CS0509

PIETER BRUEGHEL the Younger
(Brussels 1564/5 – 1637/8 Antwerp)

The Flemish Proverbs

Oil on copper, 19¼ x 26⅛ ins. (49 x 66.2 cm)
Framed dimensions: 34½ x 27¾ x 2¾ ins. (88 x 71 x 7 cm)

The verso of the panel bears the mark of the coppersmith Pieter Stas and the Antwerp city brand

PROVENANCE
Anonymous sale, Nackers, Brussels, 10 December 1970, lot 750
Anonymous sale, Sotheby's, London, 9 December 1981, lot 33,
Where acquired by the following
Private collection
Sale, Christie's, London, 8 December 2009, lot 5, (sold for £1,754,437.50)
With Johnny Van Haeften Limited
Private collection, United Kingdom, from 2011 to the present day

LITERATURE
H. Mund, "Contribution à l'étude de Pierre Breughel le Jeane: une version inconnu de ses proverbs flamands", in *Revue des archéologie et historiens d'art de Louvain*, IX, 1976, p. 157, notes 4 and 10.
K. Ertz, *Pieter Brueghel de Jüngere (1564-1637/38),* Lingen, I, 2000, no. E8*, pp. 70-71, illustrated.
R. Duckwitz, "The Devil is in the Detail. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* and copies after it from the workshop of Pieter Brueghel the Younger" in P. van den Brink, ed., *Brueghel Enterprises*, Maastricht, 2001, pp. 61, 71 and 79, note 32.

NOTE ON THE ATTRIBUTION: a collaboration with other members of the family, notably Jan Brueghel the Elder and Younger, should also be considered (Mund, Ertz, *op. cit*.). Copper was an unusual medium for Pieter, although other examples exist, and the way the figures and details are painted is most definitely characteristic of his idiosyncratic style. Most observers, however, accept that perhaps this is an example of Pieter showing his younger brother that he too could paint highly detailed paintings on copper. The dating of the copper panel around 1610 would indicate any collaboration to be more likely with Jan the Elder, rather than Jan the Younger, who was only born in 1601.

A little Flemish town, situated on a river, provides the setting for a crazy scene, in which dozens of people are engaged in a variety of absurd activities. At first glance it is hard to make sense of the colourful melee of figures, as there seems to be little or no interaction between the various groups, nor is any recognisable event taking place. However, the meaning of each little episode becomes clear when one realises that ordinary folk have been employed to act out, in very literal terms, popular sayings or proverbs, rather like an enormous game of charades. Remarkably, more than one hundred proverbs are skillfully woven into the composition, either in the form of a single figure, or a small group of figures and animals. Almost the entire surface of the panel is dotted with little scenes that engage the eye and entertain the viewer in a witty and humorous way. The inverted globe attached to the inn on the left-hand side has often been seen as the key to the interpretation of this painting: the world is not as it should be, everything is turned upside down. In the seventeenth century, the world-turned-upside-down, or the topsy-turvy world, was a metaphor for the folly of mankind.

The career of Pieter Breughel the Younger was built largely upon the reputation of his celebrated father Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525-1569). Although no more than four or five years old when the elder Bruegel died in 1569, he was nonetheless able to develop a detailed knowledge of his father's oeuvre. Most of his father's paintings had been dispersed into princely collections all over Europe, but a few remained in private hands in Antwerp, to which he may have had access. Drawings and unfinished pictures inherited from his father were also probably available to him, as were the many prints that had been made after his father's compositions. Demand for the work of the elder Bruegel remained strong long after his death. As we know from the correspondence of his younger son Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625) with Cardinal Federico Borromeo[i], in the early seventeenth century, his paintings still commanded high prices. The enduring interest in his work no doubt did much to foster the market for Pieter the Younger's copies and adaptations.

