Theme 3: Vermeer and the World of Light

Lesson 3: Bruegel

Part 1

We jump ahead about a century, a time of bloody strife and religious reformation that overshadowed the arts in that part of the world. Important painters did exist: Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)¹ and Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553),² both contemporaries of Leonardo da Vinci, are but two examples. Dürer is most famous today for his praying hands (at left), and Cranach for his portrait of Martin Luther (at right), who launched the Protestant Reformation in Germany. As previously noted, the social and religious currents—they were impossible to separate—brought about the destruction of many works of art. Paintings of religious themes might be condemned as examples of Catholic idolatry, while classical nudes were considered pagan or perverse. After all, with the fate of the world at stake, few people on either side thought that tolerance was a virtue.

With the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic response—the Counterreformation—Europe found itself religiously and politically polarized. By early in the sixteenth century Spain had conquered most of America to become the most extensive empire the world has ever known. Among its prized possessions were parts of Italy and the Low Countries. It was also the champion of Catholicism. With Henry VIII and his daughter Queen Elizabeth, England turned into Spain's chief rival religiously and politically. The Low Countries, with a sizable Protestant population, rebelled against their Spanish lords and finally won independence in the seventeenth century.

In the Catholic south the previously mentioned Council of Trent would legislate the style of religious art for some time to come, while in the north Protestantism reacted strongly against earlier—and Catholic—iconography. The safest subject matter was secular, or at least non denominational. Against this backdrop Renaissance humanism, and its expression in painting, was also driven into new channels, concerned more with the present than with the classical past. The modern age had begun, and with it a strong interest in the world around us. As light falls across the skin of the world and makes it visible, this new interest often expressed itself in landscape painting.

¹ See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 81–86.
² See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 87–92.
Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Although only 44 years old when he died, Pieter Bruegel (1525?–1569) bears the venerable title of Elder because his firstborn, also named Pieter, also became a painter of some renown. Despite what Jordi Vigué asserts in *Great Masters of Western Art*, Maria Verhulst Bessemers was not Bruegel’s mother, but rather his mother-in-law and wife of the master painter to whom Bruegel was apprenticed. Bessemers influenced her son-in-law not only in the use of tempera, a medium which Bruegel often employed in his early works, but also in the choice of subject matter: peasant themes, town scenes, and allegories, which reflected her humanist interests.

At the age of 26 Bruegel traveled to Italy to study the art of the great Renaissance masters. It is interesting to note that most of the works he executed on this journey had nothing to do with Italy, but were pictures of Alpine and country landscape he passed along the way. Although we may see something of Michelangelo’s monumentality in the peasant bodies that swarm Bruegel’s canvases, northern painters proved far more influential. There is little of Van Eyck’s precision in the handling of light, even in the few interiors painted by Bruegel; the influence shows through mainly in the careful rendering of textures. On the other hand, Van Eyck’s hallucinatory imagination did have an impact, reaching Bruegel by way of an intermediary, Hieronymous Bosch (1450–1516).

---

3 See *Great Masters of Western Art*, pages 135–140.
4 See *Great Masters of Western Art*, pages 69–74.
Part 3

The phantasmagoria in a fragment from Bruegel’s *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562), seen at left, recalls immediately the hideous demons of hell in Van Eyck’s *Last Judgment*. If anything, Bruegel’s vision is even more chaotic. The picture plane is so busy that at times we have difficulty distinguishing details. For example, the clearly discernible and beautifully rendered butterfly wings on the flying demon divert our attention from the repulsive face of the swine demon and the disgusting soft belly of the frog demon. Even more difficult to see are the darker demons, such as the upside-down rat demon between the swine and the frog, not to mention the even darker bat demon behind it. What any one creature may be doing in this battle is hard to tell. Around that flying demon, for example: is that an ivory ring or a coil of tentacle? The hellish background behind Dulle Griet, or Mad Meg, painted around 1562 (at left), owes much to the burning city of Hell in Bosch’s triptych of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510), a fragment of which is seen below. Bruegel left us no commentary on this painting, and the title comes down to us not from the artist, but from his first biographer. Mad Meg was a character from Flemish folklore: a shrew, a comic imposter, a crazy hag. In its time the image proved so popular that Bruegel painted a second version of it.

