no cadaver hanging from the gallows. And that’s why these men and women are dancing, while another man lowers his drawers. It’s not like the banal vulgarity of present-day language: “giving a sh—,” but, rather, the supreme infantile insult in its most anal expression, because it stems from the most profound and primitive in man. It is also part of the world. And the fact of giving it a (discrete) place in this painting is proof of a wise and authentic

love of man, a love which does not idealize man, but accepts him as he is, sublime and trivial at the same time. The two are part of the whole, and one cannot ignore one or the other without damaging the whole.

—translated from the French by Dana Scanlon