



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Richardson, T.M.

Citation

Richardson, T. M. (2007, October 16). *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: art discourse in the sixteenth-century Netherlands*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12377>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12377>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter Two

Art, Conversation and the *Convivium* Tradition

Similar to his earlier paintings of the *Series of the Seasons* for Nicolaes Jonghelink, it is likely that Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet* hung in the dining room of the wealthy merchant Jean Noiroot.¹⁵³ Noiroot, a former Master of the Mint in Antwerp, whose bankruptcy led to the auction of his estate in 1572, was also a wealthy patron. His collection included a large number of paintings by major Flemish artists, such as Hieronymus Bosch and Frans Floris, and among them were five by Bruegel, one of which was described as a large peasant wedding banquet painted in oil on wood.¹⁵⁴ Luc Smolderen has pointed out that it is probably this same painting, the second highest valued work in Noiroot's collection, that was acquired by the city due to Noiroot's financial troubles and subsequently bought in July 1594 in Brussels by Archduke Ernst, along with Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons*, who then took the work to Vienna where they eventually made their way to the Kunsthistorisches Museum.¹⁵⁵ The inventory for the sale of Noiroot's collection reports that the large peasant wedding banquet hung in the *achtereetkamer* (back dining room), along with three other paintings by Bruegel and portraits of Noiroot's family.¹⁵⁶ Claudia Goldstein argues that the decision to hang these specific pictures, some of the most valuable in Noiroot's collection, in this dining space indicates the room's prominence. The four Bruegel paintings—combined in the same space with the family portraits also on display—

¹⁵³ For a discussion on the location and function of Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons* in the setting of a dining room, see Goldstien, "Keeping Up Appearances" (2003).

¹⁵⁴ "Item een groot tafereel van eender boeren bruyloft van P. Bruegel." Smolderen, "Tableaux de Jérôme Bosch, de Pierre Bruegel L' Ancien et de Frans Floris" (1995), 38.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33-41. Smolderen points out that Noiroot's collection was considerable and on par with other Masters of the Mint, including Jongelincq, and the master in Middelburg who owned several paintings by Pieter Aertsen. The Middelburg Mint Master Melchior Wijntgis was an avid collector of art and close friend of Karel van Mander. For further commentary on this discovery, see Philippe and Françoise Roberts-Jones, *Bruegel* (2002), 278; Goldstein, "Artifacts of Domestic Life" (1996).

¹⁵⁶ Archives Generales du Royaume, Bruxelles, 3572bis: "in dachter eedtkamerken: lerst een mariabelt op pannel...diffigien van wylen jan noiroot en synen huysvrouw ende tanneken Noiroot...Aeffigien van adrian noiroot de voirs. Toebehoirenden...Il tronniyen op pannel...Een gelaesbert met XI gelasen daerop...Een boeren kiermisse by bruegel gemaect...een (singel) tappyt cleecken...eenen schoon cristalleyen spiegel in scrynhout...den winter op doeck by bruegel gemaect...een boeren bruyloft op pannel by bruegel gemaect...een ander bruyloft op doeck oyck by bruegel gemaect." See Goldstien, "Keeping up Appearances" (2003), 44.

convey a message of wealth, connoisseurship and family lineage. It is a presentation for outsiders in the room which, as guests, they would most likely have seen when invited in for a meal.¹⁵⁷ In his discussion of seventeenth-century domestic interiors in Antwerp, Jeffrey Muller explains that the most luxurious displays were reserved for the “back room” and the dining room on the ground floor. These spaces contained the greatest variety and quantity of objects and must have been the centers of social life.¹⁵⁸ If the *Peasant Wedding Banquet* hung in a dining room, where Bruegel’s feasting peasants were viewed by educated people who were themselves partaking of a feast, contemporary ideas of conduct and conversation surrounding the feast, or the *convivium* tradition, become important elements for understanding the reception of the painting. Literature from this tradition is helpful particularly when discussing Bruegel’s multivalent work since it reveals a process of viewing, reading and talking that engages and analyses art, literature and history on multiple levels of interpretation.

For the wealthy elite who owned Bruegel’s paintings, the *convivium* tradition had become a popular model for convivial interaction. Although the dialogues represented in the texts are, for the most part, ideal and fictional, their popularity, especially among humanists, increased their instructional value and they became social standards to be imitated.¹⁵⁹ In the following, I will first briefly discuss two of the most well-known patrons of Bruegel, Jean Noiroot and Nicolaes Jongelinck, whose dining rooms were decorated with the artist’s paintings and whose high station and elite status in Antwerp society would have insured such a convivial reception of these works. I will then examine some of the convivial literature, specifically the format and style of

¹⁵⁷ Goldstein, “Artifacts of Domestic Life” (1996), 180-181.

¹⁵⁸ Jeffrey Muller, “Private Collections in the Spanish Netherlands: Ownership and Display of Paintings in Domestic Interiors,” in Peter Sutton (ed.) *The Age of Rubens*, Ghent: Ludion Press (1993), 199.

