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

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Chapter Three:

“Feast your eyes, Feast your mind”: Bruegel’s later Peasant Paintings

*Take heart...do your best, that we may reach our target:
that they (Italians) may no longer say in their speech that
Flemish painters can make no figures.*

-Karel van Mander, *Den Grondt der Edel Vry Schilder-const*²¹⁵

*[I]n this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country
where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the
“invisible things” of God “being understood by the things that are made” may be seen,
that is, that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal
and spiritual.*

-St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*

I.

In the following, I examine three paintings by Bruegel made in the last years of his life, 1568-1569, all of which are now in Vienna: *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, *Peasant Dance*, and *Peasant and Nest Robber*. Comparable to the way in which members of the Pléiade program or rederijckers, such as Jan van der Noot and Lucas de Heere, advocated the cultivation of the vernacular language by incorporating the style and form of Latin, French or Italian literature, as well as translating texts from classical Antiquity, I show how Bruegel’s monumental paintings of peasants reveal a similar agenda for what I have termed a “visual vernacular.” Rather than this mode of painting being dependent on the resolute imitation of nature, rejecting any idealization of figures, I will show how Bruegel advocates for the incorporation of classicist, Italianate visual concepts and pictorial elements into detailed images of local custom. In this way, Bruegel mediates characteristics of ambitious *historiae* for peasant paintings, an idiom increasingly recognized as Northern, and asserts his style to be just as capable of copious, apt and cultivated expression. Furthermore, I intend to show how the recognition of this artistic mediation—in which the viewer is often forced to negotiate between sacred and profane, antique and modern, Northern and Italian

²¹⁵ Karel van Mander, *The Foundation of Noble Free Art of Painting*, unpublished translation, Elizabeth Honig (ed.), trans. by J. Bloom, et al., 13.

artistic practices—challenges the interpretive capabilities of the viewer and creates thematic associations between referee and referent that would have inspired the kind of lively conversation that fit well within the analytical model of viewing and discussing art and literature illustrated in the dialogues representing the *convivium* tradition. These paintings, which probably hung originally in dining rooms, studies or social rooms, functioned as “conversation pieces,” eliciting questions and conversations on a number of different topics regarding both the form and content of the pictures. In so doing, Bruegel’s practice of mediation functions not only to further cultivate his artistic style, but also to cultivate the mind of the viewer.

As with Aertsen’s *Pancake Eaters* discussed in the Introduction, Bruegel’s *Peasant Wedding Banquet* (fig. 8) is both a detailed depiction of a Brabant village feast yet is portrayed in such a way that it differs from previous practices of representing peasants.²¹⁶ A rustic barn filled with hay from the recent harvest serves as the banquet hall. Multiple figures dressed in traditional peasant attire sit on benches lining a long, diagonally composed table.²¹⁷ On the right, bowls of what may be *rijstpap*, or pudding, are served from a door taken off its hinges while, on the left, a man is busy pouring beer.²¹⁸ The thoughtful bride is in the center, denoted by a green cloth of honor hanging from a rope attached to a pitchfork stuck in the hay. To the right, crossed sheaves hang from a rake also stuck in the wall of hay. Traditionally, the sheaves would have been the last to be cut from the harvest and were displayed not only in honor of the bounty, with hopes for the same result the following season, but also to symbolize the desire for an equally fertile bride.²¹⁹ In the left background, a cluster of peasant figures block any visual exit, crowding into the room in hopes of tasting the banquet victuals. This cluster of heads is compositionally echoed in the left foreground by the multiple empty, round beer mugs piled on top of one another in a basket located next to the beer pourer.

²¹⁶ For analyses of this painting, see Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel* (1991), Sullivan, *Bruegel’s Peasants* (1994), and Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 149-183.

²¹⁷ On sixteenth-century costume, see Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 162-182.

²¹⁸ Jan Grauls, *Volkstaal en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel*, Antwerp: Standaard-boekhandel (1957), 209-210.

²¹⁹ On the symbolism of the ritual of the “last sheaves,” see Albert Eskeröd, *Arets Fester*, Stockholm: L.T.S. Förlag (1965), 361-364; J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: Part V—Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild*, vol. 1, London: Macmillan & Co. (1912), 131-170.

The peasant figures themselves are coarse and display manners appropriate to their social status.²²⁰ To the left of the most prominently and centrally located server, who is dressed in blue with a red hat, a seated man is depicted leaning back, beer jug in hand, looking upwards in the direction of the crossed sheaves. His mouth is open with his teeth revealed, an unrefined characteristic unthinkable in depictions of middle and upper class society.²²¹ His gaze is wide-eyed, yet seems to be directed at nothing in particular. Beyond him, on the opposite side of the table, five figures, two women and three men, sit beside one another. However, none of them interact with anyone, at least no one that we can see. A woman extends her hand to accept a jug of beer from her companion, but her friend's face is completely obstructed from view by the serving attendant. To the left of this, a peasant man holds a plate so as to reveal its emptiness while he spoons the last bits of its contents into his mouth. His wide-eyed stare is as empty as that of the man across the table toward whom his gaze is directed. Continuing to the left, we see a figure who has completely turned toward his friend, presumably to engage in conversation, but he receives no reciprocal interaction. Similar to the second figure described, the fourth character holds a bowl with her left hand and spoons its contents with her right. Her gaze is directed downward toward the table. The fifth person is hardly discernable, partially covered by the upturned beer jug raised to his mouth and partially by the bagpiper in front of the table. The disconnection between these individuals becomes even more marked when compared to the monk and urbanite on the right side of the painting. The monk's gesture of speech and the man's thoughtful expression and folded hands communicate that the two are deep in discussion. Whereas the primary concern of the peasant figures is the food and drink before them, at the expense of social interaction, the "outsiders"—lord of the manor and religious representative—are portrayed in such a way that it is clear that they are more interested in cultivating their minds than indulging in the pleasures of the feast.

Considering the fact that Bruegel's wealthy, middle-class viewers were most likely themselves partaking of a feast, this contrast between cultivated and uncultivated social manners would have certainly inspired discussion on the subject in front of the

²²⁰ On the peasants' coarse facial features, see Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994), 77-90.

²²¹ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 161.

painting. In fact, as we have seen in the *convivium* literature, and as is illustrated by the monk and gentleman, good conversation often replaces food as the “main course” of the meal. In the “Godly Feast,” Timothy starts off by saying, “We’ll eat with pleasure but listen with even more pleasure.”²²² In descriptions filling the correspondence of Erasmus and his companions, exchanges taking place over meals seem to be as sustaining as the meal itself, and food is constantly employed as a metaphor for intellectual sustenance.²²³ “Your book, you see, is meat and drink to me,” wrote Johann Reuchlin to Erasmus.²²⁴ Referring to the *Praise of Folly*, Paul Volz recounts that he and some friends “have been reading this...at dinner, and we have been filled with laughter and admiration; indeed it has almost taken the place of meat and drink.”²²⁵ In a letter to Guillaume Budé, Erasmus recounts that he and Cuthbert Tunstall “often relax over one of your letters by way of dessert.”²²⁶ Such a practice for mealtime had become a part of everyday life. Humanists argued that dialogue takes the pleasure of dining out of the realm of pure sensation and allows reason to play a role.²²⁷

The string of disconnected peasants culminates in the bagpiper. Clothed in white stockings, white pants, white undershirt and red jacket, the musician stands just left of center with a bagpipe between his arms and his fingers placed over the holes of the chanter. He has a bemused facial expression with dazed eyes and an empty glare. His glare attracts attention to his appearance, over his musical task, and encourages the viewer to look away to find the object of his gaze. Most art historians agree that it is the food being distributed that seduces his interest.²²⁸ As Kavalier explains, “The delinquent village musician is a pointer that asserts the relevance of the food for the half of the picture where it is less [visually] apparent, a relationship strengthened through correspondences in color. He is a sign of elemental desire, of essential and recognizable humanity that is deliberately associated with the wish to join in the

²²² Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (1965), 183.

²²³ Goldstein, “Keeping Up Appearances” (2003), 28.

²²⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, Wallace K. Ferguson (ed.), trans. by R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1975), vol. 3, 300.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 103.

²²⁷ Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (1991), 172-191.

²²⁸ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1991), 158.

communal meal.”²²⁹ A similar motif can be found in Pieter Aertsen’s depiction of the *Egg Dance* (1557, fig. 30). While a man performs the folk dance, the bagpiper in the background has ceased playing music and gestures longingly toward a beer mug held high by the man in the left foreground. In Bruegel’s painting, this figure echoes the behavior of the peasants seated at the table; as they are more concerned with nourishing their bodies with the food and drink before them—rather than cultivating their minds with the primary activity at mealtime, conversation—he too has abandoned his principal task, playing music, because of his preoccupation with the banquet feast. On one level, these representations of local peasant custom, viewed in the home of a wealthy businessman, could have inspired discussion about certain social differences, especially priorities regarding mealtime activities.

It should be noted that we know through infrared photography that the bagpiper is depicted, in the original version of the painting, with a large codpiece (fig. 31). It is probable that it was subsequently painted out sometime after 1622, which we can speculate because it was in this year that Pieter Bruegel the Younger copied his father’s painting and the codpiece is present.²³⁰ The codpiece becomes a popular element of male attire among all classes around 1450—from peasants and soldiers to kings and emperors—and famous contemporary writers, such as Montaigne and Rabelais, often ridiculed it as a wardrobe decoration.²³¹ Whether or not such a common characteristic of male costume would have indicated, as many modern scholars have argued, that Bruegel’s peasants were meant as embodiments of lust and other vices, remains ambiguous at best.

An additional painted-out motif raises more profound issues of modification. The angle of the bagpiper’s drone, as well as that of his accompanying musician, is compositionally continued by the ladder leaning on the other side of the hay in the background. This construction would have guided the viewer’s gaze upward to what was, either in an unfinished or original version of the painting, a peasant couple making out in the hay (fig. 32). Again, through infrared photography the presence of

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ On Pieter Breugel the Younger’s practice of copying his father’s works, see the exhibition catalogue *Brueghel – Brueghel: Een Vlaamse schildersfamilie rond 1600*, Antwerpen: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1998.

²³¹ Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2006), 99-100. See also Alpers, “Bruegel’s Festive Peasants (1972-3), 167.

the kissing couple is clear. However, it is likely that this scene of sexual desire was painted over either by Bruegel himself or by someone else soon after it was finished. It is not present in his son's copy of the painting just fifty years later and a preliminary paint analysis under magnification indicates that the paint used is consistent with the rest of the painting in this area.²³² This is a strong indication that the most extreme, overt illustration of the lack of self-control in the picture was removed, whether by Bruegel or at the patron's request, while more subtle illustrations of unrefined peasant behavior are kept. Because the droncs and ladder compositionally lead the viewer to this space, yet what is supposed to be seen is removed, we know that the change has nothing to do with fine-tuning so that the painting works better artistically. Rather, the couple is removed because of their behavior. This change is an indication of an interest, whether on the part of the artist's or the patron's, in moderating the behavior of the scene, to present a more balanced or subtle representation of peasants in their natural environment. What unrefined behavior remains in the picture has more to do with the pleasure of the meal, lightheartedness as Erasmus would say, rather than any moral or negative connotations that the kissing couple in the hay would have inspired. This lightheartedness, combined with the seriousness represented by the monk and urbanite, visually illustrates Erasmus's instructions for balance, or variety, regarding topics of conversation during dinner parties, from comedy to topics of more sober concern.²³³ In the following, I will show how this behavioral moderation is combined with artistic innovation in order to create balance, not only in regard to peasant custom but also in terms of the painting itself.

