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Pieter Bruegel the Elder: art discourse in the sixteenth-century Netherlands

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Introduction

My dissertation addresses two types of conversations that took place in the Netherlands during the middle of the sixteenth century which were independent of one another, yet significantly related. The first, and primary, discourse I am concerned with is the purely visual interaction between artists and artistic practices that unfolds in pictures. To this end, I am particularly interested in the way artists cite or mediate in their work visual concepts or pictorial elements from other artists or artistic traditions, often translating both form and content from one context into another. The secondary conversation that is fundamental to these exchanges is the dialogue that occurred between viewers in front of pictures and the way in which pictorial strategies facilitated their visual experience and challenged their analytical capabilities. At issue in the former is the creative process of the artist; at issue in the latter are the habits of mind brought to the act of looking, and what questions or revelations the image was likely to have addressed or inspired for its contemporary viewers.

The *Pancake Eaters* (1560, fig. 1) by Pieter Aertsen (1509-1575), now at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, is one example of a visual discourse that invites speculation about art theoretical ideas. The painting depicts a family of peasants gathered in front of a hearth in which a blazing fire burns. Plates of stacked waffles and pancakes, along with other foods, are prominently displayed in the foreground. Each figure's gaze claims its own space and their facial expressions are reserved and thoughtful. No matter what the peasants' actions may be, their demeanor exudes dignity. The painting is striking not so much because of what is represented, rather by how the peasants are composed. In the first half of the sixteenth century, the practice of depicting peasants tended to be rather caricatural: a stocky physique, sometimes to the point of being misformed, with clumsy posture and dazed facial expressions that are rarely individualized.¹ For example, Keith Moxey describes the peasant figures of Sebald Beham (1500-1550) as having a "depersonalized air." "Far

¹ See for example, Hans Joachim Raupp, *Bauernsatiren: Entstehung und Entwicklung des bäuerlichen Genres in der deutschen und niederländischen Kunst ca. 1470-1570*, Niederzier: Lukassen, 1986 and Paul Vandebroeck, *Beeld van de ander, verhoog over het zelf. Over wilden en narren, boeren en bedelaars*, Exhibition Catalogue, Antwerp: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1987.

from representing particular individuals,” Moxey explains, “the Beham peasants seem to repeat basic types, using different gestures and clothing as the principle means of differentiating them.”² A typical illustration of this type of figure and facial characterization can be seen in Cornelis Massys’s (1510-1556) depiction of the *Egg Dance* (1558, fig. 2). To some extent Aertsen’s peasants conform to this practice, but the group in his *Pancake Eaters* resembles, thematically and compositionally, a type of painting in the sixteenth century depicting a bourgeois family sitting at a table. But, as Reindert Falkenburg explains, in the sixteenth century, the portrait, insofar as it did not portray monarchs or aristocrats and clerics, was the prerogative of the bourgeois patricians; the lower classes did not yet appear.³ Nevertheless, Aertsen’s painting makes a strong impression of following the idiom of the contemporary bourgeois family, as Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574) depicts in his painting of *Pieter Jan Foppesz and his family* (fig. 3). In the *Pancake Eaters*, the peasants in particular have such an individual physiognomy and are painted with such meticulousness that it seems we are dealing with portraits of individual personalities worthy of being portrayed.⁴

An additional, yet puzzling, component to this unique portrayal is the face of the child on the right, which is of a Leonardesque type. The features are particularly distinct when his large round cheeks and forehead, as well as his curly red hair, are compared to the other four figures in the picture. Even the bronze tone of the child’s fair, smooth skin is divergent from the sunburned leathery faces of his family. The reference is probably taken from a Leonardo design in which two children embrace and

² Keith Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1989), 65.

³ Falkenburg, “Pieter Aertsen, Rhyparographer,” in J. Koopmans, et al (ed.), *Rhetoric-Rhétoriquers-Rederijkers*, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (1995), 197-218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 211. See also M.B. Buchan, *The Paintings of Pieter Aertsen*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts (1975), 146. J. Held, “Dr. Friedländer’s Scholarly Study of Early Flemish and Dutch Painting,” *Art in America*, vol. 27 (1939), 81-82, notes the social status of Aertsen’s kitchen maids – “[who] move about like heroines in a classical play” – unembroidered with the “esthetic standards [taken] from a social layer quite distinct from that of his actual models.” G.J. Hoogewerff, *De Noord-Nederlandsche Schilderkunst*, vol. IV, Den Haag (1941-2), 531, speaks of a “robustly, classical” kitchen maid, and claims that the Brussels painting “is dated in the antique-Roman manner”; R. Genaille, “L’oeuvre de Pieter Aertsen,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 44 (1954), 278, characterized the kitchen maid as an “aristocratic portrait.” Sources cited from Falkenburg, “Pieter Aertsen’s *Kitchen Maid* in Brussels: a Peek into the Kitchen of Art,” in J.F. van Dijkhuizen, P.G. Hoftijzer, J. Roding, (eds.), *Living in Posterity: Essays in Honour of Bart Westerweel*, Hilversum: Verloren (2004), 95-105.

kiss one another, as can be seen in a depiction of *St. John Kissing the Christ Child* by Joos van Cleve (1485-1540), who also follows the Italian artist's example (1525-1530, fig. 4,5,6).⁵