¹⁵⁹ On this note, it is important to emphasize that Bruegel himself, primarily through his connection to Ortelius, has been associated with a number of the most prominent humanists of his time. Stridbeck claims that in Antwerp Bruegel was one of “a circle of political and religious radical humanists” that included Coornhert and Plantin; *Bruegelstudien* (1977), 20, 29. Contributors to Ortelius’ album and who have been specifically associated with Bruegel by other scholars include Georg Braun, Dirck Coornhert, Georg Hoefnagel, Frans Hogenberg, Philippe Galle, and Christopher Plantin. Other than correspondence about Bruegel between Ortelius and a few of his acquaintances, there is no evidence these individuals knew Bruegel personally. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Ortelius’ humanist circle also included Benedict Arius (Montanus), John Dee, Lucas De Heere, Charles de l’Ecluse (Clusius), Hubert Goltzius, Justus Lipsius, Philippe Marnix de Sainte-Aldegonde, Gerard Mercator and Frans Sweerts Younger. For an article addressing the lack of historical evidence that Bruegel knew any of these individuals, with the exception of Ortelius, see Perez Zagorin, “Looking for Pieter Bruegel,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 64 (2003), 73-95.

the discussions narrated, in order to highlight the multivalent, analytical atmosphere it would have inspired. It is in this jovial and intellectually open-ended environment, I argue, that Bruegel's pictures became "conversation pieces" and were examined on multiple different levels regarding their artistry, social implications and religious insight.

On February 21, 1565, Jongelinck, a wealthy merchant businessman and government official under Philip II, pledged his art collection to the city of Antwerp to help a colleague pay a debt owed to the city.¹⁶⁰ According to the text of the pledge, Jongelinck owned paintings by contemporary artists such as Floris and Bruegel, and displayed them at *Ter Beke*, his suburban second home. Jongelinck decorated his rooms with cycles on the *Labors of Hercules* and the *Seven Liberal Arts*, both by Floris, along with scenes of the Judgment of Paris, the three cardinal virtues and Bruegel's paintings of the *Series of the Seasons*.¹⁶¹ Goldstein and Iain Buchanan have argued that Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons* hung in Jongelinck's dining room, based on their subject matter which relates to the production and consumption of food. Goldstein extends this argument by correlating the paintings with suggestions for suburban dining room decorations put forward by Vitruvius and Alberti.¹⁶² Furthermore, Jongelinck's brother, Jacques Jongelinck, was one of the most well-known sculptors of his time and, in May 1572, was appointed sculptor and metal founder to King Phillip II.¹⁶³ He assisted in constructing the prestigious tomb of Charles the Bold and created a series of over-life-size mythological figures in bronze for Jongelinck's country house.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ See Jean Denuce, *De Antwerpsche "Konstkamers": inventarissen van kunstverzamelingen te Antwerpen in de 16e en 17e eeuwen*, Amsterdam: De Spieghele (1932), 5.

¹⁶¹ Goldstein, "Keeping Up Appearances" (2003), 48; see also Iain Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I. "Bacchus and the Planets" by Jacques Jongelinck," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 132 (1990), 102-113 and "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: II. The Months by Pieter Bruegel the Elder," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 132 (1990), 541-550; Carl van de Velde, "Aspeckte der Historienmalerei in Antwerpen" (1992).

¹⁶² Goldstein, "Keeping up Appearances" (2003), 48. Muller also states that in the seventeenth century there was a decorum of subject that called for agreement between the function of a particular room and the kinds of pictures hung in it. Sir Henry Wotton recommended that pictures "bee as properly bestowed for their quality, as fitly for their grace: that is, chearefull Paintings in the Feasting and Banqueting Roomes; Grauer Stories in Galleries, Land-schips and Boscage, and such Wilde workes in open Terraces, or in Summer houses (as we call them) and the like." Muller, "Private Collections in the Spanish Netherlands" (1993), 199.

¹⁶³ Buchanan, "The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinck: I" (1990), 102.

¹⁶⁴ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 51.

Noirot's home was located at the Mint, where he was employed until he fled the city in 1572 due to financial trouble. An inventory of his possessions was made upon his declaration of bankruptcy. His art collection was considerable and more or less on par with other Masters of the Mint, as well as that of Jongelinck. Although Jongelinck was never employed by the Mint, Goldstein has shown that he was closely associated with its activities through family connections. Both his father and brother were also local Mint Masters and his younger brother was Warden.¹⁶⁵

Despite the fact that Jongelinck's personal and professional interactions were more dispersed within noble and humanist circles than those of Noirot, both were businessmen who had extensive personal connections to members of the Antwerp Mint, as well as with land speculators and merchants, during the same period and would have on numerous occasions invited these acquaintances into their homes for a dinner party.¹⁶⁶ They belonged to the highest, non-noble social class and the fact that they owned a diverse array of paintings depicting biblical scenes, classical mythology, landscapes and peasant scenes gives some indication to their education and interests.

Through their mutual business interests both men were connected to Joris Veselaer, General of the Mint during the tenure of Noirot, who owned works by Bosch, Joos van Cleve, Jan Gossaert, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, and others. The subjects of the paintings tend toward representations of the antique.¹⁶⁷ I single out Veselaer not only because of his collection, but because in addition to his connection to the Mint, he was well known as an art dealer and collector, negotiating sales of extremely precious objects to international leaders including two French kings and Charles V.¹⁶⁸ As both a high-ranking Mint official and a prominent international art dealer, Veselaer had contact with influential political figures as well as to the period's best-known artists. During the 1560's, Noirot, Veselaer and Jongelinck all had extensive art collections and either had direct or familial connections to the Mint; Veselaer and Noirot lived

¹⁶⁵ Goldstein, "Keeping up Appearances" (2003), 236.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 250.