If compared to previous practices of depicting peasant festivities, the complexity, order and detail of Bruegel's painting distinguishes itself from the rest. The chaotic scene which previously had appeared in German prints and the Verbeeck family water-color paintings as an animated brawl or bacchanal of foolery, such as the *Burlesque Feast* (1550, fig. 33) of Jan Mandijn (1500-1560), is in Bruegel's image composed in a more orderly fashion. Not only is the strong diagonal composition of a table employed to create depth within a closed scene, an addendum to the table is

²³² Information provided by Dr. Elke Oberthaler, Chief Restorer at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

²³³ L. Ryan, "Erasmi Convivia: The Banquet Colloquies of Erasmus" (1980), 305.

provided in the form of the makeshift serving tray bearing multiple bowls of food which has a similar diagonal composition and is situated as a mediation point between the viewer and the feasting guests. As Kavalier explains, the appeal to the viewer's senses in this way has a long tradition in Netherlandish painting. In the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the portrayal of fruit or flowers in devotional images was commonly used to prick senses other than sight, such as smell and taste, to enhance the viewing experience, as well as to engender a pious attitude through religious metaphors of consumption, as illustrated in the Song of Songs.²³⁴ If the intellectually engaged monk and lord emphasize the role of conversation during mealtime and the peasants highlight a desire for pleasure, then this prominent display of food that introduces the viewer to the banquet pricks the most prominent sense for a meal, taste.

In his representation of a *Peasant Feast* (1550, fig. 34), Aertsen also foregrounds the table on which the food is displayed. In order to intensify the visual invitation to participate in the meal, the artist tilts the tabletop forward so that the victuals are more prominently displayed (and viewed). In fact, on the foremost edge of the table, a large loaf of bread is situated so that its shadow extends into the space of the viewer. Furthermore, the bottom portion of the table is cut off by the frame of the painting so that the viewer feels as if he is actually himself sitting at the table and witnessing firsthand the activities of a peasant feast; thus, the picture implicates both the viewer's sense of space and taste.

In Bruegel's painting, the visual invitation to "take a seat" is extended by the strong diagonal movement of the door which leads to the right corner of the painting, where an empty chair is depicted along with two equally empty plates. One plate rests on top of the chair and another larger plate leans against the chair's leg, as if to provide space for the viewer to sit, have some food and contemplate the scene. This motif functions to more intensely emphasize for the viewer the act of observation and that it should not be considered a cursory or impersonal affair. The detail advocating the viewer's participation in the meal might also serve as evidence for the veracity of a well-known anecdote about Bruegel written by Karel van Mander in his *Schilderboeck*:

²³⁴ See Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1991), 152; Reindert Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion: Mysticism and the Imagery of Love in Flemish Paintings of the Virgin and Child, 1450-1550*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1994.

“Bruegel often went outside among the peasants at their kermessen and weddings, dressed in peasant clothing, and gave gifts like the other guests, pretending to be of the bride’s or the groom’s family or people.”²³⁵

Though Bruegel uses this marginal motif in other paintings, it is no invention of his own. Artists such as Petrus Christus (1410-1473), among many others, paint a similar chair in the foreground scene of *Death of the Virgin* (fig. 35). Bruegel follows such a device in his own painting of the Virgin’s death, where an empty chair sits in the foreground with a book resting on top (fig. 36). This acts as a *repoussoir* device that leads the viewer into a painting where the depth is closed off. It also serves as somewhat of an obstruction that once acknowledged, must be assimilated before proceeding further. In the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, after a brief moment’s delay at the *repoussoir*, the viewer is immediately directed by the arms of the central server toward the key figure of the representation and explores the rest of the painting thereafter. These pictorial invitations in the foreground for the beholder to enter the picture and leisurely view the activities are important observations in the context of a possible *convivium* environment, a setting in which viewers in a dining room are themselves lingering at table and participating in a feast, eager to find interesting topics of conversation.²³⁶ Because they themselves reproduce the fundamental activity of the painting—eating—the space and actions of the viewer are immediately implicated, inspiring conversation that is reflexive. Talk about the peasants feasting and the fictive space they occupy inevitably inspires talk about similar activities in the space in front of the painting and what the relationship between the two might be.

In contrast to his earlier panoramic drawings of peasant festivities, such as his depictions of *kermessen*, the importance of monumental figures in the *Peasant*

²³⁵ “[Met desen Franckert] ging Brueghel dickwils buyten by den Boeren, ter kermis, en ter Bruyloft, vercleedt in Boeren cleeren, en gaven giften als ander, versierende van Bruyds oft Bruydgoms bestandt oft volck te wesen.” English translation by Mark Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (2002), 121.

²³⁶ An interesting literary comparison to this introductory visual invitation for participation is the way in which Rabelais employs the prologues in his *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* as an opportunity for the narrator and the narratee to act out the ideal relationship between the author and reader. Michel Jeanneret explains that in each prologue an imaginary setting is provided for the production and reception of the text, a contract between the author and the reader is drawn up and the tone is set: the story can only begin after this preliminary program and this meeting of the partners in the exchange. In this very structure of narrative communication, the paradigm of the banquet enters the picture: as soon as he opens the book, the reader is invited to eat and drink. To enter the world of the fiction, the rite of passage is a simulation of conviviality; see Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (1991), 119.

Wedding Banquet is emphasized by their disposition across the picture plane and the space they occupy, which is closer to and level with that of the viewer. In addition, they 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—visual concepts that also defined a painted *historia*. In particular, the complex assembly of arms and overlapping legs that make up the bodies of the three servers surrounding the serving tray is somewhat reminiscent of the kind of figural constructions portrayed by Raphael (fig. 37, 38). The lateral movement indicated by the legs and feet of the man in red on the right juxtaposed with the man in light blue in the center, who stands flat-footed, immobile with his right leg extended, is a well thought-out arrangement comparable to Raphael's *Entombment*.²³⁷ In this painting, dating from 1507 and now in the Borghese Gallery, Rome, two figures carrying Christ assume similar positions. Both men are leaning backwards under the strain of Christ's lifeless body, the man on the left steps backwards towards Christ's makeshift tomb, indicating motion, while his counterpart stands, much like Bruegel's peasant in blue, flat-footed and immobile with his left leg extended. Created during the period when Raphael was vying with Michelangelo and Leonardo for commissions in Florence, the *Entombment* serves as an example of the intellectual peak of Italian Renaissance painting—an image in which the nature of art is as much the subject as Christ's entombment.²³⁸ In fact, Charles Rosenberg has argued that this picture is the

²³⁷ During his purported visit to Rome in 1553, scholars speculate that Bruegel was closely associated with Giulio Clovio at a time when the artist was in the service of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. If this is the case, since Clovio was an ardent admirer of Michelangelo and Raphael, whose works he frequently copied, it is fair to assume that Bruegel was introduced to the work of the leading artists of the humanist culture of the Italian Renaissance by an artist who understood and admired their artistic achievements. Although we can not know with any certitude that Bruegel specifically saw Raphael's *Entombment*, we do know that he was aware of the artist's working style in general. For a more detailed discussion of Bruegel's possible collaborations with Giulio Clovio, see Charles de Tolnay, "Newly Discovered Miniatures by Pieter Bruegel the Elder," *Burlington Magazine*, 107 (1965), 110-114. On Bruegel's purported visit to Italy, see Nils Büttner, "Ein Beitrag zur Biographie Pieter Bruegels d.Ä. und zur Kulturgeschichte der niederländischen Italienreise," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* (2000), 209-242; Dominique Allart, "Sur la piste de Bruegel en Italie: les pieces de l'enquete," *Bollettino d'Arte*, vol. 82, no. 100 (1997), 93-106. See also Württenberger, "Zu Bruegels Kunstform" (1940), 30-48, where he discusses Bruegel's limited use of Renaissance forms, which, for him, means a pictorial composition that is structured by the figure.

²³⁸ As Vasari asserts in his *Lives*, "In the art of composition, no matter what the subject, Raphael surpassed everyone else in facility, skill and ability." Later, after stating that Raphael could not equal Leonardo's sublimity and grandeur nor Michelangelo's portrayal of the naked figure, he states that, nevertheless, "Among the finest painters could also be included those who knew how to express with

quintessential Albertian composition, following precisely the standards of representation as prescribed in Alberti's treatise *On Painting*.²³⁹

Raphael's artistic designs, especially his compositions of monumental figures, would have been available to Bruegel in Brussels through a number of different venues. For example, Bernardo Daddi's (1512-ca. 1570) engraving of *Psyche Taken to a Deserted Mountain* (Fig. 39), now in San Francisco, reproduces a design that has been attributed to both Michael Coxie and Raphael. The uncertainty among art historians regarding attribution only proves the point that there were some Northern artists during this period who followed Raphael's artistic practice so closely that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish a design of the Italian artist from one of his followers.²⁴⁰ In addition to reproductive prints and drawings, Raphael's cartoons were often specifically requested for tapestry production.²⁴¹ A set of ten tapestries traditionally known as the *Acts of the Apostles* (1516–21) was commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1515 and woven in Brussels from cartoons designed and painted by Raphael. Raphael devised the scheme as a vast woven fresco incorporating life-size figures acting in fully realized illusionistic settings (fig. 40, 41).²⁴² During the following decade, other

skill, facility and judgment their various scenes, inventions, and ideas, and who in composing their pictures knew how to avoid crowding them with too much detail or impoverishing them by putting in too little, and produced works of fine stylistic purity and order." Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 1, New York: Penguin Press (1987), 300, 317.

²³⁹ Charles Rosenberg, "Raphael and the Florentine *Istoria*" (1986). See also Nigel Spivey, "Pathos by Formula: The Story of Raphael's *Entombment*," *Apollo*, vol. 150, no. 449 (July 1999), 46–51.

