

Walter S. Gibson. *Figures of Speech: Picturing Proverbs in Renaissance Netherlands*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xvi + 236 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$49.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-25954-6.

*Figures of Speech* takes up the complex question of why proverb imagery became so popular in the artistic production of the sixteenth-century Low Countries. In the first two chapters, Gibson defines the scope of his inquiry. The author underscores the humanist appreciation for proverbs' literary heritage, as utilized both in classical antiquity and the Bible, connecting the popularity of proverbs to contemporary rhetorical practice and an emerging linguistic nationalism. The fascinating link between the proverb, understood as an ancient or timeless utterance, and the championing of Dutch as a valid and historic vernacular could have been developed further by the author, particularly the implications of considering the proverb as a specifically historic type of speech. Gibson posits no single answer as to why the proverb picture was attractive either to Netherlandish artists or to potential consumers of these images, offering instead a number of possible contributing factors, ranging from: the "striking and sometimes hilarious dichotomy between form and meaning" (20) inherent in picturing proverbs, links with domestic decoration, and the close association between rederijkers and artists in sixteenth-century Antwerp.

The book's subsequent three chapters, each focusing on a case study of either a particular proverb or group of proverbial images (Hieronymus Bosch's *Haywain*, a Bruegelian printed series of twelve proverbs, and the *Battle for Trousers*), provide cogently argued examples of the complex reception and reinterpretation of proverb images in the period. Chapter 3 begins with Bosch's *Haywain*, tracing a number of related pictorial hay allegories in tapestry, paint, and print throughout the sixteenth century. Gibson attributes the longevity of the topos to collectors' interest in Boschian themes, as well as the socioeconomic timeliness of the proverbial critique of the pursuit of individual profit over communal welfare. Gibson even includes Adrian van de Venne's return to the haywain theme in the post-Revolt period, raising crucial issues about the desire for artistic and thematic continuity in the new Dutch republic. The fourth chapter, "Loquacious Pictures," focuses on a series of

undated engravings by Jan Wierix, known as the *Twelve Proverbs*. The author discusses Wierix's prints primarily as emblem-like in their combination of text and image, carefully assembling contemporary written and pictorial sources for each image. While fascinating to the period scholar, this focus on an emblematic reading of each image could have been expanded to directly address the somewhat spectral and pervasive presence of Pieter Bruegel in this chapter and throughout the volume. While Gibson identifies a group of Bruegelian images within the Wierix series, the book would have benefited from a more developed and sustained discussion of Bruegel's association with proverb imagery in a dedicated chapter or section, instead of being dispersed throughout the text. In both the third and fourth chapters, the association of a particular artistic personality with the given proverbial imagery (Bosch and Bruegel, respectively) is only briefly touched upon; a more thorough discussion of interaction between the developing connoisseurial interests of the art market, linguistic nationalism, and the popularity of proverb pictures would have furthered Gibson's conclusions. The author also has a tendency to compare images of a related proverb, across various media, without accounting for differences in scale, potential audience, etc.; for example, in discussing the differences between Bruegel's panel *Netherlandish Proverbs* and Frans Hogenberg's *Blau Huicke* engraving, Gibson neglects to verbalize the most jarring distinction between the two images — Hogenberg's inclusion of text, both inside and outside the image field (149–53). Despite these issues, *Figures of Speech* is an important book for the student and scholar of the Northern Renaissance, the first extended study of the proverb picture in Netherlandish culture, drawing on the author's unparalleled knowledge of the period. Gibson's conclusion, that proverbial images in expressing both fun and folly “could escape the confines of their original contexts and lead new lives of their own, adapted to new times and circumstances” (117) could aptly be applied to *Figures of Speech*, which will surely inspire further studies on this rich and fascinating topic.

STEPHANIE PORRAS

Courtauld Institute of Art