¹⁶⁸ Filip Vermeulen explains that the profession of art dealer was a relatively new phenomenon in sixteenth-century Antwerp; they acted "as a liaison between the artist and an affluent patron, mostly upper nobility if not royalty; these upper-class dealers negotiated the contract for a work of art and communicated the wishes of the patron to the artist." See Vermeulen, "The Antwerp Art Market in the Sixteenth Century," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University (2001), 105.

very near one another and worked together frequently; Jongelinck and Noirot had both acquired paintings by Bruegel and Floris, two of the most popular painters of the time.¹⁶⁹ Such close personal and professional ties between these three men, all with a keen interest in art collection and at least two of whom interacted with artists themselves, provides a sketch of a group of individuals who, although not of noble birth nor educated humanists, had no doubt cultivated both the means and interest to acquire art as well as a sense of taste with which to evaluate it.

By the early sixteenth century, the upper classes began to pattern their activities during mealtime after those that occurred in the dining halls of monasteries or courtly circles. Primarily, it was an occasion not only to eat one's fill but also to express one's thoughts. Since Plato's *Symposium*, the *convivium* had been an established literary genre ideally suited for discussion of a variety of topics. Founded on further descriptions of feasts in classical texts such as Cicero, Macrobius and Plutarch, the nourishment and self-cultivation that took place at dinner parties was provided in equal measure by food, drink and conversation. For example, the Ancients wanted both Bacchus and the Muses to preside at banquets, for "learned and entertaining words...delight the body and mind as much as wine does, or more."¹⁷⁰ Athenaeus constantly plays with the idea that words, not just food, provide the "satisfaction" of the meal: "we brought as our contribution not delicacies, but topics for discussion."¹⁷¹ Montaigne praises the Greeks and Romans for setting aside "for eating, which is an important action in life, several hours and the better part of the night," because the meal is an opportunity for total pleasure thanks to "such good talk and agreeable entertainment as men of intelligence are able to provide for one another."¹⁷² "*Edere et audire*," to eat and listen; in Erasmus's *Fabulous Feast*, this is the goal of a few friends sitting around a table—to cultivate the mind by taking in stories while nourishing the body with dinner. In the "Sober Feast," when deciding how to properly dedicate the

¹⁶⁹ On the probable personal connection between Noirot and Jongelinck, Goldstein also points out that Noirot's brother-in-law, Robert Eeckeren—who took Noirot in when he became a 'fugitive' in 1572—had his country house just two houses away from Jongelinck; Goldstein, "Keeping up Appearances" (2003), 237.

¹⁷⁰ Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (1991), 33

¹⁷¹ Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1993), 30.

¹⁷² Gowers, *The Loaded Table* (1993).

garden where their dinner will take place, the character Albert suggests that each one make a contribution of his own. Aemilius questions, “What shall we contribute who’ve come here empty-handed?” Albert replies, “You who carry such riches in your mind? Let each offer to the company the best thing he’s read this week.”¹⁷³ As we will see, these convivial conversations were spurred on by scripted topics, texts read around the table or paintings hanging on the wall.

By 1582, J.G. Stuckius had compiled much of what the ancients had to say regarding dining in his *Antiquitatum convivialium libri tres*, which became the standard sixteenth-century compilation of lore about ancient dining.¹⁷⁴ The volume is divided into three books, each containing around thirty chapters that address various aspects of dining culture—etiquette, manners, conversation, food, drink, special occasions. The work compiles nearly five hundred Greek, Hebrew, Arab and Latin authors whose works Stuckius claims to have read in order to present an accurate picture of the table manners and eating habits of the Ancient Greeks, Romans, Jews, Egyptians, Persians and others. In the Preface to the reader, Stuckius begins with a profoundly religious criticism of the people of his day for being sumptuous and intemperate, and recalls the punishments of God for these sins. The author goes on to recount an experience several years earlier, when he was complaining about the deplorable state of the world in the company of learned men while dining. The discussion that ensued inspired him to continue his history of convivia in the hope of admonishing readers to change impious habits, especially drunkenness and gluttony.

Since the customs of convivia are relevant to many facets and phases of human life—both private and public, sacred and profane—Stuckius explains that he incorporated information from ethic, economic, political, social and military sources. Thus, he hopes that many disciplines will take profit from his effort. He goes on to emphasize the importance for convivia, since they are not only pleasant and useful but

¹⁷³ Desiderus Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Colloquies*, vol. 40, translated and annotated by Craig R. Thompson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1997), 926.