²⁴⁰ As early as 1521, Northern artists such as Jan Gossaert and Bernard van Orley base some of their compositions of paintings on designs by Raphael. Sources include Raphael's tapestry cartoons and reproductive prints by Marcantonio Raimondi, Marco Dente, Giorgio Ghisi and others. See Liedekerke, Anne-Claire de, ed. *Fiamminghi a Roma, 1508–1608: Artistes des Pays-Bas et de la principauté de Liège à Rome à la Renaissance*. Exhibition catalogue. Ghent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 1995; Ariane Mensger, *Jan Gossaert: Die niederländische Kunst zu Beginn der Neuzeit*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2002. On the reproduction and distribution of Raphael's work, both in Italy and the North, see Corina Höper (ed.), *Raffaël und die Folgen: Das Kunstwerk in Zeitaltern seiner graphischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001.

²⁴¹ During the last quarter of the fifteenth century, high-quality Netherlandish production was increasingly dominated by the workshops in Brussels. This was the result of three factors: the decline of the industry in Arras and Tournai; the emergence of Brussels as the principal seat of the Burgundian court in the Netherlands, which ensured its importance as a center of artistic and commercial activity; and the monopoly that the Brussels artist's Guild of Saint Luke secured in 1476 over the fabrication of figurative tapestry cartoons. The importance of Brussels for artistic activity extended into the second half of the sixteenth century. Thomas P. Campbell, "European Tapestry Production and Patronage, 1400–1600," *Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002. See also, Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry: From the 15th to the 18th Century*, Trans. by Alastair Weir, Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1999.

²⁴² T. Campbell, "European Tapestry Production" (2002). For a detailed discussion of these tapestries and their design, see John White, *Studies in Renaissance Art*, London: Pindar Press (1983), 213–311.

tapestry designs by Raphael's associates were also produced in Brussels. As Thomas Campbell explains, not only did these Raphael school designs fundamentally alter the subsequent development of Netherlandish tapestry design, they also highly influenced Northern artists.²⁴³ In addition, the work of Raphael, Michelangelo, Andrea del Sarto, Bronzino, among others, was also popularized in the North through prints by Marcantonio Raimondi, Marco Dente de Ravenna (1493-1527), Agostino Veneziano (1490-1540) and Giorgio Ghisi (1520-1582). Filip Vermeulen has published documents regarding the collection of the Antwerp art dealer Jan van Kessel (1626-1679) upon his death. Among his enormous collection were three prints “by Raphael depicting martyrdom” and nineteen other prints “by Raphael, Parmigianino, and others.”²⁴⁴

While the composition and distribution of monumental figures supporting and surrounding the goddess in *Psyche Taken to a Deserted Mountain* is similar to Raphael's *Entombment*, it resonates even more with Bruegel's painting—to the degree that a visual comparison between their structural designs can highlight the artistically ambitious mode of art Bruegel employs for a peasant scene. The skill of the engraving's designer in putting together numerous bodies, while maintaining a cohesive order, is demonstrated with multiple Y-formations which create an illusion of recession, leading the gaze into depth (fig. 42). The clearest construction is made up by the man on the right, who leans forward to bear the weight of Psyche, and the figure of Psyche herself, who bows her head in mourning. The space left between these two figures leads the viewer's gaze into depth toward the landscape in the distance.

In Bruegel's painting, similar Y-formations are immediately apparent (fig. 43). In particular, the server in red on the right side of the painting who leans forward to lower the heavy wooden door, and, just to his left, the central server who straddles the

²⁴³ Ibid. See also James Bloom, “Why Painting?” in Neil De Marchi and Hans van Miegroet (eds.), *Mapping Markets for Paintings in Early Modern Europe, 1450-1750*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2004), 17-33, where he suggests that production and marketing strategies of tapestry dealers in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries were subsequently adapted by painters to meet the increasing demand for their work in the sixteenth century. Bloom also argues that the diverse subject matter of tapestry in the fifteenth century—classical and contemporary histories, landscapes, genre scenes, peasant revels, and chivalric representations of the nobility at their leisure—influenced, via linen painting, the proliferation of style and genre that characterizes sixteenth-century art in Antwerp.

²⁴⁴ Filip Vermeulen, “The Commercialization of Art: Painting and Sculpture in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp,” in Maryan Ainsworth (ed.), *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (2001), 50.

bench. This figure faces the opposite direction and carefully bends down to grasp another bowl from the tray. The space between these two reveals an older gentleman across the table, possibly the bride's father, who raises his hand indicating speech. Both artist's complex overlapping of figural groups leads the viewer's eye into depth toward an old man or a solitary tree in the landscape, elements that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Moving now to the action below Bruegel's serving table, commentators have long observed that it takes visual exercise and mental effort to reconnect the multiple feet to the appropriate body.²⁴⁵ In fact, it seems, at first glance, as if an "extra foot" is present under the makeshift serving tray bearing the bowls of food. The left leg of the server in red on the right is extended backward, with his foot arched and heel off the ground, in the process of stepping forward. In the place where his next step would fall appears what seems to be an extra foot, apparently connected to nothing. But, after a second look the viewer is able to reconnect the foot to a body, the left leg of the server in the middle who straddles the bench while passing out bowls of food. Because this server's second foot is almost invisible on the opposite side of the serving table, as well as the contorted nature of his body, it requires effort to reconstruct his lower half; i.e. an imaginary re-enactment on the part of the viewer to "re-compose" the figure out of apparently disconnected parts. Although Bruegel's "extra foot" has become somewhat of a joke, the fact that he paints a figural group in such a way that the viewer is forced to expend so much effort in order to reconnect parts with the body deserves more attention.

Is this merely a clumsy, disjointed composition, representative of the supposedly clumsy and disjointed subject matter? Or, could it be evidence for Bruegel's ambition to design a vernacular painting of rustic everyday life whose visual grammar is as worthy of close examination as a loftily painted *historia*; a willful effort to appeal to the viewer's appreciation of a complex construct?

Such a construction has a longer history with Northern artists who incorporate dramatic gestures or complex figural compositions into history paintings. For

²⁴⁵ Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994), 50. A. Wied, *Pieter Bruegel*, Paris: Macmillan (1980), 173; C. Majzels, "The Dance in the Art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (1977) 102-103.

example, Jan van Hemessen (1500-1566), who settled in Antwerp in 1524 after studying in Italy, employs dramatic gestures and daring projections in his work, while his figures, whom sometimes populate tavern or domestic scenes, often assume the classical poses of the Sistine Chapel or mimic graceful figures of Venetian pastorals.²⁴⁶ Having gleaned concepts of modeling and formal arrangement from his studies in Italy, Hemessen, along with painters such as Aertsen and Jan Massys, sought to incorporate formal elements of history painting into representations of the world of sixteenth-century Antwerp.²⁴⁷

Hemessen's *Christ and the Adulteress* (1525, fig. 44) is just one example of the way in which the artist employs the use of hands to attract the viewer's gaze and guide it through the composition. A crowded scene of figures surrounds Christ in the foreground, who bends down to write on the ground, and the adulteress woman, who stands at the right of the picture with her hands bound. Upon closer inspection of the woman and the two men who embrace her, we see a combination of hands and arms that are constructed in such a way that it is difficult to reconnect the hands to the person to whom they belong. This is especially the case for the constellation of three hands at the woman's waist, which function to first draw the viewer's attention and, second, to direct it downwards. The adulteress crosses her hands in front, while the man to her left reaches with his right arm and crosses over both of her hands. The gesture of the man's hand on the right mirrors the gesture of the woman's left hand. Between these two, the woman's right hand extends and points downward. The similar gestures and dark clothing make it difficult to know whose hand is whose. This trio of hands, I would argue, offers an artistic comparison which provides insight for the function of Bruegel's multiple feet—a complex construction that attracts, even inspires, prolonged and analytical viewing.

Hemessen's *Calling of St. Matthew* (1536, fig. 45) is a second example of such a practice.²⁴⁸ Multiple figures sit around a table, framing a collection of eight

²⁴⁶ Burr Wallen, *Jan van Hemessen: An Antwerp Painter Between Reform and Counter-Reform*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press (1983), 2-7.

²⁴⁷ On this development, see Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (2006), 50-51 and Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes* (2006).

²⁴⁸ See also *Parable of the Prodigal Son* (1536, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), *Wayfarer in a Brothel* (1543, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum), *Calling of St. Matthew* (ca. 1539-40, Vienna,

individual hands that, in an act of imaginary assemblage on the part of the viewer, must be reconnected with the bodies to whom they belong. Due to the construction of the three men on the left, closely nestled next to one another, and the shadow this creates, the mental energy and visual effort required to parcel out the constellation of crisscrossed hands also attracts prolonged viewing and a navigation of the painted space. Similar to the three hands before the adulteress and Bruegel's third peasant foot, there is one hand in the picture that requires extra effort to reconnect, the right hand of the third man on the left, who stares at St. Matthew. Because his torso is obstructed from view, it takes a second to make out that it is this man's left hand which reaches to grab coins in the center of the table. It takes even longer to discern that the right hand directly above this one, in the literal center of the painting, belongs to his right arm that must be extended across his chest. On the one level, like the crisscrossed hands in the previous painting and the twisted body of Bruegel's server, the artistry of such a construction showcases *difficoltà*.²⁴⁹ On another level, it attracts repeated viewing and forces the beholder to see the painting as parts, rather than one whole; to analyze more closely and begin the process of dissecting and rebuilding the composition.²⁵⁰

The formal qualities of the figural construction of Bruegel's servers is set within an overall design that further highlights the mediation between art and nature, "artfully" rendering the "natural" peasant subject. I mentioned earlier that for decades art historians have recognized and puzzled over the fact that the diagonal composition of the table, including the position and distribution of certain figures around it, is one traditionally employed for depictions of the biblical story of Christ's first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana. Visually, the diagonal composition

Kunsthistorisches Museum), *Ecce Homo, Calling of St. Matthew* (ca. 1548, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).

²⁴⁹ On the importance of *difficoltà* in Renaissance painting and literature, see David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981 and John Shearman, *Mannerism*, Harmondsworth, 1986.

²⁵⁰ See Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (2000) for a discussion on the understanding of pictorial composition as made up of individual parts of the body, rather than a planimetric design. Interestingly, Pieter Bruegel the Younger "corrects" his father in his copy of the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*. Along with omitting the "third" foot of the server, Bruegel the Younger changes multiple aspects of the painting, such as the position of other feet under the table and the facial features of the peasants; presumably all done to make the picture seem more "natural." On Pieter Bruegel the Younger's practice of copying his father's work, see the exhibition *catalogue Brueghel – Brueghel* (1998).

creates the illusion of a receding depth, which is difficult to depict in an enclosed space. The angle of the table allows for figures on both sides to be seen while simultaneously providing a partial view of the display of food and drink set before the guests. In addition to the print designed by Gerard van Groningen discussed earlier, other examples from Northern artists are abundant: for instance, a painting of the subject by Maarten de Vos, a contemporary and probable friend of Bruegel's (fig. 46). In numerous contemporary paintings, woodcuts and engravings from the Netherlands, similar depictions of the marriage at Cana exist, such as pen and ink drawings by Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502-1550) (fig. 47), Dionisio Calvaert (1540-1619) (fig. 48) and Dirck Vellert (1480-1547) (fig. 49) as well as an anonymous Flemish painting (fig. 50). However, the diagonal composition was also extremely popular for depictions of the biblical story of the Last Supper—both in Italy and the North. The most monumental example is a Last Supper by Tintoretto (fig. 51). Cornelis Cornelisz. Buys (? –ca. 1524), De Vos and Coecke van Aelst also employ the design (fig. 52, 53, 54).

