

# Exploring the Styles of Peasant Painters in the Netherlands: A Case Study of Bruegel Pieter the Elder

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**Abstract.** This section discusses the origin and main types of development of the Renaissance. It gradually developed from Italy to the whole of Europe. Artists find inspiration from ancient Greek works and use scientific techniques such as perspective in their paintings, resulting in works that are full of volume. At the same time, the styles of southern and northern Europe are also different, especially in the southern region of the Netherlands where Bruegel is located. This is the birthplace of humanism, which has made the civic class the main force on the path of the Renaissance. It is precisely because of spiritual liberation that art has become a tool for ordinary people to showcase their thoughts and feelings. This article focuses on the peasant painter Peter Brueghel the elder of the Renaissance. And Bruegel was the last painter in this region after the Renaissance. He is also the founder of the Dutch painting school. Most of his works are inspired by farmers and his own life, as he chose to use art as a weapon to praise virtue and hope for national independence. He is a true 'farmer painter'. At the same time, his creative techniques are also changing over time.

**Keywords:** Renaissance, Peter Bruegel the Elder, farmer theme.

## 1. Introduction

The Renaissance refers to the intellectual liberation movement that spread throughout Europe from the 14th to the 16th century. It first occurred in Italy and later developed throughout Europe, creating a higher level of human civilization that was more reasonable and in line with objective historical laws. The Renaissance had a tremendous impact on the entire artistic world, inspiring people's thinking and beginning to create with the humanistic beauty advocated in ancient Greece [1]. During the Renaissance, there was a significant difference between southern European painting and northern painting. Represented by Italy in the south, artists drew inspiration from ancient Greek artworks and applied scientific methods such as perspective, anatomy, and shading to their painting creations. Most of the works presented contain a distinct sense of volume and exquisite human body shapes.

At that time, the styles of works in northern and southern Europe were also different. In the Netherlands in the southern Netherlands, there was the last painter after the Renaissance, Bruegel, who was also an outstanding representative of the humanistic spirit. He created a large number of realistic works by observing the living habits of the local people, especially the observation of farmers. Because he always felt that the scenery of his hometown was the most beautiful, he mixed a lot of descriptions of local scenery inside.

## 2. Background and Impact

Renaissance artists focused on perspective and anatomy in their creations, using surfaces to create volumes and depict complete character bodies [2]. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo perfectly combine art and science, creating works that are both subtle and thought-provoking. Northern European artists are often influenced by Gothic traditional art and have developed Gothic art forms. Painting often uses lines and emphasizes the application of edge lines. Compared to volume, it places more emphasis on flatness and meticulous carving of lines. Represented by Doule, he can deeply observe and grasp the details of psychological portrayal. They will use their works to reflect the tension between their demeanor and the emotions of the characters, and these muscle lines are the most superb embodiment of the creator's skills.

The reasons for the aesthetic differences in painting between the South and the North are as follows: firstly, Nordic Europe lacks the rich heritage of ancient Greek and Roman art, which is more reflected in Gothic style; This seemingly dark but profound work is also a key reference object for them to draw inspiration from. Secondly, due to the humid location and unsuitable lighting and climate for large traditional murals, Nordic people prefer exquisite illustration paintings. These paintings can be preserved in books and paper and can also be used by future generations to review the artistic creations of that time, which can rejuvenate the value of art in different eras.

Thirdly, after Italy, the European Renaissance spread to the Netherlands, which is now part of Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and southern France. The natural scenery of these three places is very rich, which means that there is an endless source of material here, especially for painters who are accustomed to creating realistic works. This is a unique feng shui treasure trove. Therefore, it became the second region in Europe with more developed capitalist industry and commerce. The continuous dissemination of humanistic ideas made the civic class the main force on the path of the Renaissance. The Netherland Renaissance also reflected the interests and demands of the civic class. Rationality replaced blind worship of authority, spiritual liberation, and human status was elevated. Art was no longer the patent of the royal aristocracy, and art began to move towards the common people. The creation and content of art are becoming more participatory for ordinary people, and they will also reflect their thoughts and ideas in combination with reality.