¹⁷⁴ J.G. Stuck, *Antiquitatum convivialium libri tres*, Tiguri: Christophorus Froschoverus, 1582. I am grateful to Han Lamers (Leiden University) for his help in translating the Latin text. This volume is the subject of ongoing research and will be the central focus of a separate, forthcoming publication. On the use of this source in contemporary literature, see Robert Cummings, “Liberty and History in Jonson's Invitation to Supper,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 40, no. 1, The English Renaissance (Winter, 2000), 103-12. See also Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Colloquies*, vol. 39 (1997), 802.

absolutely necessary in the establishment and maintenance of friendship and communities. Moreover, he says, they were instituted by God. For Ancients, the convivium was sacred because the gods were imagined to be actually present; for Christians, in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, God wished that husband and wife share in a meal. The chapters that follow address topics such as the origin and definition of convivia (literally meaning “living together”), as well as convivia appropriate for kings and emperors, the military and, quite interestingly, artists and workers. “Table talks,” according to Stuckius, are the essential ornaments of convivia. It is stressed that the topics are almost infinite and very difficult to pinpoint due to their diversity. However, the conversation should be a balance between serious topics, philosophical and religious, and more light-hearted, jocular fare, such as riddles (*griphi* and *aenigmata*). This way, no matter whether men are discussing scripture or solving a puzzle, the mind is always sharpened.¹⁷⁵

Although this book was compiled after Bruegel’s death and would have been accessible only to the well-educated humanist elite, which patrons like Jean Noiroit were not a part of, the book itself and the breadth of its contents nevertheless speak to the availability and demand for the literature that was available on the subject. In addition, Stuck makes clear in his Preface that the content offers instruction to people from all walks of life—royalty, military, artists and workers—for cultivating activities around the dinner table so that sin might be avoided.

As Stuckius emphasizes, a key element that insured that dialogue enhanced the pleasure of the feast, cultivating both body and mind, is diversity, or *varietas*. Variety is consistently quoted in the convivium tradition as a universal law, and is therefore a necessary condition for the success of a meal. The banquets of classical literature, like those of Renaissance literature, cannot be reduced to the thematic, structural or stylistic constraints of a single genre: what makes them distinctive is their variety; they are pluralistic by their very nature.¹⁷⁶ Jumping from cosmology to grammar, mixing bits of metaphysics with fragments of history, as in the texts of Macrobius, is merely to follow the common practice of entertaining and informative conversation during a

¹⁷⁵ J.G. Stuck, *Antiquitatum convivialium libri tres*, 578-580.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 39, 130-134.

meal.¹⁷⁷ Ideas flow freely around a given theme and contradictions come out into the open in a collective search for truth, which may or may not be achieved. The pleasure of debate and the stimulation of controversy often even seem to be ends in themselves. Whereas other genres, such as speeches or sermons, systematically attempt to demolish contrary views and to impose a single truth, dialogue increases the number of points of view.¹⁷⁸

Likewise, for humanists such as Erasmus, medley and mixture are the remedies recommended to diners to prevent the boredom that might result from one-dimensional conversation. In his *Profane Feast*, Erasmus states that, “Though, as the comic poet says, ‘There are as many opinions as men,’ and ‘Every man follows his own bent,’ still nobody will convince me there is more variety in men’s natures than in their tastes; there’s so much that you can hardly find two men who like the same things.”¹⁷⁹ In his analysis of Erasmus’s *Profane Feast*, Lawrence Ryan explains that in this light, “no single topic becomes for long the focus of attention. The dialogue moves pleasantly from brief explanations of the difference between Stoics and Epicureans, to observations about the wines and viands being served, to why poets are devotees of Bacchus, to the variety of men’s preferences in foods, to humorous play upon the word ‘gallus,’ to Augustinus’s ‘settling’ for his share of the feast by extemporizing amusingly on a number of ways to vary the sentence ‘multi mihi constat—it costs me a great deal.’”¹⁸⁰ The role of a multivalent dialogue is so important in the ceremonial of meals that treatises go far beyond general recommendations and provide topics and even ready-made formulae for use in mealtime conversation. Even the treatises themselves become topics of conversation.¹⁸¹ And this is important for the context of Bruegel’s *Peasant Wedding Banquet*: talk about meals can always serve as talk at

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 164.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 175. See also Michel Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (1991). For an analysis of a similar atmosphere of conversation that took place in the tavern during the sixteenth century, especially having to do with theological topics during the Reformation, see Christopher Ocker, “Taverns and the Self at the Dawn of the Reformation,” in Reindert Falkenburg, et al (eds.), *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2006. Joel Altman argues that this open-ended approach also characterizes the literature of Tudor playwrights; see *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

¹⁷⁹ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Colloquies*, vol. 40 (1997), 140.

¹⁸⁰ Lawrence V. Ryan, “Art and Artifice in Erasmus’ *Convivium Profanum*,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 31 (1978), 2.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

meals; table talk is inclined to be reflexive, a subject I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three.¹⁸²

For the wealthy elite who owned Bruegel's paintings, the writing of Erasmus was of the utmost importance for education, both in academics and etiquette, particularly his *Colloquia familiaria*. Erasmus's *Colloquies* first appeared in print in November of 1518, published under the full title *Familiarum colloquiorum formulae, et alia quaedam per Des. Erasmum Roterodamum*. The publisher, Johann Froben, targeted the brief eighty page booklet at people who wanted to learn to speak Latin quickly.¹⁸³ Erasmus was initially annoyed by the publication of the *Familiarum colloquiorum formulae* (it was produced without his permission), mainly because, in its original form, it was a manual directed toward young students and not for public consumption. However, the overwhelming success of the book must have appeased him and spurred him on, because he ended up not only writing a preface for a 1519 reprinting of the book, but intermittently edited and added to it up until 1533.¹⁸⁴ By 1533, at least sixteen editions of the *Colloquia* had been published. Erasmus mentions, for example, that rumors of an impending prohibition due to it being censored by the Sorbonne intensified the desire of the public to buy the *Colloquia* and thus caused the Parisian printer Colineus to bring out a 'huge' edition of the work, purportedly of 24,000 copies, in March of 1527.¹⁸⁵ In a letter from 1529 that discusses this edition, Erasmus boasts, "It was in everybody's hands."¹⁸⁶ It continued to be one of the most popular and frequently reprinted books of the sixteenth century.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² On table talk as it is represented in Renaissance literature, see Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (1991), 89-111.