The presence of this Italianate depiction in Aertsen's peasant painting is striking considering that the subject matter is usually described by modern scholars as belonging to a particularly indigenous mode—the peasant as subject is an exclusively Northern phenomenon in the mid-sixteenth century and did not exist in, for example, Italy.⁶ If Aertsen's pictorial reference to St. John kissing Christ would have been recognized by his viewers, the artistic quote does not only refer to the Leonardesque face but also, albeit in an ironic manner, to the face of the Christ Child and the motif of the kissing. The comparison to the model as represented in van Cleve's painting helps to highlight the close vicinity of the pancake held up to the child's face by the peasant man behind him, which is roughly of the same size as his head. Whereas van Cleve's Baptist kisses Christ, Aertsen's pictorial quotation shows affection for a pancake.⁷ For period viewers, the pancake may have even helped to make the specific connection between Aertsen's motif and the Leonardesque design. After all, pancakes and faces were not always mutually exclusive, as is apparent in a seventeenth-century depiction of a *Boy with Pancake* (fig. 7) by Godfried Schalcken (1643-1706). However, even if the model of two children kissing, whether taken directly from Leonardo or through van Cleve, would have been lost on Aertsen's audience, what is clear in the painting is that Aertsen juxtaposes the child's face with a pancake—Italian style with a food that is quintessentially Dutch.

⁵ On the influence of Leonardo for Joos van Cleve, see John Oliver Hand, *Joos van Cleve: The Complete Paintings*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

⁶ See Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsen: Rhyparographer" (1995); Keith Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting in the Context of the Reformation*, New York, London: Garland, 1977.

⁷ Aertsen makes a habit of "counter-imaging" inanimate objects such as food or architecture and the human body. For a more detailed discussion of this practice, especially as it pertains to this painting, see Reindert Falkenburg's article in Annette de Vries (ed.), *Cultural Mediators. Artists and Writers at the Crossroads of Tradition, Innovation and Reception in the Low Countries and Italy 1450-1650*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers, forthcoming 2007. See also Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsen's *Kitchen Maid* in Brussels" (2004); "Pieter Aertsen's *Alter Marktverkäufer*: Imitatio artis als Paradox," in Jürgen Müller (ed.), *Imitatio Artis - Formen künstlerischer Aneignung in der Frühen Neuzeit*, München, forthcoming; "Alter Einoutus. Over de aard en herkomst van Pieter Aertsen's stilleven-conceptie," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 40 (1989), 41-66.

Since the publications of James Marrow and Rudolf Preimesberger, art historians have begun to embrace the idea that not only Italian but also Northern artists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries offered their own works as a self-referential field of discourse on artistic matters.⁸ Artists were well aware that there were more than one opinion about how a painting should look and function, and they expressed their own beliefs about these theoretical issues in their works of art rather than in texts. However, this possibility has hardly been explored for painters working in an emphatically native mode, such as Aertsen and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569). Aertsen specifically mediates a Leonardesque form from a biblical story within a painting of local rustic life, juxtaposing the quotation of Italianate style with a food that is representative of the Netherlands; if there is such a thing as a Dutch vernacular victual, pancakes would be it. It is a poignant example of the way in which an artist employs a style that was known to have originated in one region with a subject that was indigenous to another, not simply as a means of representation but more fundamentally as a comment on artistic ideas *per se*. For example, this pairing can be viewed as visual commentary on the reception of Italianate ideals in Northern art. The juxtaposition, coupled with the dignified formal presentation of a peasant family, not only confronts two artistic traditions with one another but also highlights an inter-pictorial discourse that addresses style and raises questions about artistic practice and assumptions regarding the relationship of form and content. It is one representation among many that illustrates the analytical approach to art that is an important component of the visual culture of this period.⁹ Later, I will explain how this emphasis on analytical discourse is not reserved just to artists and their work, but equally characterizes the context of viewing.

⁸ See J.H. Marrow, "Symbol and Meaning in the Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance," *Simiolus*, vol. 16 (1986), 150-169 and "Artistic Identity in Early Netherlandish Painting: The Place of Rogier van der Weyden's St. Luke Drawing the Virgin," in C.J. Purtille (ed.), *Rogier van der Weyden, St. Luke Drawing the Virgin. Selected Essays in Context*, Turnhout (1997), 53-57; Rudolph Preimesberger, "Zu Jan van Eycks Diptychon der Sammlung Thyssen-Bornemisza," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 54 (1991), 459-489. See also Heike Schlie, *Bilder des Corpus Christi. Sakramentaler Realismus von Jan van Eyck bis Hieronymus Bosch*, Berlin 2002; Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight Into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Joseph Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

⁹ For a similar discussion on the critical visual reception of the work of Albrecht Dürer by Hans Baldung Grien, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *The Eloquent Artist: Essays on Art, Art Theory and Architecture, Sixteenth to Nineteenth Century*, London: Pindar Press (2004), 1-32.

Aertsen's painting offers a clear example of one type of conversation that my dissertation examines. Specifically, I focus on Bruegel's later depictions of peasants and festivities, particularly the way in which they reveal a similar inter-pictorial discourse about art theoretical issues—how a painting should look and function. But, before transitioning from Aertsen to Bruegel, I would like to define in more detail three important terms (one of which I have already used to characterize aspects of Aertsen's painting) that will reappear throughout this study in relation to Bruegel's work: Italianate, vernacular and history painting (or *historia*). By Italianate, I mean an aspect of a painting that follows a form or style defined in Renaissance Italy. Therefore, whether the face of the child in Aertsen's *Pancake Eaters* is taken directly from Leonardo or through a Northern artist such as van Cleve, it is still Italianate. This distinction is important because in the following chapters I will argue that Bruegel mediates, among other things, Italianate pictorial elements and/or visual concepts from history painting into his later work depicting peasants and festivities. However, I do not necessarily mean that he is directly referencing Italian artists. Rather, he could have taken up Italianate ideas employed by many of his Northern contemporaries, such as Frans Floris (1519/20-1570), Michel Coxie (1499-1593), Martin de Vos (1532-1603) or Maarten van Heemskerck.