The present painting is derived from one of Pieter the Elder's most popular compositions. The original painting, preserved in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin[ii], is signed and dated 1559. To understand its success, one must appreciate that at the time it was painted, proverbs were a topic of great interest, especially in the humanist intellectual circles in which Bruegel moved. Enthusiasm for this ancient literary form had been stimulated by the publication in 1500 of Erasmus of Rotterdam's famous *Adages*. This compendium of some eight hundred Greek and Latin proverbs instantly became a best-seller and ran into many editions during the course of the century: indeed, its popularity was second only to the Bible. The first collection of Netherlandish proverbs appeared around mid-century and was followed by a wave of Netherlandish and German proverb collections, illustrated with woodcuts. Bruegel's great picture was very likely inspired by a print published the previous year by Frans Hogenberg that likewise depicted a great many proverbs crammed into a single sheet. The legend of the print reads "*Die Blau Huicke is dit meest ghenaemt/maer des weerelts abvisen he beter betaempt (This is generally called the Blue Cloak, but it would better be called the world's follies*), but it might just as well have served as the title for Bruegel's painting.

Bruegel the Elder's painting was thus executed five years before Pieter the Younger was born and almost forty years before his earliest dated copy. Including the present painting, Klaus Ertz accepts ten autograph versions by the son, two of which are dated 1607 and one which

bears an indistinct date (161?) in the following decade. There are four large versions on panel, four on canvas and two smaller variants on copper. Although in many respects the copies adhere closely to the Berlin prototype, none of them is identical. Indeed, there are many minor and more significant variations, as well as omissions and additions. Furthermore, there are numerous differences between the various copies. These variations are not easy to explain and scholars have long puzzled over the son's working processes. In this case, there are no surviving drawings by the father or the son to shed light on this question. Documents suggest that the original was still in Antwerp in the early seventeenth century[iii], but there is no evidence that it was accessible to Pieter the Younger. On the contrary, a detailed analysis of the ten copies carried out in 2002[iv] suggests that they were derived from a different model, probably a precise drawing with colour notes. This conclusion was reached based primarily on the results of an examination of the underdrawing of the original painting using infrared reflectography, which revealed that many of the details that appear in the copies feature in the underdrawing, but were not ultimately carried through to the finished painting.

Whilst Ertz considers this painting to be autograph and one of the few paintings on copper that are characteristic of the artist, he, like Hélène Mund[v] does not exclude the possible participation of Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678) with regard to the figures. This would presuppose a dating not before about 1618, since Jan the Younger was not born until 1601. On the other hand, Dr. Jørgen Wadum has observed that the type of stamp and brand which appears on the reverse of the copper panel corresponds with those on another panel dated 1610, rather suggesting that an earlier date is more plausible.

BIOGRAPHY

Surprisingly few details survive regarding the life of Pieter Breughel the Younger. Even his date of birth in Antwerp is not known although two documents which state that he was thirty-six on 22 May 1601 and seventy-two on 10 October 1636 suggest he was born in 1564 or 1565. He was the son of the celebrated peasant and landscape painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and the older brother of Jan Brueghel the Elder. He was, therefore, only about five years old when his father died in 1569 and was an adolescent when his mother passed away. He may have received his first training from his maternal grandmother Mayken Verhulst, who was a painter and had been married to Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502-1550). Van Mander suggested that he also received training from Gillis van Coninxloo (1544-1607), a claim that is not generally accepted. Pieter the Younger became a master in the Antwerp painters' Guild in 1584-85. Nine pupils are listed as having been trained in his workshop between 1588 and 1626, among them Frans Snyders (1579-1657) and Gonzales Coques (1618-1684). In 1588, he married Elizabeth Goddelet and their eldest son, Pieter III (1589-*c*.1640), also became a painter. Although he enjoyed a long and productive career that lasted more than half a century and exported his works widely through the firm of Forchoudt, he seems never to have owned a house and, in 1597, was behind with his rent. He died in Antwerp in 1637 or 1638.

In addition to both faithful copies and freely adapted variants of his father's compositions, Pieter the Younger also painted original landscapes depicting village and rural life. The caption beneath his portrait in Van Dyck's *Iconography* of 1630-31 reads *"Antverpiae pictor ruralium prospectuum"* (Antwerp painter of rural views). He inherited a sure

draughtsmanship and a taste for strong local colouring. He acquired the nickname *De Helsche Breughel* (The Hell Breughel) perhaps due to the demons which appear in his paintings of St. Anthony.