¹⁸³ Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1965), xxiii. On the *Colloquies*, see also Dennis M. Gilkey, "The *Colloquies* of Erasmus and the Literature of the Renaissance: Drama, Satire and Dialogue," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1983; J. Chomarat, D. Ménager, et al (eds.), *Cinq Banquets*, Paris: J.Vrin, 1981; "Erasmus conteur: folklore et invention narrative," in *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales offerts à Pierre Le Gentil*, Paris: SEDES (1973), 85-104; Preserved Smith, *A Key to the Colloquies of Erasmus*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927.

¹⁸⁴ Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (1965), xxiii.

¹⁸⁵ On Erasmus's response to censorship, see "The Usefulness of the Colloquies," *Collected Works of Erasmus: Colloquies*, vol. 40 (1997), 1096-1117.

¹⁸⁶ Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (1965), xxxii.

¹⁸⁷ Ryan, "Art and Artifice" (1978), 16. Starting in Erasmus's own lifetime, numerous individual colloquies were translated into just about every different European vernacular, including even one into Old Irish. Both in the original Latin texts and through the various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century translations, Erasmus' *Colloquies* had a widespread influence on many later Renaissance writers. Among Erasmus' literary works only the *Praise of Folly* has enjoyed greater fame. Romuald I. Lakowski,

The collection of *formulae* contained various ways of greeting people with differing levels of formality; ways of wishing people well in various situations; phrases for how to take leave of people, how to inquire after people's health and so on. Perhaps the biggest change the *Formulae* underwent on its journey towards what we now know as the *Colloquia familiaria* is the addition of long, fully-developed dialogues, the first of which appeared in the March 1522 edition. In fact, no new *formulae* were included after 1522.¹⁸⁸ Craig Thompson writes that Erasmus probably realized the potential for the dialogue form as a medium for him to write more or less freely on a wide variety of topics that interested him.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, the new subtitle (*Concerning Men, Manners, and Things*) and the introduction to the dialogues transformed Erasmus's work from a phrasebook to a source of coherent compositions on a variety of sacred and profane topics, often intermixing the two, that could be used as models not only for spoken and written Latin, appealing to schoolboys as well as serious Latin students of all ages, but also for proper behaviour in various everyday situations.¹⁹⁰ Incorporated into this expanded collection are six *convivia* centered on conversations which take place around dinner time. These include: *Convivium profanum* (Profane Feast), *Convivium religiosum* (Godly Feast), *Convivium poeticum* (Poetic Feast), *Convivium fabulosum* (Fabulous Feast), *Polydaitia* (*Dispar convivium* / Unequal Feast) and *Nēphalion* (*Symposion*) (Sober Feast). Though his first *convivium*, the "Profane Feast," followed in the tradition of the earlier *Colloquia*, containing primarily formulae for correct Latin speaking, it was later expanded in order to, along with the five subsequent *convivia*, represent a more ideal dialogue, while at the same time maintaining a prescriptive tone for social manners surrounding the meal.¹⁹¹ Because Erasmus's discussion of prevalent notions of food, drink and entertainment furnishes us with clues to standards

"Review of *Erasmus of the Low Countries* and Desiderius Erasmus: *Colloquies*," *Early Modern Literary Studies*, vol. 4.1 (May 1998), 11.1-10.

¹⁸⁸ Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (1965), xxv.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹⁹¹ For a detailed description on the actual changes that occurred in the various editions of the *Colloquia* and why, see Ryan, "Art and Artifice" (1978). According to Thompson, Erasmus' own correspondence offers anecdotal information on dinner parties he attended, including his food, company and conversation preferences. Goldstein, "Artifacts of Domestic Life" (1996), n. 47.

of taste and decorum in a particular society, we can learn something about sixteenth-century life and manners from his brief dialogues.¹⁹²

These individual colloquies are a revival of an ancient literary type, which I have already briefly discussed as being widely esteemed and practiced during the Renaissance. Following in the footsteps of the classical past, Erasmus describes eating and drinking moderately at table, as well as the time immediately before and after a meal, as the ideal setting for the cultivation of the self through participation in profitable discourse on a number of different subjects, from literature and art to politics and games, and incorporating philology, morality, and spirituality. These occasions were filled with serious discussion mixed with lighthearted comedy. As the character Levinus notes in concluding the *Fabulous Feast*, “Nothing is more fun than treating jokes seriously.”¹⁹³ This short statement is a poignant example of the analytical nature of these conversations; nothing was excluded from being intricately analyzed and discussed, even a simple joke. The character Augustinus illustrates this imperative in the *Profane Feast* by dissecting and teaching the rules of grammar after dinner through witty dialogues, each of them a miniature scene from everyday life.