### 3. Artistic Style of the Painter

Peter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569) was born into a family of painters. He was a famous sketcher, oil painter, and copperplate painter. He was also the last painter in the Netherlands during the Renaissance and the founder of the Dutch painting school. He lived in a time when the rulers of Spain were at war against the Netherlands, and he felt the suffering of the people. Old Peter Bruegel used art as a weapon to praise virtue and hope for national independence. He was born in the countryside, and the rural context occupied a large part of his life. Therefore, he created a large number of thematic paintings with rural backgrounds, which truly expressed the lives of farmers and himself, and is also known as a "farmer painter".

Peter Bruegel the Elder, who lived in the Netherlands from the 15th to the 16th century, was a representative of realism. He absorbed and studied the works of various Italian art masters, and based on the social reality of the Netherlands, depicted the real living conditions of the people of the Netherlands. The outline lines of his characters are simple, and he doesn't care whether the picture is exquisite or rigorous. Some of the designs are exaggerated or deformed, and sometimes the picture seems to be pieced together by the outline lines of the characters. But it is these seemingly disorderly lines that actually reflect the author's true feelings and express the most primitive and natural praise for the local people's appearance. From 1552 to 1554, he traveled to Italy and created a large number of landscape sketches. His works show his meticulous observation and expressive power towards things. Starting around 1556, his highly symbolic character composition style replaced the previous landscape composition style, arranging small-scale character compositions in panoramic space, and shifting from landscape painting to highly satirical character composition.

#### 3.1. Style Characteristics

Peter Bruegel the Elder's painting style was influenced by Bauchy's creative techniques, incorporating some bizarre and profound techniques into his creations. For example, mystery, exaggerated, and distorted images. But Peter Bruegel the Elder's paintings are not a continuation of Bauchy's, he just looked back at Bauchy and followed his style, his works are strange and profound. The reason for using the bizarre style may be that the rule of Spain at that time was influenced by capitalism. As a democratic and upright painter, Old Peter Bruegel's realistic ideas are extremely risky, and proverbial stories can subtly express his thoughts. This theme can precisely express the concerns of the people, resist cruel rule, and call for social injustice.

"*Children's Games*" is a representative of absurdity, which can be understood as human life is nothing more than "*Children's Games*" in the eyes of God, as if God is the master of everything, and people must remember this. In the picture, children play various games, such as riding fences, pulling ropes, jumping horses, spinning skirts, rolling iron rings, riding cylinders, and other daily game behaviors, which seem to be filled with detailed narratives. The sense of solidity in the characters portrayed by Peter Bruegel the Elder is a rebellion against the slender and aristocratic paintings. In the painting, children are wrapped in thick cotton coats, with round heads and bodies, making people feel a bit playful.

### 3.2. Composition of the Grand Scene

The so-called "grand scene composition" refers to raising the horizon, narrowing down the distant view, expanding the middle and foreground, making the visual field more open, giving people a deep sense of spatial depth, and at the same time demonstrating their ability to combine imagination with reality. *The Carnival and the Battle of Lent* is a typical representative of his composition of large-scale scenes. When viewed from afar, the scene resembles a divine perspective, observing the daily lives of ants like humans. The scene is dark and chaotic, but it also seems to be deliberately distributed, with a rational order. In the middle, it looks like a circle, distributing people in all directions. On the left and right sides of the scene are carnival activities, giving a visual impact. From the square to the street, the distance is small, making the audience more convinced that this is a real scene. The color of the picture is colorful and highly variable.