The term vernacular has long been used to describe a language that is indigenous to a particular people or region. Whether a language is described as native, mother tongue or the vernacular, these descriptors are made possible only by one culture being aware that other languages exist. The use of the word vernacular consciously distinguishes one culture's own language from that of another. The term has also recently been adopted by modern art historians to describe native artistic practices.¹⁰ In late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century northern Europe, by comparison, the distinction of local artistic custom or a visual vernacular is made

¹⁰ Mark Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*, *Æmulatio* and the Space of Vernacular Style," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 46, Zwolle: Wanders (1996), 181-205 and "Aertsen's Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, Serlio's Architecture and the Meaning of Location," in Jelle Koopmans, et al. (eds.) *Rhetoric – Rhétoriqueurs – Rederijkers*, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (1995), 177; David Freedberg, "Allusion and Topicality in the Work of Pieter Bruegel: The Implications of a Forgotten Polemic," in D. Freedberg (ed.), *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, Tokyo (1989), 53-65. The same is true for scholars working on Italian art; one example is a recent lecture by Charles Dempsey at the Max Planck Institut, Florence, "The Origins of Vernacular Style in Renaissance Art: The Invention of Simone Martini's *Maesta*," July 3, 2006.

possible, at least in part, by the influx of a classicist, Italian art into the region; the community becomes aware of another, radically different, visual language. To paint in a vernacular style, then, becomes a conscious choice; in the sixteenth-century, Northern artists are aware of their own artistic practices as such—Northern—in contrast, or even in opposition, to the styles and/or subjects of art emerging out of Italy. One example of vernacular art in the North that I will specifically address is the portrayal of peasant life as the primary subject within panel painting.

Although I will discuss the term vernacular in greater detail in Chapter One, especially as it has been used by modern scholars to describe Bruegel's art, I would like to acknowledge here that it is a concept that people in the sixteenth century would have most likely reserved for a discussion of language and not applied to the visual arts. Artists and humanist writers in the Netherlands during this period, such as Dominicus Lampsonius (1532-1599) and Lucas de Heere (1534-1584), were fully aware of native Netherlandish artistic practices that were distinct from other regions, especially in regards to the visual prominence given to landscape, but whether or not they would have understood their visual tradition as a kind of vernacular visual language can only remain speculation.¹¹ Of course, the question immediately arises, then, why use the term now if they did not use it then? In the end, I have chosen to employ the term, because I will argue that one way to better understand the visual discourse that is represented in Bruegel's art is in comparison to the motivations and mechanisms of the humanist agenda for the cultivation of the vernacular language. I propose this agenda—especially as it is illustrated in the work of the French poet Clément Marot, the program of the Pléiade poets and, through their influence, De Heere and the rhetorician societies—as a comparative model for describing similar practices of artistic enrichment that is presented in Bruegel's art.

If one aspect of Bruegel's means for artistic cultivation is based on the mediation of visual concepts and pictorial elements from history painting into scenes of everyday rustic life, it is important, then, to briefly define what exactly the term

¹¹ See Walter Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-boeck*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. See also Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1980), esp. 135-142 where he discusses the terms *Welsch* (denoting the Latin or Romance, Italian or French) and *Deutsch* (German—as-opposed-to-*Welsch*) as stylistic descriptors. Whereas *Welsch*, according to Baxandall, is identifiable, the *Deutsch* is less clearly so, but nevertheless a category of the time.

history painting, or *historia*, refers to, at least in the context of this study. The concept is complex and somewhat controversial, but is understood, in general, to be a story articulated by figures. *Historia* refers to both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of a painting. It not only describes a representation of history—whether biblical, political or mythological—but also a substantial, even ambitious, work of art in which several monumental figures are placed in meaningful relation to one another through gestures, movement and expressions, without ever losing sight of the composition as a whole, in order to structure the narrative portrayed.¹²

In his description of the term in *On Painting*, the Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti had in mind frescoes and other large-scale, publicly commissioned works. History paintings were the artist’s “most capacious” and “highest” task. They were carefully composed pictures, in which a substantial number of figures—ideally nine—appeared. Anthony Grafton explains that the Latin term *historia*, which Alberti used, calls to mind one of the central products of humanistic rhetoric: the written narrative of a kingdom’s origins, or a monarch’s reign, or a battle. Cicero described history as *opus oratorium maxime*—“the supreme work of the orator”—and Alberti made clear that he had this definition in mind when he called the *historia* “the greatest work of the painter.”¹³

In northern Europe, the sixteenth-century German theorist Gualtherus Rivius adopted Alberti’s thesis and argued for the creation of “*Histori*” paintings as the prime task of the painter.¹⁴ In his *Schilder-boeck* of 1604, Karel van Mander described history painting as “the most distinguished part of the arts, that is, the positioning of

¹² The literature on the concept of *historia* is extensive. See Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, London: Penguin Press, 2000; A. Grafton, “*Historia* and *Istoria*: Alberti’s terminology in context,” *I Tatti studies*, vol. 8 (2000), 37-68; Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000; Jack M. Greenstein, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1992), esp. 35-58; Charles Rosenberg, “Raphael and the Florentine *Istoria*,” in James Beck (ed.), *Raphael Before Rome, Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 17 (1986), 175-187; Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, London: Penguin Books, 1972. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. See also Carl van de Velde, “Aspekte der Historienmalerei in Antwerpen in der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts,” in Ekkehard Mai and Hans Vlieghe (eds.), *Von Bruegel bis Rubens*, Köln: Verlag Locher (1992), 71-78.