In the “Poetic Feast,” Erasmus asserts, “I show what sort of feast scholars should have.”¹⁹⁴ Whether this literary party ever took place is uncertain, but Thompson argues that we may suppose that it resembles, more or less, many a one Erasmus enjoyed.¹⁹⁵ The house and gardens, as well as some of the dialogues, so vividly described in Erasmus’s “Godly Feast” were probably fictional constructions based on, at least in part, actual experiences in the homes of friends and acquaintances. For example, explains Thompson, in some respects the description of the interior of Eusebius’s house, which is the setting for the feast, resembles that of Erasmus’s friend Johann von Botzheim, Canon of Constance, where Erasmus was guest in September 1522. Likewise, the mansion of Jérôme de Busleyden in Mechelen may have contributed something to Eusebius’s villa. Other country houses in which Erasmus stayed that could have been influential were in Anderlec, near Brussels, and ‘zum

¹⁹² Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 40 (1997), 802.

¹⁹³ Lawrence V. Ryan, “Erasmii Convivia: The Banquet Colloquies of Erasmus,” *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Turonensis*, Paris: Vrin (1980), 305.

¹⁹⁴ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 40 (1997), 1102.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 39, 390.

Sessel' in Basel.¹⁹⁶ Preserved Smith also argues that the majority of the anecdotes included in the *Colloquies* are founded on the personal experiences of Erasmus and his friends, comparing them even to Luther's "Table Talk" and "Goethe's Conversations with Ackermann."¹⁹⁷

While enjoying a simple meal of produce from the garden, along with "thick" wine from the "fount of the muses," the guests in the "Poetic Feast" engage in conversation addressing enigmatic verses from classical literature, conflicting interpretations and philological studies. Responding to their intellectual endeavors, Margaret, the maidservant who intermittently offers comic relief to the scene, charges, "That's poets for you! The minute dinner starts, they count on their fingers (measuring meter and rhyme) and bring out a book. Better save games and literature for the second course."¹⁹⁸ When one of the guests returns empty-handed after a trip to the kitchen to request from Margaret salt to "make the eggs palatable," Sbrulius consoles his friends, "At least we'll season our eggs with stories."¹⁹⁹ The *Poetic Feast*, as well as many other convivia of Erasmus, also shows that convivial conversation was not exclusively reserved for the dining room but took place in other receiving rooms of the house, as well as in the garden. Later, after being told by Margaret that their "session" has lasted long enough, they retreat to the backyard in order to stretch their legs, pick some fruit for dessert and continue their conversation: "suppose we sit under this lime tree and invoke the Muses...the very garden itself will furnish a subject [of discussion]."²⁰⁰ The feast concludes with the guests competing in a game to see who can produce the best poetic verse inspired by the blooms of the garden. This is one more illustration of the way in which analytical thinking and creative effort were carried out in a competitive atmosphere among friends.

The most visually inspired of the *Colloquies* is the *Godly Feast*, a dialogue written, according to Erasmus, to "give ample demonstration of what the feasting of all Christians should be like."²⁰¹ The conversation begins with the host character Eusebius guiding his guests through his gardens just prior to lunch, pointing out certain

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 172.

¹⁹⁷ Preserved Smith, *A Key to the Colloquies of Erasmus* (1927), 1-3.

¹⁹⁸ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 39 (1997), 396.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 397.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 404.

²⁰¹ Ibid., vol. 40, 1101.

art works, plants and a collection of birds, in order to show how nature, art and religion work in harmony to shape a person's moral, aesthetic and spiritual well-being.²⁰² For example, Eusebius explains that a fountain appears as a symbol of spiritual thirst, whereas a stream, polluted by kitchen waste, warns of the dangers of corrupting the pure source of Scripture.²⁰³ An owl perched in a painted grove reminds one to be prudent and act advisedly. In addition to religious and moral instruction, Erasmus offers through the speech of Eusebius some indication that art, even artists, were also topics of discussion. Drawing attention to a mural, his painted garden within a garden, Eusebius states that, "We are twice pleased when we see a painted flower competing with a real one. In one we admire the cleverness of nature, in the other the inventiveness of the painter."²⁰⁴ In the original Latin edition, Erasmus uses the term *ingenium* for "inventiveness." As I have explained earlier in Chapter One, the word *ingenium* refers to much more than just rote imitation of nature, but is indicative more of the artist's natural-born imagination and creativity. Thus, the double admiration referred to regards both the created products of nature and the artist, as well as the creative abilities of the two. Eusebius's statement indicates that the imaginative talent of the artist is as much a subject of delight and discourse as the beauty or decoration of the picture he creates.