### 3.3. Exaggerated Metaphorical Techniques

In the *Netherland Proverbs*, the human body depicted in the painting is exaggerated to be round, sturdy, and simple, with intentionally elongated or shortened proportions. This painting is a popular proverb story depicted by Peter Bruegel the Elder, which contains profound meanings. The details in the painting are extremely ironic, reflecting the inner world of Peter Bruegel the Elder. The foolish person in the picture is doing foolish things, roughly from left to right: a powerful woman wearing red clothes is tying the devil onto a cushion, and the meaning of painting it is that she can overcome bad situations; There is a person who bites a pillar, which symbolizes a devout and hypocritical person who blindly goes to church; Married couples under the broom mean they live in sin and do not care about property; The roof covered with cakes is a rich fantasy, hoping that dreams come true; There are also people who hit the wall with their heads, which also implies that some people do not want to take responsibility and appear to be in vain; The wife who drapes a blue cloak over her husband in the middle symbolizes marital deception.

In this scene, each independent character has its meaning. These individual unique thoughts and simple details cover the painter's rich inner world.

## 4. Analysis

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's late works offer a profound reflection of his unique insights and keen observations on the societal issues of his time. He exposes the corruption of the feudal church, critiques the oppression under foreign rule, and imparts warnings to humanity through his art.

In "*The Triumph of Death*", Pieter Bruegel the Elder uses the symbolic image of death, represented by a skeleton, to symbolize the corruption of the feudal church, revealing the helplessness and weakness of humanity under the church's oppression. This creation not only reflects the artist's contemplation of the "dark ages" but also sharply exposes the acute contradictions within society. The combination of crosses and the skeleton camp intensifies the strong criticism of the hypocritical nature of the church. In the artwork, Bruegel employs metaphorical and fantastical elements, transforming the specific images of most characters into absurd and peculiar forms, creating an eerie atmosphere. This conveys a unique aesthetic, expressing a special beauty in the depiction of supernatural beings and ghosts. With a vivid imprint and a fresh interpretation, the painting reflects

realistic scenes of human existence, pioneering the portrayal of the human spirit. The use of these grotesque images serves to draw inspiration from or shed light on the infinite sorrow caused by the political factors of that time [1].

In "*The Census at Bethlehem*" and "*The Massacre of the Innocents*", Bruegel uses biblical stories as a vehicle to deeply depict the resistance of the Dutch people against Spanish rule. By portraying the coldness of winter, the engulfing dark clouds, and the apparent calmness juxtaposed with internal turmoil, he expresses the anticipation of impending disaster and anger toward the brutal oppression of foreign rulers [2]. When anxiety and rage erupt in "*The Massacre of the Innocents*", the scene is filled with blood-soaked horror and cries of fear, undoubtedly a direct reflection of real tragedy. The panoramic composition is tightly organized, providing an elevated perspective. The artist arranges groups of characters, forming a dramatic scene, and each detail is captivating. Due to the use of even lighting, minimal shadows on objects contribute to a clean and sharp presentation, highlighting the main theme. This meticulous technique stems from his adherence to tradition and early influence by Dutch symbolic painters like Bosch, showcasing Bruegel's rustic and down-to-earth painting style [3].

As for "*The Parable of the Blind*", it is an admonitory work by Bruegel. Depicting six blind individuals supporting each other as they unknowingly move toward danger, only to ultimately fall into peril, Bruegel conveys a warning to the world: those who lack proper judgment and rationality often find themselves in situations of danger from which they cannot extricate themselves [4].

Bruegel completed "*The Parable of the Blind*" in the year preceding his death. During this period, in the 16th century, the Reformation was emerging, and a revolutionary spirit was stirring in the Netherlands. At that time, the Netherlands remained under Spanish colonial rule, and a significant democratic revolution was quietly brewing. Bruegel, who had moved to Brussels with his teacher's daughter Mayken Coecke in 1563 and lived there after their marriage, passed away on September 9, 1569, due to illness. Before his death, he specifically instructed his family to burn some of his late-life paintings, fearing that the societal satire hidden in the artworks could bring unforeseen consequences to his family. Brussels, being the seat of government, was at the center of political turmoil during that period. Bruegel likely witnessed or heard of the brutal actions of the Spanish rulers, leaving him deeply perplexed and worried about the fate and future of the Netherlands.