Why would Bruegel have painted a feast of peasants in an ordered design, both in relation to the construction of figures and the overall composition, previously employed for ambitious depictions of lofty stories of the Bible? Is Bruegel, as some scholars have implied, simply using a popular diagonal composition for what had become a popular theme?²⁵¹ Considering its monumental size, 114 x 164 cm, and the high standard of the medium, oil paint on panel, I argue that one issue at hand is an interest in engaging perceived notions of artistic norms and values by juxtaposing what might seem to be contradictory notions of art—history painting and a peasant scene. By comparing Raphaelesque designs—the figural constructions in both the *Entombment* and *Psyche*—to a similar composition in Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, we can see for the first time the complex and ambitious way in which a seemingly “natural” scene of peasants is artfully portrayed. Though Bruegel's subject is a peasant feast, like Raphael's *Entombment* it fits well within Alberti's precepts for

²⁵¹ Kavalier explains, “No doubt other painters would have recognized the formal sources of Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, but this would seem a more narrowly professional matter, an index of institutional practice.” *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 153.

decorum and understanding a *historia*.²⁵² The diagonal composition of the table and the construction of the peasant figures in the foreground create a dramatic narrative in which a story is told with variety and decorum, in a style informed by the observation of nature and knowledge of the laws of perspective. Bodies harmonize together in both size and function. The figures move in a manner appropriate to their age, sex and station (take, for example, the seated child in the foreground, the meditative bride in the center and the monk on the right who displays the gesture for speech), and fit together to represent and explain the narrative. Excess is avoided and a variety of movements and poses are employed in which the composition of members accord well with one another and attract prolonged viewing.

The visual tension of a rustic peasant scene and compositional artifice associated with history painting raises foundational questions regarding art and nature, a “natural” subject that is artfully portrayed, high form and low subject, sacred history referenced in a contemporary setting, questions which were also taken up by some of Bruegel’s Northern contemporaries, such as Jan van Hemessen and Pieter Aertsen.²⁵³ By appropriating a stylistic model of painting which emphasizes the artful construction of figural groups for a vernacular scene of peasants, Bruegel perfectly combines the artfulness of a “historia” for the art-less, or natural, subject of the peasant, thereby integrating “art” as much as “custom” as the regulating factor. In a highly competitive art market during the second half of the sixteenth century in Flanders, especially considering the popularity of Italianate painting, and amid an increasing artistic awareness of the educated elite, as evidenced in the way paintings and literature are discussed in the writings of Lombard, Lampsonius, De Heere and Ortelius, such artful artlessness, referencing figures and a composition from recognized works of painted *historiae* within a “natural” scene of peasants, would have situated art itself as a subject of the painting and, therefore, one topic of conversation.²⁵⁴

Speaking of De Heere, we are reminded again of the agenda of the rederijckers and Pléiade group for the cultivation and use of the vernacular language instead of

²⁵² See p. 13-15 for literature on Alberti’s precepts, as well as possible ways the author was known in the North.

²⁵³ For studies of this element in the work of Pieter Aertsen, see Falkenburg (1995, 2004, 2007).

²⁵⁴ On the presence of “artful artlessness” in Renaissance Italy, see Patricia Emison, *Low and High Style in Italian Renaissance Art*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997.

Latin. In order to foster the status of a language indigenous to Flanders, formal, stylistic and rhetorical elements of Latin and French were appropriated in order to “enrich” and “adorn” the vernacular. Likewise, multiple literary historians have explained that the theater of the rederijkers in the mid-sixteenth century had ties both to native Netherlandish and to classical traditions. Rederijkers articulated their newly acquired humanist ideas in traditional literary genres. While the dramatic forms remained basically those of late Medieval morality plays and farces, rederijker authors translated classical dramas and, by Bruegel’s time, began to use the persuasive methods of rhetorical argumentation in their own works.²⁵⁵ Similar to his rederijker counterparts and the humanist agenda for the cultivation of the vernacular language, Bruegel too employs a sophisticated grammar of visual concepts and pictorial elements traditionally reserved for representing events from the Bible for a vernacular scene of peasants. Whether visual or literary, all of these works of art were dependent on the astuteness of the reader or viewer to recognize, decipher and appreciate these diverse forms and resonances.

In this context, it is important to restate and emphasize that in addition to numerous paintings by Bruegel, the art collections of Jongelinck and Noirot included multiple pictures by artists who more recognizably incorporated elements from an Italianate mode, one example being Frans Floris (see fig. 20, *The Banquet of the Gods*). These patrons came from the economic, political and professional elite of the Netherlands, a circle of sophisticated collectors who would have admired the Italianate

²⁵⁵ Meadow, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (2002), 17. Ramakers, “Bruegel en de rederijkers” (1997); see also Ramakers, “Kinderen van Saturnus” (2002); Ramakers, *Spelen en Figuren* (1996), where he discusses the interaction of various forms of artistic production—rhetoricians, theologians, poets, artists—in the implementation of theatrical processions. See also Marijke Spies, “Between Ornament and Argumentation: Developments in Sixteenth-Century Dutch Poetics,” in Jelle Koopmans, et al (eds.) *Rhetoric-Rhétoriqueurs-Rederijkers*, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (1995), 117-122. The same phenomenon occurs in Italy as well. For example, Konrad Eisenbichler explains that in the work of Giovan Maria Cecchi the traditional Renaissance religious play, the *sacra rappresentazione*, came to terms with the sixteenth century’s renewed interest in the classics and adapted itself to the new concepts of dramaturgy. Although the *sacra rappresentazione*, in its fifteenth-century garb, had disappeared, Cecchi was experimenting with a new religious drama which reversed Angelo Poliziano’s structural innovation. Whereas the *Orfeo* had placed secular, pagan content in a religious, fifteenth-century mould, Cecchi in his *Il figliuol prodigo* successfully dramatized a Christian story with the rules of classical and erudite comedy, while at the same time reflecting the spirit of mercantile, Renaissance Florence. See K. Eisenbichler, “From *Sacra* to *Commedia*,” *Bibliothèque d’humanisme et Renaissance*, vol. 45, no. 1 (1983), 108.

history paintings of Floris.²⁵⁶ Noirot owned eleven paintings by Floris, which hung in his bedroom, or *slaepcamer*.²⁵⁷ His salon contained a large Acteon panel (which, upon the sale of his estate, was the most expensive item in his collection).²⁵⁸ Other painted subjects in his collection include: Paris with the three goddesses, Cleopatra with Cupid, and the story of Icarus or Phaeton.²⁵⁹ Jongelinck owned twenty-two paintings by Floris, including large cycles such as the Labors of Hercules and the Seven Liberal Arts, as well as sixteen by Bruegel, including the Series of the Seasons. Furthermore, Jongelinck's brother, Jacques, created a series of over-life-size mythological figures in bronze for Nicolaes's country house.²⁶⁰ The collections of Noirot and Jongelinck not only reveal a developed taste for religious and mythological pictures but also for depictions of local custom, such as peasant scenes, and landscape. Noirot's collection also shows that Bruegel's unique portrayal of peasants would have been viewed within a domestic interior that included paintings, such as those of Floris, with similar formal and stylistic elements, yet incorporated for a very different subject matter. Therefore, we are guaranteed that the viewers of Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet* would have had easy access to the types of pictures, namely painted *historiae*, which portray the very characteristics Bruegel employs for cultivating his vernacular style and they would have been able to compare and contrast the subject, style and creative abilities of the artists. As we saw earlier in my discussion of Erasmus's *Godly Feast*, in addition to religious and moral instruction, Erasmus offers through the speech of Eusebius some indication that art, even the creative abilities of artists, were also topics of discussion during mealtime activities. 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."²⁶¹

I am not arguing that the viewers of Bruegel's painting of rustic life would not have considered the peasants and their actions in relation to their own socio-cultural

²⁵⁶ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 51. See also C. van de Velde, *Frans Floris (1519/20-1570). Leven en Werken* (1975).

²⁵⁷ Goldstein, "Keeping up Appearances" (2003), 43.

²⁵⁸ Smolderen, "Tableaux de Jérôme Bosch, de Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien et de Frans Floris" (1995).

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 51.

²⁶¹ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 39 (1997), 179.

context and interpreted them accordingly. On the one hand, as Walter Gibson and Claudia Goldstein have shown, paintings and objects in the dining room, such as dining ware, often depicted peasants and festivals to function as entertainment at dinner parties, inspiring laughter and contributing to the levity which was a recommended accompaniment to the meal.²⁶² No doubt the upturned beer jugs represented one important aspect of a dinner party—light-hearted pleasure. At the same time, these manners, along with the lack of personal interaction between the peasant figures sitting at the table, offer for the viewer instruction on proper behavior by negative example. As Macrobius writes: “For a group of men to say nothing at all while stuffing themselves with food would be positively swinish.”²⁶³ In addition to all of this, however, I am proposing that the cultural connotations of peasant life cannot be separated from the ambitious way in which Bruegel represents it. In fact, Bruegel’s visual discussion of what constitutes art is fundamentally dependent on the status-lessness of the peasant class and its emerging distinction as representing a particularly Northern, vernacular style. In addition to what has been argued in the past, that Bruegel’s ambitious paintings of country folk either affirm or demean the status of the peasant in a changing economic environment, his use of complex mechanisms and references to artistic standards employed for history painting also serves to question what constitutes a proper work of art and validate his own style.

I have shown in my discussion of the *convivium* tradition that plays and texts, such as Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, became occasions at dinner time for readers to both take pleasure in the texts and showcase their knowledge by closely analyzing formal aspects or offering commentary and interpretations. Discussion included laughter, appreciation, dissecting language and rhetorical structure in order to teach the rules of grammar. The companions in the *Poetic Feast* recite poetry, analyze difficult terms, resolve problems of rhyme and meter and compete to see who can give more in-depth readings of traditional literary texts. Likewise, for those wealthy elite seated in a dining room eating, looking at a painting depicting peasants also at table, Bruegel’s visual

²⁶² Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel* (2006); Goldstein, “Keeping Up Appearances” (2003), 31, 80-142. See also Alpers, “Realism as a Comic Mode” (1975-6), 115-144, esp. 117-118, where she discusses the peasant subject in comic literature that was meant to be read in a convivial setting to produce laughter.

²⁶³ Macrobius, *The Saturnalia*, trans. by P.V. Davies, New York: Columbia University Press (1969), 47.

grammar, his artful manner of composition, would have been a subject of discourse as much as the peasants and the festive event on display.