The second section of the *Godly Feast* consists of the lunch-party itself, and the discussion of biblical texts and moral themes which takes place during it. Sitting down to eat, Eusebius explains that, "truly if a meal was something holy to pagans, much more should it be so to Christians, for whom it's an allegory of that sacred last supper which the Lord Jesus took with his disciples."²⁰⁵ These occasions at mealtime provided inspiration for laughing, learning and religious insight. Meandering between one subject and another, from lofty discourse to table talk in a lighter vein, various

²⁰² Ibid. For a detailed study of this particular convivium, see Lucy L.E. Schlüter, *Niet alleen: Een kunsthistorisch-ethische plaatsbepaling van tuin en huis in het Convivium religiosum van Erasmus*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995; Jochen Becker, "'Non est muta rerum natura': die anschauliche Sittenlehre van Erasmus *Convivium religiosum*," in Carsten-Peter Warncke (ed.) *Ikonographie der Bibliotheken, Vorträge eines bibliotheks-historischen Seminars vom 13. bis 14. September in der Herzog August Bibliothek*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (1992), 43-106. See also Florence Hopper, "The Erasmian Garden," *The Oxford Companion to Gardens*, Oxford (1986), 390-391.

²⁰³ Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1979), 104.

²⁰⁴ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 39 (1997), 179.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 182.

styles and rhetorical witticisms were incorporated into the conversation, requiring the participant to digest his or her food with moderation so as to maintain the clearest mind possible. Although Erasmus's *convivia* are obviously representative of his own thoughts and ideas, each having their own persuasive agenda, an open-ended dialogue characterizes each. Even when discussing scripture in the *Godly Feast*, an occasion in which a more dogmatic attitude might be expected, the dialogue entertains multiple different interpretations. After the first scripture verse has been read during dinner, Eusebius says, "Nevertheless I should be better pleased if I understood thoroughly what I heard. I wish we had a good theologian here who not only understood these matters but had prudence as well. I don't know that it's permissible for us laymen to discuss these topics." Timothy responds, "It would be permissible even for sailors, in my opinion, provided there is no rash attempt at formal definition."²⁰⁶ During their discourse on the interpretation of three different verses dealing with the true nature of Christian liberty, even mistakes and differences of opinion are seen as opportunities to find better answers. When asked to join the group in offering an interpretation of Proverbs 21: 1-3, which was previously read aloud at the table, Theophilus timidly defers, saying his mind had been on the food rather than the conversation. Eusebius responds, "You'll please us even by making a mistake, for thus you'll give us opportunity of finding the answer." After exchanging complimentary, but differing, interpretations on the meaning of the verses, the group concludes that though none of them can claim full or final certitude, they believe they achieve glimpses of truth, or at least, consensus about probabilities.²⁰⁷ The purpose of the conversation and offering one's interpretation was not about being right or wrong; it seems, on the contrary, that this had little value. Rather, judgment about one's particular view was based on how well the person argues his point and inspires further conversation and opportunity for learning.

In fact, judgments about quality, defining what is good and bad, are equally ambiguous. In the "Fabulous Feast," Eutrapelus decrees that a contest of story-telling will take place and "only amusing stories shall be presented...Even stories made up on the spur of the moment shall be lawful, provided probability and decorum are

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 187.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 187, 174.

observed. If everyone has a story, the most entertaining tale and the one who tells the dullest shall pay for the wine.” Surprised by this, Asteus objects saying, “But your law makes the best story equal to the worst.” Eutrapelus responds with a clever justification: “Where pleasure is the object, the worst speaker deserves praise no less than the best, because he is no less entertaining...Don’t more people laugh at a cuckoo’s song than at a nightingale’s? In this matter, mediocrity is no recommendation.”²⁰⁸ After multiple stories involving deceit, irony, judgment, wittiness and social manners, Adosches tells the final tale, then concludes: “We’ve all had our story. Now, it remains for the judge to give his decision.”²⁰⁹ Just at this moment, Levinus, an unexpected guest, arrives on the scene and issues an invitation for all those present to attend a theological luncheon the following day. The guests’ attention is diverted and the dialogue concludes with no final judgment about the winner of the competition. When conversation and entertainment are the priorities of the party, right and wrong or good and bad are means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

In the *Godly Feast*, the paintings on the walls surrounding the event were not neglected. In fact, they played an integral role. In describing his dining room to his guests, Eusebius explains in the *Godly Feast*, “I seem to eat in a garden, not a house, for the walls also have their own flourishing flowers scattered over them; and there are good paintings. Here Christ keeps the Last Supper with his chosen disciples. Here Herod celebrates his birthday with a fatal feast. Here Dives of the Gospel story, shortly to go down to hell, dines sumptuously; Lazarus, soon to be received into Abraham’s bosom, is driven from the gates.”²¹⁰ The images described all reflect the room’s function, each showing events centered around the meal. Eusebius adds an overtly moralized explanation for them, saying that the images “warn us to be temperate at feasts and deter us from drunkenness and sensuality.”²¹¹ Not only do the

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 574.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 584.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 205. For a discussion of the themes of these pictures in the context of dining rooms, see Schlüter, *Niet Alleen* (1995), 222-238.

²¹¹ Ibid. On Erasmus and the visual arts, see, M.A. Nauwelaerts, “Erasmus en de kunst,” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Oudheidkunde en Kunstgeschiedenis*, vol. 42 (1975), 3-30; Erwin Panofsky, “Erasmus and the Visual Arts,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 32 (1969), 200-217; C.C. de Bruin, “Erasmus in de Spiegel der zestiende-eeuwse letterkunde en beeldende kunsten,” *Nederlands Literatuurboek*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1969; Georges Marlier, *Erasmus et la peinture flamande de son*

paintings provide some sense of the host's taste and values to his guests, they also universalize the ritual of the meal by coupling the actual event with some of the most famous meals in history.²¹² The paintings, as much as the conversation, offer the viewers opportunities for self-cultivation.