¹³ A. Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti* (2000), 127.

¹⁴ De Costa Kaufmann, *The Eloquent Artist* (2004), 55; See Gualtherus Rivius, *Der furnembsten, notwenigsten der gantzen Architektur angehörigen Mathematischen und mechanischen Künst, eigentlicher Bericht*, Nuremberg (1547), fol. BB 1r, BBB 2rff.

the human figure, and with it ultimately the embracing of all corollary particulars.”¹⁵ Although it is unclear to what degree Alberti’s discussion of *historia* in *On Painting* influenced artists, whether in Italy or the North, what is certain is that the Italian example of what painting should be—as represented in, for example, the work of Michelangelo and Raphael (a style that is itself based on classical art)—was taken up by Northern artists in the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ Just one case among many others is Jan van Scorel’s *Baptism of Christ* from 1530, now in Haarlem, in which he patterns many of his figural constructions after a design by Michelangelo. This development also characterizes the work of other well-known Northern artists such as Jan Gossaert, Coxie, Floris and Heemskerck.¹⁷ Whereas in much of Bruegel’s previous work, such as the Series of the Seasons or *Netherlandish Proverbs*, one could say that the artist constructs the landscape or architectural setting as the primary visual force that guides the viewer’s gaze and develops the narrative, in his later peasant paintings it is the construction and distribution of monumental figures that perform this task. The difference between these paintings by Bruegel and those of Floris, Heemskerck and the others is the subject matter for which this mode is employed.

One of the ways Bruegel participated in the visual discourse of his time was the unique manner he dealt with the influx of Italian art into the Netherlands. By the mid-sixteenth century, differing opinions among Northern artists about this “new” art seems to have created a kind of polemic between a more ornate, classicizing style of painting and another mode which rejected such models and looked instead to local traditions for its inspiration.¹⁸ Until now, scholars have characterized Bruegel as an advocate of the latter school, arguing that his work adheres to an emphatically “vernacular style” that

¹⁵ “het besonderste deel der Consten, te weten, een Menschlijck beeldt te leeren stellen, oock eyndlijck alle ander omstandighe deelen t’omhelsen.” As translated by Walter Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon* (1991), 194.

¹⁶ In Lampsonius’s *Vita* of Lambert Lombard, published in 1565 by Hubert Goltzius, he makes a passing reference to Alberti.

¹⁷ On the interaction of these artists and Italian influences, see Raphael de Smedt (ed.), *Michel Coxcie, pictor regis (1499-1592)*, International Colloquium, Mechelen, June 5-6, 1992, Mechelen: Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen, 1993; Carl van de Velde, *Frans Floris (1519/20-1570): Leven en Werken*, Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1975; Ilja Veldman, *Maarten van Heemskerck and Dutch Humanism in the Sixteenth-Century*, Maarssen: Gary Schwartz, 1977; Adelheid Reinsch, *Die Zeichnungen des Marten de Vos: stilistische und ikonographische Untersuchungen*, Bamberg, 1967; Ariane Mensger, *Jan Gossaert: die niederländische Kunst zu Beginn der Neuzeit*, Berlin: Reimer, 2002.

¹⁸ Freedberg, “Allusion and Topicality” (1989), 63. See also Meadow, “Procession to Calvary,” (1996) and “Aertsen’s Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” (1995).

embraces the “natural life of Brabant.”¹⁹ However, building on preliminary suggestions by Carl Gustaf Stridbeck, I turn to the program of the Pléiade poets in France, a group of seven lyric poets who campaigned for the cultivation and use of the vernacular language instead of classical Latin, as a comparable model for understanding Bruegel’s unique position in the visual discussion.²⁰

These French poets, including Joachim Du Bellay (1522-1560) and Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), subscribed to the humanist practice of embracing the themes and forms of classical literature, but rejected the propagation of Latin as the only language for artistic and scholarly expression. They considered it their responsibility to defend the vernacular and advocate its use by showing that it was just as capable of copious, apt and ornate expression as were the languages of Antiquity.²¹ They advocated a higher and better style by encouraging the translation and imitation of the ancients and Italians into their native tongue. Whereas the vernacular had fallen into disrepute by following usage or custom, classical Latin is regulated by principles of rhetoric and poetry. To further develop the vernacular language, therefore, was a matter of integrating these artistic principles as much as custom as regulating factors. The ideal was not one of crude imitation of outward appearance, but of a poet so well-versed in the inner principles that had guided the composition of Ancient literature that he would be able to imaginatively mediate these forms to restructure the vernacular in new and inventive ways.²² Despite the fact that the Pléiade program originated in France, it was also highly influential for writers in the North, such as Lucas de Heere and Jan van der Noot (1540-1595). Furthermore, these men were prominent members of the Antwerp *rederijkerskamer* (rhetorician’s society) in the 1560’s, an organization that combined

¹⁹ Ibid, Freedberg and Meadow. See also Max Friedländer, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, London: Phaidon (1969), 136, where he disputes that Bruegel was a student of Pieter Coecke van Aelst and that he was never trained by a professional panel painter.

²⁰ Although he did not elaborate, Stridbeck was the first to propose a connection between the “Romanism” in Bruegel’s art and the program of the Pléiade group. At first he asserts an antagonistic relationship between Bruegel and Italianate, classicist forms and ideas, one that inspires a “nationalist” reaction against foreign influence. But, by situating Bruegel’s work in the context of the Pléiade he describes artistic interaction that is better understood as validation or cultivation. I will expand on this suggestion and show that it is an appropriate one; Carl Gustaf Stridbeck, *Bruegelstudien: Untersuchungen zu den ikonologischen Problemen bei Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. sowie dessen Beziehungen zum niederländischen Romanismus*, Soest: Davaco Publishers (1977), 288. See also Meadow, “Bruegel’s *Procession to Calvary* (1996), 198.