Implicit in this description of Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet* is a custom of viewing art that does not take the surface at face value, but considers diverse artistic practices allowing for a visual experience that is analytical and multivalent.

Referential viewing is performative by its very nature; which is to say that the viewer and the knowledge he brings to the act of looking, the "beholder's share," are involved in the process of making meaning. With this idea in mind, I would like to return to the issue of whether or not Bruegel's viewers would have recognized in this painting visual references to the wedding at Cana. Thus far, scholars have only investigated this possibility within the context of moral instruction, whether or not the moral values associated with the biblical story would have pertained to its new context.²⁶⁴ I would like to revisit the prospect within the context of a theological principle which was prominent during this period, recognizing sacred history in everyday life.²⁶⁵

As I just mentioned, the painting guides the viewer to reconstruct pictorial associations; the strong diagonal composition of the scene and the beer pourer on the left are, as far as I have been able to ascertain, unprecedented choices for a peasant feast. The diagonal design was most popular for depictions of the two most significant feasts in the New Testament, in which Jesus performed his first and last miracles: the transformations of water into wine at the wedding at Cana and bread and wine into his body and blood at the Last Supper. Although the use of such a composition and figural motif could be a matter of workshop practice, it is important to remember that these formal references would have been viewed by a group of people dining in the home of a wealthy Antwerp businessman and well acquainted with the tradition of hanging

²⁶⁴ See Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994). Kavalier argues, "It is far from clear that the values associated with this device in religious pictures would have pertained to its new application. No doubt other painters would have recognized the formal sources of Bruegel's painting, but this would seem a more narrowly professional matter, an index of institutional practice. Given the sometimes confusing exchange between sacred and secular imagery in the work of Aertsen, Beuckelaer, and their contemporaries, it appears unlikely that the viewer would have seen in Bruegel's painting a significant reference to the Marriage at Cana and the values it implied." *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 153.

²⁶⁵ Also applicable here is Thomas Greene's description of this habit of mind as a particularly humanist practice. "Sub-reading" he explains is, "an 'archaeological' scrutiny, a decipherment of the latent or hidden or indecipherable object of historical knowledge beneath the surface; see "Petrarch and the Humanist Hermeneutic," in Giose Rimanelli and Kenneth John Atchity (eds.), *Italian Literature: Roots and Branches*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1976).

representations of historically significant banquets in a dining room, which was cited previously in Erasmus's *Godly Feast*. While discussing the inventory of Johanna Greyns' collection, taken upon her death in 1626, Jeffrey Muller explains that the subject of some of the paintings hanging in her dining room are, in one way or another, connected with the function of the room.²⁶⁶ For example, two panel paintings of the Supper at Emmaus hung next to a peasant market scene, as well as two panel paintings of a "cheerful" peasant and his wife.²⁶⁷ Bruegel's youngest son, Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), represents this practice in his depiction of the *Sense of Taste*, one of a series of five paintings, each devoted to one of the senses (1618, fig. 55). With the hunting lodge Castle Tervuren in the background, this painting is an ode to the rich and varied game supposedly to be found on the royal domains of Albrecht and Isabella.²⁶⁸ Taste, in the form of a nude woman, is seated at a table lavishly displaying roasted game, seafood, and fruit. A satyr is in the process of carefully pouring wine into the woman's glass. Located on the wall behind the central table is a painting of the wedding at Cana, possibly after Frans Francken.²⁶⁹ To the left of this picture, hanging above the entrance into the busy kitchen, is a painting that precisely reproduces Bruegel the Elder's design of the *Fat Kitchen* (fig. 56).²⁷⁰ Feasting peasants hang next to a biblical feast. Whereas the *Fat Kitchen*, located above the entrance to where the food is being prepared, is representative of the abundance of the victuals on display, the *Wedding at Cana* adds a religious tone to the pleasure taken in God's creation. An additional level of interaction between these depictions of the sacred and profane is inspired by the action of the satyr standing in the space in front of the two pictures. In the midst of pouring wine into the woman's glass, his pose and posture replicate the painted wine pourer behind him in the Cana wedding, the very moment when Christ performs his first miracle of turning water into wine. The similarity between these two

²⁶⁶ This was also the case in Italy; see Scott R. Walker, "Florentine painted Refectories, 1350-1500," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1979.

²⁶⁷ Muller, "Private Collections in the Spanish Netherlands" (1993), 200.

²⁶⁸ For the most recent discussion of this series of paintings, see Anne T. Woollett and A. van Suchtelen (eds.), *Rubens en Brueghel: een artistieke vriendschap, exhibition catalogue*, Den Haag: Mauritshuis, 2006; Barbar Welzel, "Sinnliche Erkenntnis, Wissenschaft und Bildtheorie: der Fünf-Sinne-Zyklus von Jan Brueghel d.Ä. und Peter Paul Rubens für das erzherzogliche Paar Albrecht und Isabella," in Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer (ed.), *Scientiae et artes* (2004), 231-245.

²⁶⁹ M. Díaz Padrón, et al (eds.), *David Teniers, Jan Brueghel y los Gabinetes de Pinturas*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1992.

²⁷⁰ Woollett and Suchtelen, *Rubens en Brueghel* (2006).

figures creates reflexivity between the two scenes of consumption, encouraging conversation among the viewers in front of the painting about possible relationships among the various fictive spaces and what implications these might have for their own “real,” lived space, which is also depicted in the picture itself via the hunting lodge.²⁷¹ In a similar fashion, the interaction of feasting viewers with Bruegel’s *Peasant Wedding Banquet* creates a visual experience that is fundamentally reflexive; both viewer and painted figures engage in the same activity leading to a continuity between the two.

What makes the particular visible association between Bruegel’s *Peasant Wedding Banquet* and depictions of the wedding at Cana so striking is not only the perspective of the table, but also Bruegel’s attentive depiction and placement of the beer pourer in the left foreground (fig. 13, 14). In comparison to the same figure in Gerard van Groningen’s design, we can see that both men lean forward with knees slightly bent, resting their jugs lightly on their thighs while concentrating on the task at hand. In addition, a comparison between Bruegel’s peasant bride with that of Gerard’s reveals that the woman replicates in pose and posture exactly the traditional downward, meditative gaze compulsory for honorable brides during this period, which illustrated a humble heart and contemplative mind (fig. 15, 16).²⁷²

The possible mediation of a sacred story within a secular scene has not been extensively considered, probably for two reasons. First, the association has only been approached from a moralistic perspective, whether or not the temperate moral values associated with the compositional device in a religious picture would have pertained, whether directly or antithetically, to its new application.²⁷³ The second reason is the general characterization of sixteenth-century Netherlandish art, from Hieronymus

²⁷¹ This interconnection of sacred and profane motifs also occurs in the *Allegory of Sight*. Venus, the goddess of love, displays for her young son, Cupid, a painting of Jesus restoring sight to a blind man. For a general study on paintings within paintings, see the exhibition catalogue by Pierre Georgel, *La peinture dans la peinture*, Dijon: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1984.

²⁷² On the tradition of the bride’s reserved demeanour, see Gibson, “Some Notes on Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Peasant Wedding Feast*,” *Art Quarterly*, vol. 28 (1965), 194-208 and Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel* (2006), 120, 216. Such a demeanour, coupled with a bridal crown and flowing hair was a tradition of virginal modesty in general. As illustrated in Gerard van Groningen’s depiction of the *Wedding at Cana*, this was the traditional way of representing the Cana bride. A literary example can be found in a poem by Jan van der Noot commemorating a wedding in 1563 in which the young lady receives her future husband’s offer of marriage with “her eyes cast down [heur ooghen nederwaert]”; see *Jan van der Noot, Het Bosken en Het Theatre*, W.A.P. Smit (ed.), Utrecht: HES Publishers (1979), 59.

²⁷³ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 153; Sullivan, *Bruegel’s Peasants* (1994), 52.

Bosch to Bruegel, as a transitional step in the process by which secular interests gradually extricated themselves from the context of religious painting.²⁷⁴ As a result, the distinction between sacred and secular art is largely defined along iconographical themes. When the two are combined in the same painting, such as in Aertsen's *Market Stall* or Bruegel's *Adoration of the Magi in the Snow*, the theme that plays the most prominent visual role usually categorizes the image (i.e., "market scene" or "landscape").

This modern habit of viewing is wholly anachronistic and cuts against the grain of the sixteenth-century mindset, whether religious or artistic, viewing these images.²⁷⁵ Unlike modern attempts to divide images into neatly packed divisions of subject and style, it is likely that the habit of mind that viewed Bruegel's pictures knew no concept of "genre."²⁷⁶ We know that in the middle of the sixteenth century, terms such as "landscape" or "peasant scene" were used by notaries to describe pictures in a specific inventory, but these terms did not delineate any monolithically fixed notions of pictorial kind, nor the status of such a kind. Neither did they describe how a viewer should visually experience a painting, as is the case for modern categories of art.

In order to discern the possible function of mediating religious scenes within paintings that, at first sight, seem to exclusively represent a landscape or activities of

²⁷⁴ Many proposals have been set forth to account for "the emergence of secular art" in sixteenth century; see, for example, Max J. Friedländer, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development*, New York: Schocken, 1963; Keith Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beukelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting* (1977); on this development from an evolutionary perspective, see Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes* (2006).

²⁷⁵ See David Freedberg, "Allusion and Topicality" (1989), 53-65, where he discusses Bruegel's practice of "dissimulation," the way in which he situates biblical events in contemporary settings in order to address current political situations; Freedberg, "The Hidden God: Image and Interdiction in the Netherlands in the Sixteenth Century," *Art History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (June 1982), 132-153, where he discusses the polarity of the sacred and non-sacred during the Catholic and Protestant Reformations, while at the same time "bearing witness to the contagiousness of the sacred, to the tendency of what is regarded as sacred to be carried over into apparently non-sacred objects and to leave its traces there." See also Larry Silver, "God in the Details: Bosch and Judgement(s)," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, no. 4 (December 2001), 626-650.

²⁷⁶ Reindert Falkenburg, Mark Meadow and other scholars have noted that the issue of genre is a particularly fraught one for sixteenth-century Netherlandish art. See Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*" (1996). On the development of pictorial genres in the Netherlands, see Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes* (2006). See also R. Falkenburg, "Recente visies op de zeventiende-eeuwse Nederlandse genre-schilderkunst" (1991); 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 vols.; L. De Pauw-De Veen, *De begrippen 'schilder', 'schilderij' en 'schilderen' in de zeventiende eeuw*, Brussel: Paleis der Academien, 1969.

everyday life, it is important to note that this practice is consistent throughout Bruegel's work and has a longer history in earlier Netherlandish painting. This practice would have, therefore, created expectations that defined a habit of viewing. Issues of sight and insight, (spiritual) blindness and enlightenment, are fundamental to the culture of interiority in the fifteenth century as much as in the sixteenth century, as it is brought out in many texts belonging to the Modern Devotion and (Christian) Humanism. Not only are these spiritual issues the matrix within which early Modern education evolved in the Netherlands, they have turned out to be constructs for iconography essential to several types of devotional painting in fifteenth-century northern European art.²⁷⁷ They are also addressed in pictorial modes of paradox and irony operative in many types of sixteenth-century painting, such as Aertsen's peasant and market scenes, and are the direct iconographic forbearers of Bruegel's art. Central to this pictorial discourse is the function of the inconspicuous religious motif for the overall visual and intellectual experience of the painting.

