





1 Pieter Bruegel the Elder
The Census at Bethlehem, 1566.
Detail of fig. 4.1.
Royal Museums of Fine Arts
of Belgium, Brussels

1 A Winter's Voyage with Pieter Bruegel the Elder

An Introduction to Dialogue

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*And in wintry weather people may be heard
muttering the name of Bruegel*

Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*, 1949

The winter scenes by Pieter Bruegel the Elder are the archetypal images of winter in the old Low Countries. Depicting Christmas and Carnival festivities in snowy landscapes lit by a pale sun during the sombre days between December and February, they are among the first large-format early Netherlandish panel paintings with winter as their main subject. Often copied and imitated, they contributed to forging the canonical image of 'northern' winter in the collective imagination, to the point that skaters and children in sleighs have become indissociable from our concept of Low Countries.

This book about Bruegel's winter scenes at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium aims to shed new light on the special status of these masterpieces in the cultural history of the Low Countries. It is the result of an unusual experiment. From 2007 to 2017, a team of Royal Museums art historians joined forces with the international research group 'City and Society in the Low Countries', headed by Marc Boone, history professor at the University of Ghent.¹ Until then composed essentially of historians, the group studies urban society in the Low Countries through specific societal themes. In this context, a new examination of Bruegel's paintings at the Royal Museums soon seemed indispensable.

Indeed, while views on Bruegel diverge, most present-day researchers regard him as the preeminent urban painter, a friend of the humanists, residing in Antwerp then Brussels – Brabant's two metropolises in the sixteenth century.² His work lends itself particularly well to methodological exchange between historians and art historians. From the outset, Bruegel has interested historians because of his ability to reconstruct the details of daily life, material culture and his contemporaries' habits and customs. On the other hand, the most recent studies in art history underscore the richness of the painter's vocabulary, which combines direct observation, imaginary motifs and elements borrowed from the most diverse realms of art. The 'City and Society' research group provided a unique opportunity for the practitioners of both disciplines to discuss the relationship Bruegel maintained

with the reality of his time and thus clarify the connections between the historical background, the artist's sources and his creations.

Among the great social themes the research network investigated, environmental questions, the relationship of (city-dwelling) human beings to nature and their resistance to extreme climatic conditions prompted the team to focus on the two winter scenes by Bruegel at the Royal Museums: *Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap* and *The Census at Bethlehem*. These paintings date from 1565 or shortly after, a year that saw one of the harshest winters in Western Europe during the Little Ice Age. Several climate historians have raised the question of a causal relationship.³ In *Die Welt aus den Angeln* (2017), Philipp Blom does not hesitate to establish a correlation, albeit controversial, between climatic upheaval and the political turmoil of the times, the former acting in his view as a catalyst of the latter.⁴ Although Bruegel's winter scenes have seldom given rise to this type of comparison, two have often been interpreted as scarcely veiled criticism of the reigning Habsburgs: *The Massacre of the Innocents* (The Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Hampton Court Palace, London; see fig. 2.3) and, in a corollary manner, *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566), which some have considered to be its pendant.⁵ In this regard, the bird trap in *Winter Landscape* (1565) has sometimes been read as an allusion to the many 'traps' the inhabitants of the period had to avoid.⁶

This type of interpretation adheres to the image still tenaciously rooted in the minds of the general public, as well as some specialists, of a rebellious Bruegel who, on the eve of his death, according to his biographer Karel van Mander, asked his wife to burn his compromising drawings.⁷ The choice of Bruegel's *Massacre of the Innocents* as the cover illustration for Louis Paul Boon's famous novel *Het Geuzenboek* ('The Beggars' Book', 1979) is symptomatic of the perpetuation of this image, and so is a recent graphic novel featuring Bruegel as a painter of revolt who concealed portraits of insurgents in his paintings (François Cortegiani and Mankho, *Les grands peintres: Pieter Bruegel*,



3 Pieter Bruegel the Elder
The Massacre of the Innocents, 1566 or later?
Oil on panel, 109.2 × 158.1 cm.
Royal Collection Trust, London,
RCIN 405787



► 21 Pieter Bruegel the Elder
The Census at Bethlehem, 1566. Detail. Royal
Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

asked for it to be drawn back.³⁸ In his *Schilder-boeck* (1604), Karel van Mander cites this ancient anecdote in his life of Hans Vredeman de Vries. This artist reportedly painted a perspective view in the summer pavilion of Aert Molckeman, 'the king's treasurer', in Brussels, and Bruegel, fascinated by the trompe-l'œil open door, added a peasant couple uninvited.³⁹ The result so pleased Molckeman that he would not consider having Bruegel's addition removed. Other contemporaries praised Bruegel for what we might call his 'imaginary naturalism'. The Antwerp cartographer and antiquary Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) compared him to the ancient painter Apelles, who 'painted things that could not be painted', for instance, atmospheric phenomena like thunder and lightning, a quality also seen in Bruegel's unequalled rendering of snow and ice. Ortelius also writes that Bruegel did not imitate, but recreated nature; his works may seem natural (*naturales*) but they are artificial (*artificiales*).⁴⁰

Bethlehem in Brabant

Bruegel had an unparalleled ability to mix the real and the imagined. He made the universal message of the *Census* convincing by encapsulating precise references to



20 Anonymous, *Farm at Wijnegem*, late
16th century. Pen and red chalk on paper,
130 × 187 mm. Musée du Louvre, Paris,
Département des Arts graphiques, 21003-recto





9 Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap, 1565.
Detail of fig. 3.1. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of
Belgium, Brussels