Regarding the *Godly Feast*, Terence Cave writes that Erasmus has constructed a scene in which a frugally domesticated nature penetrates the religious colloquy in the most literal sense: remarks about various plants in the garden, sculpture, painting, food and drink are juxtaposed with comments on scriptural meaning in such a way that a continuity and even an equivalence is established between them. The surroundings of the guests, as well as the food and drink they consume, are integral, even inspirational, to the discussion; evangelical points are constantly being made through metaphors of viewing and tasting. This is an important point because Cave argues that in the text the decor and the banquet reflect one another, establishing an equilibrium (or reversible transference) between art and nature, body and soul, human and divine. Sacred and profane are imbricated so that there is no longer a clear distinction between the two.²¹³

Cave explains that:

Ambivalence is manifested. Sometimes the surface becomes transparent and reveals a hidden meaning (as with the fountain and polluted stream); other times, what is seen, for example in the gardens, is not explained. Literal seeing has to suffice, and the host comments that, for the moment it will be enough to have seen these emblems as if through a lattice. Such a remark recalls the Pauline notion of seeing through a glass darkly. But within the thematic structure of the *Convivium religiosum*, the figure of the lattice has a special suggestiveness. For the house and the gardens constitute a place where, as the guests walk, perspectives are constantly shifting; there are gateways, courtyards, gardens within gardens, galleries, layer upon layer of moving surfaces endlessly pointing towards new and unexpected significations. In the concluding section, the host refers to the

temps, Damme: Éditions du Musée van Maerlant, 1954; Rachel Giese, "Erasmus and the fine Arts," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 7 (1935), 257-279. See also J.B. Trapp, "Thomas More and the Visual Arts," *Essays on the Renaissance and the Classical Tradition*, Aldershot: Variorum (1990), VIII, 27-54; Warren W. Wooden and John N. Wall, Jr., "Thomas More and the painter's eye: visual perspective and artistic purpose in More's *Utopia*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 15 (1985), 231-263.

²¹² Goldstein, "Keeping Up Appearances" (2003), 183.

²¹³ Cave, *The Cornucopian Text* (1979), 105. On the interplay of art and nature, literal and metaphorical understanding, intimation and actuality in the *Godly Feast*, see T. Cave, "Enargeia: Erasmus and the Rhetoric of Presence in the Sixteenth Century," *L'esprit créateur*, vol. 16 (Winter 1976), 5-19.

opening and shutting of windows in different seasons so as to create differing views, different spaces and places.²¹⁴

To conclude, it is this early modern atmosphere of dialogue and analytical inquiry in which pictures throughout the domestic interior could have functioned as “conversation pieces,” eliciting discussion on a number of different levels. Eusebius, in the *Godly Feast*, illustrates that art was enjoyed in a purely decorative sense, enhancing the pleasurable nature of dining room entertainment: “I seem to eat in a garden, not a house.” However, considering the multivalent nature of the discussions described in Erasmus’s *Convivia*, among many others, analyzing art and literature in terms of form, content and function, there is no reason to assume a one-dimensional approach to viewing. Pleasure and didacticism, especially regarding one’s view of the world or proper social manners are not mutually exclusive, as Eusebius’s explanation of the paintings hanging on his dining room wall indicate: “they warn us to be temperate at feasts and deter us from drunkenness and sensuality.”

Nor, as illustrated in Eusebius’s tour of the grounds, are the sacred and profane exclusive of one another; a fountain appears as a symbol of spiritual thirst, whereas a stream, polluted by kitchen waste, warns of the dangers of corrupting the pure source of Scripture. Furthermore, the artfulness of pictures, not only *what* they represent but also *how* they represent could have also been a topic of conversation. For example, in the *Profane Feast* we are told that Augustine appreciates witty dialogues both for what they have to say and for how they say it; he dissects and teaches his guests the rules of grammar after dinner using the dialogues read at table, each of them a miniature scene from everyday life. The companions in the *Poetic Feast* recite poetry, analyze difficult terms, resolve problems of rhyme and meter and give more in-depth readings of traditional manuscripts. Nothing is excluded from their analytical minds; what they view while in the garden eating dessert inspires them to create their own poetic verse. In the *Godly Feast*, Eusebius admires the *ingenium* of the artist through a comparison of painted and natural flowers. Likewise, in a time when discussion about art *per se* was becoming a more popular topic among Northern art lovers, as is attested in the writing of, among others, Lambert Lombard, Dominicus Lampsonius, Lucas de

²¹⁴ Ibid., 103-111.

Heere and Abraham Ortelius, close analysis of the grammar of visual art, regarding both form and content, could have been a topic of conversation as much as aesthetic pleasure and religious or moral instruction. This atmosphere also provides the context in which to understand Bruegel's later works of peasants as I will describe them in the following chapter—multivalent and hybrid pictures that, through their mediation of visual concepts and pictorial elements associated with history painting (as well as some of the themes themselves), beg for close visual analysis and raise questions about issues that were prominent in intellectual discussions of the time, such as art and nature, antique and modern, sacred and profane and vernacular cultivation.