At stake in the majority of Bruegel's paintings is the ability of the viewer to recognize subtle religious references or difficult-to-see motifs, then to "switch perspectives" and redefine the painting as a result of this visual revelation. One example, among many others, is his *Census at Bethlehem* (fig. 57), painted in 1566 and now in Brussels.²⁷⁸ In the hands of Bruegel, the small town in Judea is transformed into a sixteenth-century snow-covered Brabant village in which people gather in front of an inn to pay taxes. Instead of Emperor Augustus giving the orders, it is Charles V of Spain. The sign of the inn on the left is a green wreath and a placard bearing the coat of arms of Charles hangs on the front.²⁷⁹ Numerous people crowd in front of a table to perform their duty of paying taxes, as is illustrated by a figure in front of the table handing over money to an official in a fur-trimmed coat. People are portrayed

²⁷⁷ On this topic, see Brett Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Joseph Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Jeffrey Hamburger, "Speculations on Speculation: Vision and Perception in the Theory and Practice of Mystical Devotion," in *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang: Neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte. Kolloquium Kloster Fischingen 1998*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag (2000), 253-388; Reindert Falkenburg, "Pieter Bruegel's Series of the Seasons: On the Perception of Divine Order," Joost van der Auwera (ed.), *Liber Amicorum Raphaël de Smedt*, Leuven: Peeters (2001), 253-275.

²⁷⁸ For a general discussion of this painting, see Roberts-Jones, *Pieter Bruegel* (2002), 180.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

throughout the picture going about their daily activities of cleaning, playing, cooking and working. In the lower left foreground, a man cuts the throat of a pig; in the lower right corner, children play on the ice; a woman in the center sweeps snow; multiple men build a structure in the center background. In the right middle ground, a man stands at the door of a dilapidated shack. In the left background, figures traverse the frozen lake and just beyond the ice two tiny figures enter a church. In the right background, buildings in the village are falling apart. Roosters search for morsels of food, birds fly, people talk and the sun sets.

Almost hidden in the crowd in the center foreground of the picture is a woman riding on a donkey pulled by a man. There is nothing about these two figures that sets them apart within the painting. Viewed in isolation, this motif is one more adjective that describes one theme of the painting, people *en route* to pay their taxes. However, because of a longer pictorial tradition of portraying a man, woman and donkey in just this manner (usually in pictures of the Flight into Egypt), we know the pair to be Mary and Joseph, the future mother and father of Christ. Having recognized this marginal, inconspicuous motif, the viewer must now reexamine the picture in light of this detail. What once were “secular” illustrations of everyday life in a sixteenth-century Brabant village must now be redefined in the context of the religious story this couple (located next to an inn) represents—the census at Bethlehem and birth of Christ.

As described in St. Luke’s gospel (2:1-5), the story of the pregnant Mary and Joseph returning to be registered in Bethlehem directly precedes the birth of Christ, an event that is the pivotal point between the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. As the story goes, Mary wrapped Jesus in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Seen in this context, the viewer projects into this Brabant village what he or she associates with the biblical narrative. The people standing in front of the inn are equally there because of a decree from Caesar Augustus as they are to pay taxes to Charles. The inn crowded with people becomes the one that had no room for the holy family. The dilapidated shack in the middle ground, with a cross on top of its roof, becomes a possible birthplace of Christ. The church in the left background and the decrepit buildings on the other side of the picture form the base of a triangle whose apex is located in the figures of Mary and Joseph. Rather than, or in addition to,

structures common in a contemporary Brabant village, they also serve as symbols for the Old and New Testaments.

Although Bruegel's multivalent painting could have been viewed as a comment on the socio-economic situation of his time, paralleling biblical and contemporary political figures, I have briefly emphasized the visual experience of navigating a picture that imbricates a religious story within an everyday scene. This process of negotiating sacred and profane, redefining illustrations of everyday life in the context of a religious story, is ignited by a subtle, inconspicuous motif that is only recognized after prolonged viewing. As a result, the viewer must shift gears and rethink each aspect of the picture in a new light. The example of the *Census at Bethlehem* also pertains to many other pictures by Bruegel such as the *Fall of Icarus*, *Conversion of St. Paul*, *Adoration of the Magi in the Snow* and the *Series of the Seasons*.²⁸⁰ Although in these examples we are dealing with the mediation of a religious or mythological story through small, out-of-the-way motifs, rather than more formal references such as the composition and figures I have identified in the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, a similar analytical, projective way of viewing is at play. As Falkenburg argues regarding the landscape paintings of Joachim Patinir (ca.1485-1524), an artist who was highly influential for Bruegel:

The function of these details is to lead the eye of the beholder beyond a superficial observation of the world and its natural beauties and to engage him in a dialectic between different ways of looking, between the observation of the beauty of the world and the acknowledgement of a spiritual reality in that world that can only be perceived with the eye of the mind, i.e. the discerning eye that is able to recognize these details and ponder their relationship within the painting and the viewing experience itself.²⁸¹

Likewise, religious writers during this period, whether Protestant or Catholic, consistently instructed their readers to associate religious themes with moments in everyday life. As early as the fifteenth century, writers in the Netherlands associated

²⁸⁰ See, for example, Larry Silver, "Pieter Bruegel in the Capital of Capitalism," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 47 (1996), 125-154; Reindert Falkenburg, "Doorzien als esthetische ervaring bij Pieter Bruegel I en het vroeg-zestiende-eeuwse landschap," in *De uitvinding van het landschap. Van Patinir tot Rubens, 1520-1650*, Antwerpen: Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 53-65 and "Pieter Bruegel's Series of the Seasons" (2001); Freedberg, "Allusion and Topicality" (1989).

²⁸¹ R. Falkenburg, "The Devil is in the Detail: Ways of Seeing Joachim Patinir's 'World Landscapes'," in Alejandro Vergara (ed.) exhibition catalogue, *Joachim Patinir*, Madrid: Museo del Prado (2007).

with the *Devotio Moderna*, or Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, instructed the devout to have Christ ever present before their eyes, no matter if it is during prayers or making bread. Their emphasis on seeing Christ present in the everyday develops from the centrality of progress in the virtues, spiritual exercises that lead to a more perfect and harmonious life, rather than to a kind of speculative or mystical union with God. All things—work, study and leisure—were dedicated to the edification, or exercising, of one’s spiritual self and the way this was acted out in daily interactions.²⁸² In his treatise on conversion, John Brinckerinck (d. 1419) instructs:

Work in such a way that you never forget [the Lord]. So when we go to eat we think: How shall I conduct myself now? St. Augustine answers us that we should approach eating as medicine. We are to strengthen the body so it may persist in the service of God...When we go to speak with someone, we should think: Dear Lord how should I conduct myself in this situation? And so whatever we do, whether thinking or speaking, keeping silent or working, going or standing, sitting or rising, going to bed or going to church, reading or praying, we should say: Dear Lord, how am I to do this? Shall I do it this way?²⁸³

As a result of the urban lay spirituality that develops in the Low Countries during the fifteenth century, partly due to writers such as Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381) and those associated with the Modern Devotion, leading up to the theological developments of the Protestant Reformation in the North, the locus of the good life is placed within “life” itself.²⁸⁴ By the sixteenth century the full human life is now defined in terms of labour and production, on one hand, and marriage and family life on the other. For example, Martin Luther (1483-1546), a prominent student of the educational program of the *Devotio Moderna*, sought to abolish the boundary separating the everyday life of production and reproduction from the good life of contemplation and holiness. The Christian is called to be holy in the midst of everyday life, not apart from everyday life. For Luther, there is no distinction between the “secular” and the “religious,” the monk and the shoemaker, the baptized and the

²⁸² *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, introduction by John van Engen, New York: Paulist Press (1988), 7-35.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 226. John Brinckerinck (d. 1419) belonged to the earliest generation of the Modern Devotion, converted by the founder of the movement, Geert Grote.

²⁸⁴ For a discussion of this development, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1989), 210-218.

ordained, the carnal and the spirit-filled, the celibate and the married. All life is sanctified by God's grace in Christ, and all vocations are Christian vocations. By denying any special form of life as a privileged locus of the sacred, Luther denies the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirms their interpenetration.²⁸⁵

Luther explains that when washing one's hands before dinner, he should remember the holy meal for which every meal is a representation, the Last Supper, and perform hand washing as a ritual of purification in preparation to take part. Similarly, in Erasmus's "Godly Feast," a theologian who was also a prominent student of the *Devotio Moderna*, the character Eusebius invites Christ to be a part of their meal: "Now may Christ, the Enlivener of all, and without whom nothing can be pleasant, vouchsafe to be with us, and exhilarate our minds by his presence." One of his guests, Timothy, points out, "I hope he will be pleased so to do; but where shall he sit, for the places are all taken up?" Eusebius responds, "I would have him in every morsel and drop that we eat and drink; but especially, in our minds."²⁸⁶

As a result, a picture that might seem funny, moralistic or light-hearted when viewed only in terms of the subject matter represented could be transformed into a witty and penetrating visual experience if understood within the viewing context of the dining room and how dispositional facets of the image inspire the viewer's memory and awaken a repertoire of visual, literary and religious associations.²⁸⁷ In doing so, the association of the "secular" *Peasant Wedding Banquet* with the "sacred" wedding at Cana implies as much about the intellectual, even spiritual, competency of the viewer as about his or her ability to analyze social behaviour or artistic practice. For, by recognizing a religious story within a secular scene, the viewer is not only inspired

²⁸⁵ On the other hand, the Catholic Reformation issued interdictions which sought to make the distinction in art even more concrete. There were recurrent objections to painters like Caravaggio who appear to "confuse" the everyday with the sacred. See also, Heide Wunder, "iusticia, Teutonice fromkeyt.' Theologische Rechtfertigung und bürgerliche Rechtschaffenheit. Ein Beitrag zur Sozialgeschichte eines theologischen Konzepts," in Bernd Moeller (ed.), *Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland als Umbruch, Wissenschaftliches Symposium des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 1996*, Heidelberg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus (1998), 307-332

²⁸⁶ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 39 (1997), 181.