²¹ Grahame Castor, *Pléiade Poetics: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Thought and Terminology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1964), 8.

²² Ibid.

with artists to form the same guild—topics I will take up in greater detail in Chapter One.

By offering a close visual analysis of Bruegel's later peasant paintings—*Peasant Wedding Banquet*, *Peasant Dance* and *Peasant and Nest Robber* (1568, all in Vienna)—as well as his design of the *Festival of Fools*, compared to the particular way the Pléiade poets and rederijkers enrich the vernacular language, I will expand the notion of vernacular style and argue that Bruegel's cultivation of it is far from a rejection of classicist, Italianate influences. Rather, these paintings reveal an intricate visual discourse that mediates form, style and iconography from Italianate and Antique sources into scenes of sixteenth-century rustic life in the Netherlands (or, said in another way, artful Latinate components into a Northern visual vernacular). To counter the claim that Bruegel's later works represent an indigenous idiom that eschews foreign influence, I discuss in greater detail their hybrid nature, 'artfully' depicting the 'natural' life of Brabant, and argue that similar to the cultivation and use of the vernacular language instead of Latin, these pictures simultaneously question the uncritical acceptance of artistic practices and assumptions defined in Italy and push for the possibility of incorporating these very principles into what was increasingly recognized as a Northern idiom.

This artistic agenda could also have been understood by Bruegel's viewers as a response to the hierarchical ordering of the visual arts, a classical scheme of prioritizing artistic modes articulated by, among others, Pliny the Elder and revived in Italy during the fifteenth century. Pliny describes under the category of lesser painting (*minoris picturae*) the work of artists who depicted humbler subjects, such as the *rhyparographoi* and *anthropographoi*, painters of sordid subjects and human beings, what we might now call still-life and genre painters.²³ This mode is in contrast to the more prestigious representation of history; in classical discussions on style this referred to naval battles or cavalry engagements, but Alberti adds to this list mythological

²³ De Costa Kaufmann, *The Eloquent Artist* (2004), 54. See also Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Art Market*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2006), esp. 87-102; Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsen: Rhyparographer" (1995); Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

subjects.²⁴ Likewise, Sebastian Serlio (1475-1554) drew distinctions when he described the stage setting for comic, tragic and satyric scenes, designs which became popular references for Northern artists after they were published by the widow of Pieter Coecke van Aelst in 1553.²⁵ Serlio's description of the stages imposes a social hierarchy upon the dramatic genres: the tragic set includes the "stately homes of great personages, for the actions of love, strange adventures and cruel murders (as you read in ancient and modern tragedies) happen always in the houses of great lords, Dukes, Princes and Kings"; the comedic set takes place in a street scene that includes all aspects of life—a great inn, church, private homes, brothel, etc.; and the satyric features "gente rustica" in a wooded natural setting complete with rustic cabins.²⁶

No doubt that with the influx of Italian designs into the Netherlands during the sixteenth century, concepts and theories about art revived from antiquity also made their way north of the Alps. Designs from Italy were born along some of the same routes by which knowledge of classicizing humanism reached northern Europe. As a result, this art (and I would add here ideas about art) carried with it the prestigious associations granted to all remnants and revivals of classical culture by the humanists.²⁷ Whereas in Italy up to the mid-sixteenth century the hierarchical ordering of the visual arts seems to be a consistent topic of theoretical discussion, supported by more developed ideas on the subject in rhetorical and poetic theory, such distinctions, whether in theory or practice, were still undefined during this period in the North, both among artists and viewers. Reindert Falkenburg, Mark Meadow and other scholars have noted that the issue of genre in general is a particularly fraught one for Netherlandish art.²⁸ For example, Dominicus Lampsonius, in a letter to Giorgio

²⁴ Ibid., 55. On Alberti's inclusion of mythology as *historia*, see A. Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti* (2000), 127.

²⁵ See also E.H. Gombrich, "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape," *Norm and Form*, London: Phaidon Press (1971), 119-121; Jan Białostocki, "Das Modus-Problem in den bildenden Künsten," *Stil und Ikonographie*, Dresden: Fundus-Bücher (1966), 9-33.

²⁶ *The Book of Architecture by Sebastiano Serlio, London, 1611*, New York: Arno Press, 1980. This English version was translated directly from the Dutch 1553 version, which is a complete and accurate translation of Serlio's original text. See also Barnard Hewitt (ed.), *The Renaissance Stage: Documents of Serlio, Sabbattini and Furtttenbach*, Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1958.

²⁷ Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*" (1996), 182.

²⁸ Ibid. See also Meadow, "Aertsen's Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" (1995); Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsen: Ryparographer" (1995); Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes* (2006); Beverly Louise Brown, "Genre and Meaning: Crosscurrents Between Venice and the North," in Bernard Aikema and Beverly Louise Brown (eds.), *Renaissance Venice and the North*, London: Thames and Hudson

Vasari, argues that landscape, deemed by Italians to be of a lesser mode, is the proper glory of the Belgians and is equally important to the painted *historia*.²⁹ Furthermore, we know that in the middle of the sixteenth century in the Netherlands, terms such as “landscape” or “peasant scene” were used by notaries to describe pictures in a specific inventory, but these terms did not delineate status nor did they describe how a viewer should visually experience a painting, as is the case for modern categories of art. Bruegel’s mediation of visual concepts and pictorial elements from history painting into everyday life could have functioned not only to construct and enrich a native style but also would have created a tension that led his viewers, and fellow artists, to critically assess the artistic standards and assumptions about the hierarchical ordering of the visual arts.³⁰

Bruegel’s inter-pictorial dialogue entails both conscious quotes of well-known motifs—position and structure of figures, attributes or compositions—as well as notions of artistic and theoretical style in Italy and Flanders (i.e., issues of decorum). This practice of mediation not only raises questions for sixteenth-century viewers about artistic representation *per se* but also calls on—indeed, is dependant on—various levels of viewer awareness—literary, religious and artistic—during the process of visual analysis. The pictures are put together in such a way that they interact with the storehouse of knowledge brought to the act of looking and, therefore, demand, even challenge, the interpretive capabilities of viewers.