The procession of blind individuals in the foreground of the painting decisively abandons the old, broad path. Their disdainful expressions and confident strides signify a resolute rejection of decaying and deteriorating elements, demonstrating a firm determination to forge a new path in the vast wilderness. However, this new path is narrow, treacherous, and fraught with peril, exacerbated by their blindness and sluggishness. Once the leader plunges into the abyss, the followers behind inevitably encounter misfortune [4].

In conclusion, Bruegel's works are not only a critique of contemporary society but also a wake-up call for humanity [5]. His artistry and profound thoughts give his works lasting relevance today.

## 5. Painting Technique

In the late 15th century, Humanism spread widely in the Netherlands, and the artistic works of Hieronymus Bosch, a Dutch painter, stood out during this period. Influenced by Christianity, Bosch's art style carried a satirical tone of folk art [6]. Besides realistic depictions, Bosch used fantastical, comic-like figures to satirize feudal lords and other characters, vividly reflecting the societal demands of the masses. Works like "*Ship of Fools*", "*Haywain*" and "*The Garden of Earthly Delights*" are among his famous masterpieces. Dutch painters inherited Bosch's painting techniques of metaphor and symbolism, and Bruegel's works exhibit characteristics reminiscent of Bosch's [7]. Bosch's painting style leaned towards medieval art, utilizing metaphorical, symbolic, and suggestive techniques in his creations. Bruegel inherited and developed Bosch's painting style, presenting unique artistic imagery filled with symbols and mystery.

Firstly, Bruegel's painting technique emphasizes precise capture of object shapes and light. Proficient in using light and shadow contrasts, he enriches the scenes with a sense of three-

dimensionality through variations in color intensity and line thickness [8]. Secondly, Bruegel excels in portraying characters with strong sculptural qualities. The facial expressions in his works are rich and genuine, with lively eyes expressing vitality and charismatic individuality. Moreover, Bruegel adeptly utilizes composition techniques, employing clever layouts and visual guidance to infuse the scenes with tension and dynamism. Offering a visual impact, he plays with size differences, taking the viewer from squares to streets, creating a believable sense of reality with vibrant and varied colors.

Lastly, Bruegel's painting technique reflects his profound understanding and unique insight into light and shadow. His works often seamlessly integrate light and shadow effects with the thematic elements, creating distinctive artistic effects [9]. In handling light and shadow, he employs transparent layers and transitions to achieve natural lighting effects, enhancing the depth and three-dimensionality of the scenes. Bruegel frequently integrates characters into vast landscapes, showcasing colorful human activities and societal customs [10]. His works abound with details, skillfully employing composition and contrast to guide the viewer's gaze, revealing various lively narratives. Overall, through his exquisite technique and unique understanding of light and shadow, Bruegel successfully captured the everyday life and landscapes of society, leaving behind numerous artworks with significant artistic value.

## 6. Conclusion

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's late works serve as a profound reflection of his unique perspectives on societal issues. Through paintings like *"The Triumph of Death"*, he unveils the corruption of the feudal church and criticizes the oppression under foreign rule. The combination of symbolism and dreamlike conveyance in his art creates a bizarre yet compelling atmosphere, exposing societal contradictions and political factors. Additionally, works like *"The Census at Bethlehem"* and *"The Massacre of the Innocents"* portray deep insights into Dutch resistance against Spanish rule, vividly capturing impending disasters and the fury against oppressive rulers. Bruegel's meticulous technique, inherited from Netherlander symbolism painter Bosch, showcases a rustic and local style. In conclusion, Bruegel's art is a powerful critique and a timeless reminder, employing unique techniques to capture the essence of societal struggles and everyday life.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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