

Walter S. Gibson. *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*.

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Walter Gibson, a well-known scholar of sixteenth-century Netherlandish art, has set himself an impressive and daunting task in his latest book. He tackles a dilemma familiar to all encountering the powerful yet still puzzling work of Bruegel. Today's viewer cannot rely upon his or her eyes or even older Netherlandish visual traditions to come to terms with the work, but needs keys long buried in the culture — and not only visual culture — to make headway. In the last decade-and-a-half alone, many art historians have taken the plunge into popular culture, examining proverbs and joke books as well as visual evidence like lesser-known prints, to emerge with rich corollary evidence which enriches knowledge of the environment in which Bruegel produced his art. This scholarship, along with new investigations of high culture embedded in humanist philosophy and literature — intellectual realms more commonly applied to Bruegel's work — have provided a marked service to our understanding of the late sixteenth century as a whole. And Gibson engages the insistent question that dogs all art historians after encountering this vast body of once-buried material: what relationship do the other facets of contemporary culture have to Bruegel's art?

In a wide-ranging text composed of six chapters and an epilogue (some expanding on previous publications), Gibson focuses upon laughter as a fundamental reason why many of Bruegel's most famous works were made. Gibson does not try to imagine the art from the maker's perspective, but sets out to determine what viewers' responses might have been to those of Bruegel's works which caused laughter. In doing so, he discusses the history of attitudes to laughter, investigates what contemporaries wrote about laughter, why imagery produced in Bruegel's time made people laugh, who paid for the artist's works that made them laugh, and where amusing Bruegelian revels in paint were located in the home. He documents well-to-do citizens' encounters with real peasants in rustic festivals and what these encounters, as well as representations of them, might have meant to Bruegel's wealthy patrons, and includes a final in-depth case study of Bruegel's painting of a wrathful old woman, *Dulle Griet*, roaming a hell-like, alarming, yet perversely comic, Boschian dystopia with imagery also derived from old proverbs and jokes.

Gibson pointedly takes issue with much literature on the Flemish artist, beginning with Charles de Tolnay in the mid-twentieth century, by rejecting the idea that Bruegel articulated a consistent philosophy or systematic approach to his subjects because it “does violence to our understanding of the way artists earned their living in the competitive world of Bruegel’s time” (7). He believes that an artist working for highly educated noble patrons or the Church could well have developed such a philosophy within his art, but Bruegel’s patrons and audience did not belong to these particular groups. His audience — and particularly the patrons of his paintings — were, according to Gibson, not the intelligentsia but wealthy bureaucrats and merchants competing hotly in the marketplace and scrambling up the social ladder. His implication, then, is that Bruegel crafted his humorous paintings to amuse his rich patrons.

The author believes that in seeking a profound meaning for Bruegel’s art, scholars have too often dismissed the very important element of humor residing in his prints and paintings, and he makes a good point. As Svetlana Alpers observed some decades ago, historians either found a reflection of actual peasant life — which to non-peasants seemed humorous — mirrored in Bruegel’s paintings or a deep moralizing critique of well-to-do viewers’ mores embedded in the works. Both types of interpretation missed the artfully comic in Bruegel’s production, she maintained, and she urged art historians to take comedy when expressed in visual form as seriously as historians of literature and culture took poetry and popular festivities. Gibson provides a great service because he takes the comedy, humor, and laughter that Bruegel’s witty secular work provokes laudably seriously (but, as he will state, not too seriously).

Gibson maintains that merchants who wished to display their luxuries and enhance their social standing among their peers enjoyed Bruegel’s humorous paintings for their “pure entertainment” value, since the humanists who may (or may not) have invested a deeper meaning in the works did not own the paintings. Owing to his sense of fairness in citing and weighing other scholars’ contributions, Gibson perhaps unintentionally blurs his main point a little, however. He is quick to point out that humanists surely knew the paintings and owned prints, and that patrons such as Cardinal Granvelle, who owned non-comic Bruegel paintings but presumably constituted part of the audience for that group, in fact enjoyed a deep classical training and defended Erasmus against university theologians, and two of Bruegel’s other wealthy patrons knew the classics, at least. As a consequence, it seems clear that even if Bruegel’s patrons hung his paintings of peasants’ country revels mainly to impress their Antwerpian *nouveau-riche* friends and cause some good-natured laughter at their dinner parties, as Gibson would prefer, this does not exclude the possibility that Bruegel had a systematic or philosophical approach to making comic paintings, only that some people didn’t get the cosmic twist to the big joke.

And one of the most appealing parts of this book is that Gibson gives plenty of compelling examples in literature, popular practices, and art, both spiritual and secular, erudite and earthy, of how laughter is meant to propel the laugher not

only to better physical and mental health but also to a deeper experience and understanding of his condition in the world. Bruegel's humorous paintings and the patrons who laughed uproariously when they saw them deserve this encomium.

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