The multivalent character of these images leads me to the secondary conversation my dissertation examines: the verbal and analytical discourse that these images would have inspired between viewers in front of images hanging in the domestic interior. In Bruegel’s *Peasant Wedding Banquet* (fig. 8), a festive Flemish

(2005), 105-113; R. Falkenburg, “Recente visies op de zeventiende-eeuwse Nederlandse genreschilderkunst,” *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1991), 119-141; Wolfgang Stechow and Christopher Comer, “The History of the Term Genre,” *Allen Memorial Museum Bulletin*, vol. 30, n. 2 (1973), 88-94; Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp, 1550-1700*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987; Hessel Miedema, *Karel van Mander, Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert (1973), 2 vol.; L. De Pauw-De Veen, *De begrippen ‘schilder’, ‘schilderij’ en ‘schilderen’ in de zeventiende eeuw*, Brussel: Paleis der Academien, 1969.

²⁹ Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon* (1991), 145-6.

³⁰ In regards to Aertsen, Stoichita concludes that the unconventionality of subject matter and handling in some of his works, such as his presentation of peasants and foodstuffs, gave them the status of “anti-painting.” Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image* (1997), 3-18. See also Charlotte Houghton, “This was Tomorrow: Pieter Aertsen’s *Meat Stall* as Contemporary Art,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 2 (June 2004), 277-300.

banquet is set within a barn filled with hay from the recent harvest. The guests are seated around a long diagonally composed table. They eat and drink while in the foreground more food is distributed and more beer is poured. The bride is denoted by a green drapery attached to the wall of hay and an honorary crown tacked above her head. On the right side, a monk and a bearded man dressed in black are attentively engaged in conversation (fig. 9). The monk's right hand assumes the gesture of speech while the distinguished urbanite, presumably the lord of the territory, thoughtfully listens with his hands folded, signaling his contemplation of the friar's words. The two are obviously outsiders, probably visiting the village to take part in the wedding ceremony as cleric and witness.³¹ It has been argued, rather convincingly, that Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet* probably hung in the dining room of the wealthy Jean Noiroet, the Antwerp Mint Master from 1562-1572, a subject I will return to in more detail in the next chapter.³² If we view Bruegel's painted feast with the understanding that the picture hung in a dining room, where cultivated guests were themselves partaking in a meal, this marginal detail of the monk and urbanite is an important illustration of the most important activity at mealtimes for Bruegel's educated viewers—learned discussion. If the other people seated at the long table—most of whom do not engage one another, focusing their attention on the food and drink before them—illustrate for viewers social manners of peasants, then the two more civilized “outsiders” provide an example of proper behavior for the middle class during a dinner party.³³ Therefore, contemporary ideas about conduct and conversation surrounding the feast become important elements for reconstructing hypothetical scenarios for the reception of art.

³¹ On the social function of these two guests, see Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999), 163-168.

³² Luc Smolderen, “Tableaux de Jérôme Bosch, de Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien et de Frans Floris Dispersés en vente publique à la monnaie d'anvers en 1572,” *Revue Belge D'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Art*, vol. LXIV (1995), 33-41; Claudia Goldstein, “Artifacts of Domestic Life: Bruegel's paintings in the Flemish home,” in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 47 (1996), 174-193 and “Keeping Up Appearances: The Social Significance of Domestic Decoration in Antwerp, 1508-1600,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2003.

³³ For example, regarding earlier peasant imagery with more overt displays of drunkenness and bawdiness, Kavaler explains that, “this strain of peasant imagery seems closely associated with an urban approach to self-definition through negative example.” Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel* (1999), 158. See also Margaret Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Sullivan makes a similar argument for the peasant feasts of Pieter Aertsen; see “Aertsen's Kitchen and Market Scenes: Audience and Innovation in the art of Pieter Aertsen,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 81 (1999), 236-266.

I examine the *convivium* tradition as a model for better understanding how contemporary viewers may have analyzed and discussed the multivalent nature of Bruegel's pictures. As a genre of literature, the *convivium* stretches from Antiquity to the Renaissance and describes interactions that took place before, during and after mealtime. For example, dialogues, such as Erasmus's *Convivia*, offer detailed instructions for proper conversation within a convivial setting. However, the interactions described in these texts not only took place in the dining room but also throughout the domestic interior, before and after the meal, as well as outside in the garden. Although Erasmus's dialogues are, for the most part, ideal and fictional, their popularity increased their instructional value and they became social standards to be imitated. The *convivia* of the wealthy and educated, then, helps delimit the context in which period viewers saw and understood paintings such as Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet*.