Key to The Flemish Proverbs by Pieter Brueghel II

1) She tightly ties up the devil on top of a cushion (*she is a formidable woman, she is a shrew).*
2) He is a pillar licker (*he is a hypocrite*).
3) She carries fire in one hand and water in the other. *(She is false, or even: she blows hot and cold).*
4) This time it's the sow that pulls out the stopper. *(Everything is going badly here, everyone does exactly as they want).*
5) He grills the herring to get the spawn. *(he is someone who squanders).*
6) This time his herring won't cook (*this time he is unsuccessful*).
7) He has a cake on his head. *(he is unlucky).*
8) To fall between two stools.
9) a) To find the dog in the cooking-pot (*to arrive too late, to go dinnerless*)
b) In an open pot or yawning hole, the dog sticks its nose everywhere (*everyone is interested in a badly kept secret).*
10) By the sign of the scissors. *(hair cut here).*
11) To always gnaw on the same bone. *(To always set one's heart on the same thing).*
12) a) A hen feeler (*a lecher*).

b) Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.

13) He puts a bell on a cat (*he launches into a risky business*).
14) To bang ones head against a brick wall (*despite one's best efforts one makes no progress).*
15) Are you a soldier or a peasant?
16) One shears sheep, the other shears pigs. *(One gets all the profit, the other none).*
17) Patient as a sheep.
18) One weaves what the other spins. *(One supplies the materials, the other works with them).*
19) Beware the black dog doesn't interfere (*beware that nothing happens to thwart your plans*).
20) He carries a full basket of daylight (*He devotes himself to unnecessary labour*).
21) He lights a candle for the devil. *(He flatters anyone for favour, he wants to be everyone's friend).*
22) He makes his confession to the devil. *(He confides in someone who is not worthy).*
23) He who whispers in one's ear. *(Slanderer or gossip monger).*
24) The Stork invited the Fox. *(The cheater is fooled* – refers to a fable by Aesop*).*
25) The spit must be watered. *(One must take care of everything if one wants to succeed).*
26) One must put the roast on the spit while the fire burns. *(One must strike while the iron is hot).*
27) To be (sitting) on live coals *(To be impatient).*
28) Two dogs with one bone rarely get on (*Two people are rarely of the same opinion on the same matter).*
29) The pig is stuck in the belly. *(it is an irrevocable deed).*
30) To scatter roses before swine (*Give something beautiful to someone who cannot appreciate it).*
31) She puts the blue cloak over her husband's shoulders. *(She pulls the wool over his eyes- i.e. deceives him).*
32) It goes like pincers on a pig. *(It is incongruous).*
33) Fill up the well after the calf has drowned (*Give advice when it is too late, to shut the stable door when the horse has bolted).*
34) One must crawl if one wants to make it through the world. *(You must know how to be servile if you want to make it in society).*
35) He turns the world on his thumb (*he has everyone twisted round his finger*).
36) Attach a flaxen beard to the Lord (*to be a hypocrite*).
37) They are holding on at full stretch *(Each wants to overpower the other).*
38) To put a spoke in the wheel (*to create problems*).
39) He who upset his porridge cannot get it all back. *(It is no use crying over spilt milk).*
40) He is looking for the axe. *(He is lazy).*
41) He who searches, finds.
42) He finds it difficult to grab two loaves at the same time. *(He is having trouble making ends meet).*
43) He wants to open wider than an oven (*he attempts the impossible, he tires himself pointlessly).*
44) He is sitting in his own light. *(He puts himself in the shade. He wrongs himself).*
45) One doesn't search for another in the oven if one hasn't been in there oneself. *(It takes one to know one).*
46) She takes the chicken egg and leaves the goose egg. *(She puts the prey out of harms way).*

