

Margaret A. Sullivan. *Bruegel and the Creative Process, 1559–1563*.

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Margaret Sullivan presents a comprehensive, chronologically organized study of the paintings, drawings, and prints Pieter Bruegel the Elder produced from 1559 to 1563. The chapters are primarily organized around Bruegel's unique paintings during this period: the *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559), *Battle between Carnival and Lent* (1559), *Children's Games* (1560), *Dulle Griet* (1561), *Two Monkeys* (1562), and the *Triumph of Death* (1562). Sullivan explains her relatively narrow focus by arguing that these works represent an exceptional "burst of creativity" that begins with the artist's shift away from works on paper to large-scale paintings in oil on panel and ends abruptly with his move to Brussels and transition into more-traditional subject matter, such as religious scenes, landscapes, and peasant festivities. Drawing on works in diverse media, by both Bruegel and his contemporaries, as well as the religious and

political context of the time, economic demands of the marketplace, and education and expectations of the potential audience, Sullivan sets out to better understand what combination of circumstances would have led to such a period of art-making and how Bruegel's contemporary viewers would have interpreted his unprecedented works.

As the earliest extant example in which proverbs serve as the subject of a large-scale painting, in the first chapter Sullivan takes up the *Netherlandish Proverbs*. Rather than privileging proverbs primarily in the vernacular, the author argues that for Bruegel's audience, Christian humanists, proverbs served as a useful and entertaining way to join Christian and pagan ideas, Latin sources and vernacular usage. The small figures and intricate composition would have inspired a multifaceted conversation, concerned more with complexity and making connections across time and space, than with singular interpretations grounded in ethnography.

The humanist interest in collecting extended beyond proverbs to local customs associated with country life. In the second chapter, Sullivan examines an additional painted collection that followed the *Proverbs, Battle between Carnival and Lent*. Here, Bruegel establishes a clear compositional division with customs associated with Carnival on the left and those with Lent on the right. By connecting individual motifs with vernacular and classical literary sources, the author argues that the painting is a satire that criticizes the failings of both the Reformed sects and the Catholic Church.

With the exception of Bosch's hell scenes, no visual precedent exists for Bruegel's *Dulle Griet*, the subject of chapter 3. Claiming that Bruegel would have been concerned with meeting the expectations of a Christian humanist clientele, Sullivan embarks upon her own creative process of connecting specific motifs to classical literature. Of particular importance are the sins that give rise to folly and madness relayed by Horace in his third satire (book 2), which the author argues are abundantly illustrated in the painting, particularly by the two large figures in the center. The subjects of madness and folly are related to the persecution of heretics at the time, both by Catholics and Reformers. By satirically criticizing both extremes, the author argues that the painting advocates for a Christian Stoic (nonviolent) perspective on the madness of their time.

The apocalyptic vision that is the *Triumph of Death* is the result of madness and folly overcoming the world. It is *Dulle Griet's* climax. By this point in the book, Sullivan's reliance on classical literary sources becomes more tenuous, particularly since there is little in the image itself that leads in this direction. While the author argues that "the *Triumph of Death* integrates the Christian and the classical in a profoundly original work of art," she connects antiquity solely to the theme of death rather than other motifs in the painting.

Like her earlier book, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994), Sullivan's current study provides a wealth of research about humanist viewers and the classical texts that may have informed their reception of the works. There are a few important components missing, however. First, despite repeated use of "creative process," there is no attempt to theoretically extrapolate from her observations any kind of definition of the phrase, or how Bruegel or his contemporaries would have understood the concepts of creativity and invention. Second, while Sullivan mentions the dining

room as a potential space for viewing, and the *convivium* tradition (as represented in Erasmus's *Colloquies*) as a model for the type of conversation the paintings may have generated, she does not describe this context in any detail. We know, for example, that Erasmus's texts are fictional and representative of his intellectual agenda. But, are they an accurate characterization of an actual sixteenth-century dining experience and, if so, to what degree? These points notwithstanding, Sullivan's nuanced interpretations of Bruegel's images are filled with new information that will no doubt benefit not just Bruegel scholarship, but Northern Renaissance studies as a whole.

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