This viewing context is predicated on the fact that while one partakes of food or drink that cultivates the body, one should also engage in conversation that cultivates the mind. The conversation that structures this self-cultivation is, as we shall see, analytical in nature. It is a setting that is described as being more receptive to questions than answers and is characterized by varied and open-ended discussions. Diverse topics are proposed which inspire equally diverse comments and opinions. In the end, being right or wrong about a particular subject matter has little value; rather, how well one argues his point and inspires further conversation and opportunity for learning is what is important. I will argue that it is in this analytical and curious atmosphere that Bruegel's multivalent works would have functioned as "conversation pieces" that facilitated self-cultivation.³⁴ Therefore, I want to emphasize here that all of my observations on and interpretations of Bruegel's work in the following chapters should be understood to operate in this context—a kind of convivial re-enactment in which one voice among several raises questions or ideas about both the meaning and mechanics of the pictures. My aim is to discuss both the visual mechanics of the images as well as the way they would have functioned in the period to raise questions

³⁴ The term "conversation piece" was first applied to Bruegel's work by Meadow in his discussion of the artist's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. See *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric*, Zwolle: Waanders (2002), 153.

and inspire discussion. No doubt that subsequent (art historical) voices will differ in many ways from my own, as my voice differs from my predecessors, but what remains important is whether or not these voices inspire further conversation and the pursuit of understanding.

Conversation culminating in self-cultivation leads me to my final introductory comments. By focusing on the visual evidence provided by the pictures themselves in conjunction with the reconstruction of their hypothetical reception in a convivial context, I will show how Bruegel's practice of mediating pictorial elements and visual concepts from history painting into local scenes of everyday life extends beyond showing artistic influence or a cultivation of his vernacular style. Rather, I will argue that his artistic mediation is not at all separated from the content of the images, and would have awakened a repertoire of references—visual, literary, religious—that the viewer brought to the act of looking. Ernst Gombrich describes this as the “beholder’s share,” which extends far beyond simply the viewer’s knowledge of a story’s plot from which the scene of a painting is taken. A viewer’s understanding of a representation is dependent on all previous experiences he or she is led to associate with its subject matter. “All representation relies to some extent on what I have called ‘guided projections.’ When we say that the blots and brushstrokes of the impressionist landscapes ‘suddenly come to life,’ we mean we have been led to project a landscape into these dabs of pigment.”³⁵ Considering the highly analytical convivial environment I briefly described, the viewer’s recognition of these formal and/or stylistic elements could have inspired “guided projections” which led to discussions regarding possible thematic connections between Bruegel’s rustic scenes, the visual sources he mediates and the lived experiences of the viewer. In fact, it is precisely in the moment of recognition that a shift of perspective occurs in which the viewer redefines what is represented in the context of what is referenced. In so doing, Bruegel’s practice of mediating both form and content functions not only to further validate his artistic practice and subject, but also to cultivate the mind of the viewer—to understand the painting and his or her visual experience not only in the context of what is pictured but

³⁵ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton: University Press (1960), 203.

also in light of the way in which the image inspires the viewer's imagination.³⁶ The process of sight and insight, of seeing and understanding, is dependent on the viewer not taking the picture at face value, but analytically engaging and discussing it. This habit of seeing through, or within, what seems to be a depiction of everyday life, pictorial references or marginal motifs that comment on or offer insight for the painting as a whole, is consistent throughout Bruegel's work and has a much longer history in earlier Netherlandish art, a subject I will discuss further in Chapter Three.

In terms of method, it is important to emphasize that it is the pictures themselves and the visual experience they inspire that form the primary source material for my research. Rather than look exclusively towards texts to explicate Bruegel's paintings, I build my arguments from a careful analysis of the visual grammar and syntax of the individual works (how the particulars in an image are organized into groups). To this end, Otto Pächt's discussion of the "design principle (*Gestaltungsprinzip*)" has been highly influential. The design principle is not merely visible form but something more fundamental, a system of differential relations that organizes the work: figure-ground relationships, framing devices and tensions between horizontal and vertical or foreground and background motifs.³⁷ It is out of a close observation of these elements and the aesthetic experience they produce that questions regarding form and content arise. As Wolfgang Kemp so aptly states: "the function of beholding has already been incorporated into the work itself."³⁸ That is to say, perception itself is interpretive; simply observing structural design is already a part of the viewer's process of discerning meaning. Also important is to supplement this visual analysis by relating it to the complex web of contemporary images that the pictures would have most likely been viewed in association with. It is important to combine what Kemp defines as "reception aesthetics" with Gombrich's "psychology of reception," i.e. that the work of art dynamically interacts with the beholder and the

³⁶ As George Didi-Huberman explains, "The word 'expectative' attempts to account for this paradox, that a visibility can acquire all its value not from what it shows but from the expectation of a visibility it does not show." See Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*. Chicago: University Press (1995), 76.

³⁷ Otto Pächt, *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, London: Harvey Miller Publishers (1999), 11.

³⁸ Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception," in Mark A. Cheetham, et al (eds.) *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), 181.

storehouse of mental images he or she brings to the act of looking. These resonances, or pictorial associations that exist in the imagination of the viewer, are as important for reconstructing context and meaning as what is actually shown in the picture itself.³⁹ Depending on pictures rather than texts as the primary source for interpretation is speculative and less verifiable. However, in the following my analysis will be layered in such a way that while I allow the images themselves to raise the primary questions of inquiry, in order to work towards answering these questions I will contextualize my visual analysis of Bruegel's work within discussions of textual sources, including period treatises on art, poetry, rhetoric and *convivia*, in order to provide corroborating evidence for my readings.