47) To fall through the basket. *(To fail or even: to entangle oneself in lies or boasts and not know how to get out of them).*
48) He is suspended between heaven and earth.
49) To cut belts from someone else's leather *(To be generous with someone else's wealth).*
50) He grabs the eel by the tail. *(He will certainly not succeed in his endeavour).*
51) To swim against the tide.
52) To throw the habit in the nettles. *(To give up one's profession or quit religious life).*
53) A cracked wall is soon in ruins (*Evil, once present quickly wreaks havoc*).
54) To be unable to bear the sun shining on the water. *(To be jealous of another's happiness).*
55) He throws his money into the water. *(He throws his money down the drain).*
56) They both shit through the same hole. *(They get on famously well).*
57) It's like putting a lavatory above a pit. *(It is obvious).*
58) The big fishes eat the little fishes. *(The strong dominate the weak).*
59) He fishes behind the nets. *(He arrived too late).*
60) He wipes his backside on the prison door. *(He is reckless).*
61) He falls from the (back of the) bull onto the ass. (*From the frying pan into the fire).*
62) He plays atop the pillory. *(He takes over something for an inappropriate use).*
63) Two heads (or two fools) under the same cap. *(These two people always agree).*
64) Shave the fool without soap. *(Profit from the weaknesses of others).*
65) He has got toothache behind the ears. *(He is crafty).*
66) a)He pisses at the moon. *(To attempt the impossible).*
b) He pissed against the moon (*he came off badly*).
67) By the sign of the chamber pot (*everything is askew there*).
68) Fools draw the card (*simpletons have their arms full, luck smiles on the foolish)*
69) To shit on the whole world. *(To make fun of everything).*
70) At the sign of the world-turned-upside-down *(everything is turned on its head – it is not as it should be).*
71) They hold onto each other by their noses *(they mutually deceive each other).*
72) He looks through his fingers. *(He takes it easy, he is indulgent).*
73) To be in his shoes (*to wait in vain).*
74) Bring out the broom. *(live it up while the master's away).*
75) They jumped under the broom *(they are living as common-law husband and wife).*
76) The rooftops are covered with tarts. *(There is an abundance of everything)*
77) a) To shoot one arrow straight after the other (*to drop one hint after the other*).
b) Don't shoot all your arrows at once (*don't exhaust all your supplies at once, don't say everything at once).*
78) To keep an egg in the nest. *(To keep a nest egg, put something away for a rainy day).*
79) When the gate is open, the pigs run through the corn (*when no one keeps watch everything goes askew).*
80) He stretches out his coat the way the wind blows. *(He blows with the wind, he changes sides).*
81) He winnows feathers in the breeze. *(He does pointless or foolish work).*
82) Less corn, more pork (*you cannot have everything at once*).
83) To kill two flies in one swat. *(To kill two birds with one stone).*
84) When the house burns, he warms himself by the fire. (*It doesn't matter to him that his house burns, as long as he can warm himself in the fire)*.
85) A good soldier is not afraid of fire.

86) There is no smoke without fire
87) Her behind has caught fire (*She is in a hurry*).
88) When the blind leads the blind, all fall into the ditch. *(The blind leading the blind).*
89) Horse manure is scarcely figs. (*One must not believe in nonsense*).
90) He watches dancing bears. *(He is hungry).*
91) For this reason and that, the geese go barefoot.
92) Who knows why geese go barefoot? *(There is a reason for everything).*
93) He shits on the gallows. *(He mocks Justice).*
94) To set sail with the devil. *(To get involved with the wrong crowd).*
95) The journey is not over until you see the church belfry. *(It is not as easy as it seems).*

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[i] In a letter of 1609, addressed to Cardinal Federico Borromeo, Jan wrote apologetically that he was unable to obtain works by his father for the clergyman because the Emperor had offered to pay a very high price for any of Bruegel's paintings that became available. For the reference to Brueghel correspondence see:- Dominique Allart, "Did Pieter Breughel the Younger see his father's paintings? Some methodological and critical reflections", in catalogue of the exhibition *Brueghel Enterprises,* ed. Peter van den Brink, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, 2001, p. 47.

[ii] Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Netherlandish Proverbs*, panel, 117 x 163.5 cm, Staatliche Muzeen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

[iii] See: catalogue of the exhibition, *Brueghel Enterprises*, *op. cit.,* p. 59.

[iv] See: catalogue of the exhibition, *Brueghel Enterprises*, *op. cit.,* p. 59.

[v] See literature above.