²⁸⁷ See also David Freedberg, "The Hidden God" (1982), 143, where he discusses the way in which a symbol may generate associations from its use in other contexts; or, as Turner explains it, "that the latent and to a certain extent the hidden meanings of a dominant symbol in one context may be discovered by using exegetic reports on its significance in another." V. Turner and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York (1978), 247-248. For a broader discussion on the function of images in this context, see Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.

to remember his or her own meal as a religious act, but he or she also reenacts the performance of conversion locked into the biblical story, namely Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine.²⁸⁸ As Jesus transformed "secular" water into "spiritual" wine, so the viewer sees a sacred story within a scene of everyday life. In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus instructs his readers on exactly how to enact such an insight:

Let us imagine, therefore, two worlds, the one merely intelligible, the other visible. Since we are but pilgrims in the visible world, we should never make it our fixed abode, but should *relate by a fitting comparison* everything that occurs to the senses to the angelic world..... Therefore, whatever you observe in this material world, learn to refer to God and to the invisible part of yourself. In that way, whatever offers itself to the senses will become for you an occasion for the practice of piety.²⁸⁹

In Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, present reality and a biblical story, vernacular subject in a painterly style, urban and rustic convivial settings are elaborately layered within the visual experience, requiring its viewers continuously to negotiate, question and discuss shifting perspectives about art, society and spirituality.

II.

Building on the visual conversations within this painting and the verbal dialogue inspired by it, I would like to turn now to another of Bruegel's later peasant paintings that represents and inspires similar topics of discourse. Hanging next to the *Peasant Wedding Banquet* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is the *Peasant Dance*, also made in 1568 (fig. 17). However unlikely, the similarity between their

²⁸⁸ For further discussions on the performative act of interpretation in Bruegel's work, specifically as it entails pictorial discovery and a reenactment of the central theme locked into the subject of the painting, see Falkenburg, "Doorzien als esthetische ervaring" (2005), 53-65; Meadow, "Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary*" (1996); Walter Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon* (1991). See also Lyckle de Vries, "Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus*: Ovid or Solomon," *Simiolus*, vol. 30, no.1/2 (2003), 4-18, where he argues that Bruegel takes texts directly from the Bible, Solomon speaking in Ecclesiastes, and presents them in the form of an everyday life situation.

²⁸⁹ Erasmus, *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*. Trans. Charles Fantazzi. Oxford: University Press (1981), 65, (emphasis added). On the function of analogy in Erasmus's works as a figure of rhetoric allowing the imagination to assist reason in constructing links between heterogeneous fields of study and thought, see Jean-Claude Margolin, "L'Analogie dans la Pensée d'Erasmus," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, vol. 69 (1978), 25-50.

formal qualities, including an emphasis on monumental figures and complex compositions that lead the viewers gaze into depth, has led many scholars to see the paintings as pendants.²⁹⁰ The scene represents an annual village festival held on the feast day of the village patron saint; if the large red flag hanging from the building on the left is any indication, the festivities are dedicated to St. George. Dancing, drinking and music making illustrate the merry atmosphere. On the left, peasants sit at a table in front of an inn that is decorated with beer and food. They engage one another in a number of ways, either in an inebriated exchange or physical affection. The interaction between the three peasants at the table, all of whom extend their arms toward one another, is a motif taken from one of Bruegel's earlier pictures, *St. George Kermis* (1561, fig. 22, 58). In this engraving after the artist's design, three men are seated on the left side of the table situated in front of an inn and interact with one another in almost the exact same fashion. This is one example among many in which the artist takes up a small or marginal motif from a previous panoramic work and forms it into a more prominent element of a painting. Other examples include the *Cripples*, taken from the *Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, and the *Blind Leading the Blind* and *Magpie on the Gallows*, taken from the *Netherlandish Proverbs*.²⁹¹

On the right side of the *Peasant Dance*, one couple strides into the scene from the right. Behind them in the middle ground, two couples glide hand in hand to the rhythm of the bagpiper; the musician's expanded cheeks indicate the intensity of his tunes. The rough faces of all the figures, particularly the large man in the center and those seated around the table, reveal teeth or expressions that visually communicate something of the unrefined or primitive quality of the peasant dance.²⁹²

The emphasis on depicting figures in motion is striking. The prominent display of intertwined arms and legs of the dancers, constructed so as to lead the viewer's gaze into depth, has led some scholars, such as Gibson and Sullivan, to liken the design to an Italian style of representing bacchanals.²⁹³ For example, the complex assembly of

²⁹⁰ See for example, Raupp, *Bauernsatiren* (1986) and Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (2006).

²⁹¹ On Bruegel's habit of reproducing his own work in subsequent paintings, see Meadow, "Bruegel's Procession to Calvary" (1996) and *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs* (2002).

²⁹² Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 185; on facial expressions, also see Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994).

²⁹³ Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994); Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (2006), 103.

the figures on the right leads the beholder into depth through a constellation of arms and legs; the couple's raised clasped hands in the middle ground form an arch that functions to both frame the recessional space below it as well as to echo and point toward the arches of the church in the background. To the left of the central peasant dressed in black in the foreground, a second recessional corridor invites the viewer into the fictive space of the painting (fig. 59). Beginning with the profile of the central figure, a cascade of subsequent faces, first that of a peasant woman then an urbanite man, leads to a smiling jester in the distance. Additionally, the viewer's gaze is attracted in this direction by the arms and feet of a second couple in the middle ground. In mid-step, the clasped hands of this pair are also raised while each figure kicks up a leg. The construction of the man in particular reveals that his function is as much to guide the gaze as a representation of an actual peasant dancing. His arms are completely straight, not bending with his motion, and his hat is awkwardly situated on the side of his head covering his face; if the scene were put into motion, no doubt it would immediately fall to the ground. Because his face is obstructed, the viewer's sight immediately extends beyond the figure and enters the small corridor framed by his arms and the woman's leg, which also leads to the fool with his left hand raised, standing next to a frowning man.

We can see similar visual concepts in Titian's *The Andrians* (fig. 18), a painting I offered in Chapter One as a comparison, in which a crowd of mythological figures are prominently displayed across the foreground and lead the viewer's gaze into the distance. Such formal constructions in which bodies are used to construct the narrative of the picture were also common among Northern artists influenced by Italian style—such as Michel Coxie, Maarten van Heemskerck, and Frans Floris—pictures that were much more readily accessible to Bruegel. It is commonly observed that paintings such as Heemskerck's *Triumph of Bacchus* (fig. 19), a picture that I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, functioned as a stage on which to show off the artistic skill and knowledge he had acquired during his travels in Italy.²⁹⁴ Multiple, intertwined figures

²⁹⁴ For general discussions of Heemskerck's *Triumph of Bacchus*, see Ilja M. Veldman, *Maarten van Heemskerck and Dutch Humanism* (1977) and "Maarten van Heemskerck en Italië," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 44 (1993), 125-142; R. Grosshans, *Maarten van Heemskerck: Die Gemälde*, Berlin, 1980; J.C. Harrison, *The Paintings of Maarten van Heemskerck: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols, Ann Arbor, MI, 1987.

are depicted in a frieze-like manner across the foreground. On the right, the drunken Bacchus sits on his carriage, attended to by multiple satyrs. Music-makers dance before him. The festive figures reach, run, twist and tumble; their naked, muscular bodies resonate with an Italianate mode, such as that of Michelangelo. Bacchus's train creeps to the left, toward a rusticated antique archway, then winds into the distant background toward his temple of worship.

Frans Floris was also one of the most important painters of mythological subjects in sixteenth-century Flanders. Numerous intertwined figures populate his festive depiction of the *Banquet of the Gods* (ca. 1556-68, fig. 20).²⁹⁵ The figure of Saturn, the god of time, sits in the center with his back to the viewer, watching the pleasures of the passionate group while they express their affectionate desires. The monumental figure acts as a visual obstruction which encourages the viewer to look beyond him, to see what he sees. The figures are seated around a T-shaped table which recedes into the distance toward an opening outside the garden. Other than a few oysters and a bowl of fruit, the table is noticeably empty. The gods seem to be more interested in feasting on each other than the meager food scattered around them; an activity which equally consumes the mind of the viewer.

Although Bruegel's painting represents a native village festival, it is no less a stage on which viewers could have appreciated the artist's creative abilities, not just in depicting a detailed image of a rustic religious holiday but also in connecting bodies and their appendages in such a way that the narrative is clearly communicated and the gaze is guided through the picture. As I briefly discussed, compared to the artist's earlier panoramic depictions of peasant *kermissen*, the *Peasant Dance* takes on a completely different perspective. For example, both the *Kermis at Hoboken* and *St. George Kermis* provide a bird's-eye view from which to observe the numerous characters and their activities. The ground planes are tilted upward so that details in the background are clear, for example, the stage in the right background of the *St. George Kermis* where a play is in progress. Earlier Netherlandish paintings of village fairs tend to adopt something of this sweeping view.

²⁹⁵ For a general discussion of this painting, see Van de Velde, *Frans Floris* (1975).

The staging of the *Peasant Dance* provides an entrance for the viewer that is on the same level as the cast of characters. The architectural design is such that the buildings recede into depth roughly following one-point perspective. Rather than looking down on all the festivities simultaneously, the viewer must navigate spaces created by the compositional construction, first encountering the festive foreground activities then looking through the figures toward details in the background, such as a church and fool, that seem to offer some kind of marginal commentary. As I stated in Chapter One, Margaret Sullivan has connected Bruegel's peasant scene with Serlio's setting for satire (fig. 21).²⁹⁶ This particular design was one of three settings proposed by Serlio which corresponded to the three modes of classical drama: tragedy, comedy and satire. Similar to Bruegel's design, this country setting offers a ground plane level with that of the viewer with a single dirt path leading into the distance. Two rows of receding buildings line the path. Keith Moxey, among others, argues that artists were familiar with the treatise's illustrations of the ancient settings for drama.²⁹⁷ For example, he has shown that two of Bruegel's contemporaries, Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer, borrowed extensively from Serlio's illustrations for market scenes and domestic interiors. Sullivan offers Serlio's illustration to show that the homes of satyrs as they appear in ancient drama resemble a peasant village. Consequently, she rather unconvincingly argues that Bruegel's contemporary viewers would have interpreted his peasants as modern versions of the wild, salacious satyrs of antiquity and, therefore, functioned as didactic moral exempla.²⁹⁸

However, as Falkenburg has observed in the work of Pieter Aertsen, the juxtaposition of classical settings or stately figural compositions with peasant figures has more to do with appealing to a discourse on art and artifice than with offering a hermeneutic for interpreting the behaviour illustrated. By "counter-imaging" standards of art defined in Italy or antiquity with peasant subjects, a practice unheard of in the Netherlands, Aertsen creates a *contradictio in picturis* that questions the boundaries of

²⁹⁶ Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994), 19.

²⁹⁷ Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting* (1977), 73-89; see also Th.H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, "Pieter Aertsen en Joachim Beuckelaer en hun ontleeningen aan Serlio's architectuurprenten," *Oud Holland* 62 (1947), 123-134; Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsen's *Kitchen Maid* in Brussels" (2004).