The first chapter is dedicated to more closely examining the two conversations I have briefly described above, especially in the context of the two parallel literary phenomena—the Pléiade program and *convivium* tradition. In the first section, I question the term vernacular as it has been applied to Bruegel in recent art historical literature, particularly the way it is used to situate the artist within a school of painting that rejects Italianate, classicist influence. In order to expand the concept, I take a closer look at two contemporary texts, one by Lucas de Heere and another by Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598), which have been understood by art historians to illustrate a polemic between a Northern school of painting and an Italianate style. Without rejecting that a polemic is present in these texts, I redefine the issues at stake by analyzing two contemporary artistic discussions that were intricately intertwined and widespread in Bruegel's artistic community: first, the debate around art and nature; second, the program of the Pléiade poets and rhetorician's society for the cultivation of the vernacular language. These two discussions, I will argue, are fundamental for better understanding the art theoretical statements made by De Heere and Ortelius, as

³⁹ Important studies in this regard are Wolfgang Kemp (ed.), *Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1992; Valeska van Rosen, Klaus Krüger, Rudolf Preimesberger (eds.), *Der stumme Diskurs der Bilder. Reflexionsformen des Ästhetischen in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit*, München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2003; Jürgen Müller, "Holbein und Laokoon. Ein Beitrag zur gemalten Kunsttheorie Hans Holbeins d.J.," in Bodo Brinkmann und Wolfgang Schmid (eds.) *Hans Holbein und der Wandel in der Kunst des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, Turnhout: Brepols (2005), 73-89.

well as for acquiring a model for viewing the inter-pictorial discourse active in Bruegel's later work.

In Chapter Two, my focus will be a deeper look into the viewing context of paintings that hung in the domestic interior using the genre of literature of the *convivium* tradition. I discuss various convivial texts, focusing primarily on Erasmus's six *convivia* first published in 1518, and argue that Bruegel's paintings can be better understood as "conversation pieces" within an atmosphere that prizes an analytical mind and diverse opinions.

Chapter Three is dedicated to a close visual analysis of three of Bruegel's later paintings of peasants—*Peasant Wedding Banquet*, *Peasant Dance* and *Peasant and Nest Robber*. My discussion of each painting is divided into two categories. On the one hand, I formally analyze the visual mechanics of the pictures. My focus will be especially on their hybrid, multivalent character, in which conscious quotes of well-known visual concepts or pictorial elements from history painting are subtly mediated within detailed representations of local custom. This mediation, I will continue to argue, should be understood in the context of vernacular cultivation, or enrichment, which is comparable to the humanist program for the cultivation of the vernacular language. In addition, I will show how these visual translations, if you will, are not at all separated from the content of the images and are important for describing the visual experience these pictures would have facilitated. For the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, the fundamental question at stake is, what is the nature of a feast? The individual figures and diagonal composition lead viewers to a discussion about social manners—a balance between pleasure and refinement—as well as to seeing both the painting and the lived feast of the viewer in front of it in relation to one of the most important feasts of the Bible, the wedding at Cana. For the *Peasant Dance*, the fundamental question posed is, what is the nature of a kermis? By combining visual concepts from Italianate bacchanalia with more traditional iconography of peasant kermises and constructing compositional elements that demand specific ways of seeing particular motifs and actions in relation to one another, Bruegel thematizes the viewer's act of 'seeing through' and visual discernment. The artist stages a viewing experience that negotiates the fragile balance between celebratory, carefree behavior and cultivated reverence when observing church holidays, a balance that, according to church officials and

political leaders, had vanished from village kermises. For the *Peasant and Nest Robber*, I will build on the work of previous scholars to propose that, on the one hand, Bruegel's picture is a detailed, complex representation of farmers in their rustic surroundings which would have been viewed in relation not only to a Dutch proverb and a motif from Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* but also to a description of folly by Erasmus in *The Praise of Folly*. On the other hand, Bruegel also incorporates into his peasant scene specific pictorial elements that the viewer would have associated with depictions of John the Baptist, a recognition that would have led to conversation and insights about possible thematic connections between the life of the biblical figure and the actions of the central peasant.

The *Festival of Fools*, a print by Pieter van der Heyden after Bruegel's design, is the subject of the fourth and final chapter. Although the medium is a print rather than panel painting, and therefore the audience much more broad and diverse, I will show that the practices of making and viewing works of art I describe in the previous chapters are also helpful in thinking about this particular design. Building on the key elements of blindness and self-knowledge developed in my discussion of the *Peasant and Nest Robber*, I will interweave analyses of certain aspects of the picture—architecture, actions of the fools, and text—in order to show how Bruegel elaborates on the processional format of contemporary *facties* (wagon plays presented at drama festivals), using architecture, figures and accompanying text to visually and intellectually fuse the world of the viewer and that of the picture. Specifically, I will explain how the bowling game represented incites the performance of interpretation as an exercise in overcoming blindness through the acquisition of self-knowledge. Subsequently, I will discuss how Bruegel's allegory of folly not only resonates visually with *facties* but also depictions of allegorical processions. I will argue that although Bruegel's picture would have been viewed in the context of these vernacular plays, there are other pictorial elements that reveal a visual discourse with the practice of representing allegorical processions, particularly those of Maarten van Heemskerck. More precisely, the manner in which Bruegel portrays the procession of fools not only incorporates visual illustrations of local proverbs, gestures or customs specific to the subject, but also mediates classical architecture and pictorial motifs that resemble, or play on, a type of image that, although not classical in nature, had been employed up to

this point for classical themes or royal entries. As a result, Bruegel presents a local festivity in a form that brings with it a certain mode, or habit, of viewing that would have informed the viewer's analysis and interpretation.

I conclude the dissertation with a close reading of an anecdote about Bruegel written by Karl van Mander in his description of the life of Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527-1607). This account of a coincidental artistic interaction between Bruegel and Vredeman has been largely neglected by art historians and offers a glimpse into a possible visual discourse between two well-known artists and how the confrontation of their different artistic styles was evaluated in the latter portion of the sixteenth century.