Similarly inspired by Bosch are the nightmarish activities and creatures that spill over Mad Meg’s world. Once again, the sheer overpopulation of weird images pulls our eye in all directions. We are not dealing with a restful, pleasant viewing experience. This is another image we can study year after year and always find something to amaze or perplex us. This delight in turning loose the darker side of the imagination is more typical of the north, and we must search long and hard to find even a remotely similar vision in Renaissance Italy, where reason was as cherished as the principles of harmony, proportion, and unity. If anything, madness and hell denote chaos, the absence of order, and in a sense goes along with the absence or rejection of God.

Bruegel is not chiefly known for his visions of hell, however, but for his town, country, and peasant scenes. He painted all the seasons with an equally careful eye and so provides us with an unparalleled glimpse at northern Europe in the sixteenth century. Even his religious art draws on the facts of everyday life, such as the *Census at Bethlehem* from 1566 (above). The title refers to the biblical account of how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, the City of David, near Jerusalem. Obviously we are not in ancient Palestine, but in contemporary—that is, mid sixteenth-century—Belgium. At first blush, this does not appear a religious painting at all: it takes some scrutiny to identify Joseph with his pregnant wife Mary atop a donkey. Instead, the painting seems to show us a variety of activities in a large Flemish town in winter. Of course, Christmas falls at the end of December, the start of winter in Europe. Days are short, and so the sun sits on the horizon above the frozen winter. Children skate on the pond and throw snowballs, while grownups go about the hard life of getting through the
winter. Such an image of everyday life, especially of the middle and lower classes and country folk, belongs to genre painting, which becomes increasingly important in the next century. At the same time Bruegel has given so much attention to the greater world—the winter sky, the naked branches, the colors of the snow and ice, the detailed buildings, and so on—that we can safely say that the landscape itself is the subject of this painting, whatever pious motive the artist had in taking up the brush. Only the cast shadows are missing. Although painted in oils, the Census at Bethlehem has a tempera-like shimmer.
Let us consider one of Bruegel’s most famous works, the Fall of Icarus (1558). Greek mythology tells us that Daedalus, the father of Icarus, was a cunning inventor hired by King Minos of Crete to construct a labyrinth to contain the Minotaur, a monster that was half-man and half-bull. The maze consisted of passageways so complex that no one could escape. To insure that Daedalus never revealed the maze’s secrets, King Minos imprisoned Daedalus and his son in a tower. The ever-inventive Daedalus collected feathers from the eagles that roosted on the tower and fashioned wings from them with candle wax. He and Icarus flew away one morning, carried on the wind towards the mainland. At first everything went well. Then the boy, exhilarated by the experience of flying, soared too close to the sun. The wax melted, the wings fell apart, and Icarus plunged into the sea and drowned. This is the moment Bruegel has chosen to portray. Where is the boy? As in the previous image of Joseph and Mary almost lost among the crowd, the viewer needs to search for Icarus. The painter shows off his skill at rendering the whole world on canvas. And, according to the next poem, he also shows us something infinitely more important.
Part 5

W.H. Auden—the initials stand for Wystan Hugh—is one of the great poets of the twentieth century. Born in England in 1907, he fought in the Spanish civil war and then moved to the United States in 1939, where he became a citizen. As a young man he was a radical socialist with an intense interest in Freudian psychoanalysis, but after moving to the US his concerns shifted to the existential meaning of Christian theology. First and foremost, of course, he was always a poet. He died in 1973. The following poem was written in 1938, in the middle of the civil war, with Auden on the losing side. He managed to visit the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels, which houses an important Bruegel collection. Some verses allude to paintings in the Bruegel gallery the poet must have passed to reach the Fall of Icarus. Little did Auden realize that the terrible suffering he had seen in Spain was only a prelude to the Second World War that began in 1939.

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Bruegel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.