²⁹⁸ Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994), 18-19.

art itself.²⁹⁹ Likewise, similar to the way in which Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet* incorporates pictorial references from a biblical story and visual concepts from history painting, in the following I will show how the composition of the *Peasant Dance* resonates with formal characteristics previously employed for depictions of bacchanalia. In addition to taking up the "natural life of Brabant," Bruegel constructs a complex formal composition incorporating Italianate visual concepts, increasingly taken up by Northern artists in the mid-sixteenth century, in order to push the pictorial possibilities for his vernacular style.³⁰⁰ Furthermore, similar to my discussion of the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, the specific formal characteristics incorporated are by no means separated from the content of the image. Rather, by examining the processes of viewing inspired by the bacchanalia of Floris and Heemskerck in relation to the *Peasant Dance*, I will argue that instead of functioning solely as moral instruction, pointing out the improper behavior of the carefree peasant, the mechanics and syntax of Bruegel's painting leads, even compels, the viewer to visually negotiate specific formal and iconographic aspects of the picture in such a way that the performance of viewing itself re-enacts the delicate balancing act that is locked into the subject of the picture—the celebration of a religious holiday.

Pleasure and enjoyment in the pagan world are prominently displayed in Heemskerck's *Triumph of Bacchus* (fig. 19). The Greek god Dionysus, later adopted by the Romans as Bacchus, was the god of wine and of mystic ecstasy. Wine, music and floral arrangements are in abundance and the revelry is uninhibited. The painting resembles antique sarcophagi which often depicted bacchic processions, objects Heemskerck could have seen during his visit to Rome. However, as Ilja Veldman has pointed out, Heemskerck adds a motif in the center foreground which casts a tone of accountability on the festive scene.³⁰¹ A smiling putto disrupts the illusion of the painted surface by looking directly at the viewer and angling a mirror to reveal the reflection of a drunken sartyr's behind, as well as the excrement flowing from it. As

²⁹⁹ See Falkenburg, "Pieter Aertsens *Alter Marktverkäufer*" (2006).

³⁰⁰ We should remember here Meadow's discussion of the slippage between vernacular and classical proverbs, proverbs in which "carefully garnered classical Latin is translated in the vernacular to add to the repertoire of available figures for enriching plays or poems, or everyday conversation." Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs* (2002), 79.

³⁰¹ Ilja Veldman, "Elements of continuity: a finger raised in warning," *Simiolus* vol. 20, no.2/3 (1990-1), 125-141.

the wine pouring from the vase next to him might indicate, the sorry state of the satyr is a result of wine flowing too freely. The action and gaze of the putto directly address the viewer, connecting him to the world of the image. Veldman has shown that this particular emphasis on faeces—a motif unknown in classical or Italian versions of the theme—is a sign that the usual meaning of such an image, pleasure in an untroubled pagan world, has changed. She argues that Heemskerck depicts a classical theme in an Italianate style but gives it a Netherlandish moral twist. Veldman goes on to state that the now illegible inscription on the *cartellino* could have resembled the inscription on the engraving of Cornelis Bos (1506-1563) reproducing Heemskerck's composition (1543, fig. 60). The poem begins with the warning: "He who is led by an unbridled love for the wine-god Lyaeus looks more like a monster than a human being."³⁰² If this text correctly communicates the sentiment of the lost inscription on Heemskerck's painting, it indicates that the mirror reflection displayed by the putto could be that of the viewer as much as a reflective commentary on what is viewed. Even if Heemskerck's contemporary viewer would not have associated such a moralizing text with the artist's visual amendment, the marginal motif of the putto and mirror reflection nevertheless speak to the need for self-awareness and instill a tone of accountability. While there is much to be enjoyed about the painting, both the skill with which it is painted and its festive subject, the motif reminds viewers of the balance between pleasure and self-control; a measure of behavior that would have been well-known among Heemskerck's educated observers, as I have shown in my discussion of manners prescribed in the *convivium* tradition.³⁰³ For example, for the Ancients, while wine brought pleasure and creativity to a banquet, learned discussion was equally important.³⁰⁴ The character Eusebius also advocates such a balance in Erasmus's "Godly Feast." During a discussion about the effects and appropriateness of drinking wine, Eusebius brings out his Bible to read the sixth chapter of first Corinthians: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things

³⁰² Ibid., 133. "Immodico quisquis sectatur amore Lyaeum/ Non homini similes, sed mage monstro hominis."

³⁰³ On humanism and behavior, see Ilja Veldman, *Maarten van Heemskerck and Dutch Humanism* (1977).

³⁰⁴ Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (1991), 33

are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”³⁰⁵ While enjoyment of food and drink tempered by moderation is an issue, the context of this statement is Paul’s admonition that the body is connected to Christ and anyone united with the Lord will glorify him in all that he does.

An engraving by Jan Sadeler (1550-1608), titled *As the Days of Noe Were*, reproduces a drawing by Dirck Barendsz (1534-1592) dating probably from ca. 1570 (fig. 61).³⁰⁶ The image foregrounds a group of nude figures who are depicted in an Italianate style and gathered around a table enjoying food, drink and each other’s company. As Veldman has pointed out, it seems at first sight that the occasion is being celebrated in a light-hearted festive manner.³⁰⁷ However, the left side of the picture opens up to reveal a landscape and a body of water in the distance. While the atmosphere is merry and calm in the foreground, in the background Noah’s ark bobs in the water under pouring rain and threatening clouds. In this picture, Barendsz adds a biblical motif in the margin of a classical setting of the feast of the gods depicted in an Italianate style.³⁰⁸ While the pleasure of the meal is prominently portrayed in the foreground, the viewer’s recognition of Noah’s ark in the background implicates the indulgent actions of the figures as the cause of God’s wrath in the form of the flood. Again, the moralizing motif pricks the viewer’s awareness and reminds him of the importance of balancing enjoyment and self-control.

Floris’s painting of the *Feast of the Gods* (fig. 20) argues for a similar sense of equilibrium and self-awareness. Fiona Healy explains that while Mars, the god of war, is occupied by a passionate embrace with Venus, Saturn, the god of time, watches his fellow Olympians indulge their amorous desires with what is, one feels, increasing indignation.³⁰⁹ At the far end of the table, Amor is being honored, while the three fates to his left illustrate the theme, and consequences, of the transience of time. In the distance, a harpy reiterates the notion of time; the monster can be seen approaching,

³⁰⁵ Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 39 (1997), 189.

³⁰⁶ For a general discussion of this print, see J.P. Filedt Kok, et al (eds.), *Kunst voor de beeldenstorm*, Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum (1986), 417.

³⁰⁷ Veldman, “Elements of Continuity” (1990-1), 133.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Fiona Healy, “Bedrooms and Banquets: Mythology in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting,” in Hans Vlieghe, et al (eds.) *Concept, Design and Execution in Flemish Painting (1550-1700)*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers (2000), 88.

bringing with her doom and destruction. Healy argues that the essence of the picture is found in the two playful putti, one of whom vehemently tugs at Saturn's scythe while the other dons Mars's discarded armor. Their seemingly innocent behaviour is to be read as symbolic for the sweep of Saturn's implement which will end the Golden Age and the resulting inevitability of war.³¹⁰ The abundance on display can only occur during a time of peace, which, if these putti are any indication, is about to come to an end. As a significant painter of mythology during this period, Floris's depiction of the delicate equilibrium that exists among the gods is discussed by Healy as a metaphor for the uncertainty of the political situation in the Netherlands at the end of the 1560's. For all its apparent revelry, the painting masks a very serious and topical subject. Through the composition of the painting, the viewer is led to navigate both the foreground and background and to balance abundant pleasure and love, on the one hand, and the transience of time and impending doom, on the other. The putto in the bottom right corner, who wears the ominous helmet of Mars, peers out of the painting and functions to implicate the space of the viewer, a place and time that could learn from such a call for equilibrium.

Similarly, merriness is showcased in the foreground of Bruegel's *Peasant Kermis* where villagers delight in the physical pleasures of festivity and children dance to the sound of the bagpipe. Although the left side of the painting illustrates more overt abandonment in the revelry—drunken stupor, affectionate kisses, public exposure—this section is quarantined by the compositional boundary created by the angle of the bagpiper's drones coupled with the musician's arm and extended leg. The rest of the painting is dedicated to dancing. However, the complex assembly of the dancing figures on the right leads the beholder into depth through a constellation of arms and legs; the couple's raised clasped hands in the middle ground form an arch that echoes and points toward the arches of the church that sits so prominent on the horizon line in the background. The visual pointer reminds the viewer that the festivities on display are in honor of a religious holiday. The flag hanging from the building on the left is traditionally a visual indicator for the occasion of these types of rustic revelries; its symbol reveals that the kermis is dedicated to Saint George.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 89.

Bruegel's *St. George Kermis* includes a banner hanging from an inn bearing the figure of the saint, along with the motto, "Let the peasants hold their *kermis*" (fig. 62). The motto also appears on an earlier representation of a peasant kermis by Pieter van der Borch, but is prefaced with lines that are more overtly condemning: "The drunkards delight in such festivals: fighting and brawling and drinking themselves drunk like beasts—going to the kermises, be it man or woman. Therefore, let the peasants hold their kermis."³¹¹ Margaret Carroll argues that because Bruegel only includes the last line of these verses in his depiction, he leaves the commentary more ambiguous and, thus, the picture should be understood as supportive of the festive tradition rather than derogatory.³¹² Regardless of whether or not this is the case, the motto is representative of the tenuous status of church holidays in peasant villages during this period. On the one hand, various examples from contemporary literature convey a reputation of the peasant as overindulging in the festivities and ignoring the religious subject they were supposed to be venerating. The *Kermis at Hoboken* carries a quatrain that follows the first two lines on van der Borch's print, then adds: "They insist on holding their *kermises*, even though they have to fast and die of the cold."³¹³ Civil and church authorities alike often tried to limit or suppress the festival day.³¹⁴

Luther criticized and sought to moderate church holiday festivals as early as 1520. In his letter to *The Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther argues:

All festivals should be abolished and Sunday alone retained. If it be desired, however, to retain the festivals of our lady and of the major saints, they should be transferred to Sunday, or observed only by an early morning mass after which all the rest of the day should be a working day. Here is the reason: since the feast days are abused by the drinking, gambling, loafing and all manner of sin, we anger God more on holidays than we do on other days. Things are so topsy-turvy that holidays are not holy but working days are...Above all, we

³¹¹ "De dronckaerts verblijen hun in sulcken feesten / Kijven en vichten en dronckendrincken als beesten / Te kermisen te ghaenne tsy mans oft vrouwen / Daeromme laet de boeren haer kermises houwen." As translated by Raupp, *Baurensatiren* (1986), 245-247.

³¹² Carroll, "Peasant Festivity and Political Identity" (1987).

³¹³ "Sij moeten die kermisen onderhouden / Al souwen sij vasten en sterven van kauwen." As translated by Kavalier (1999), 187-189.

³¹⁴ Keith Moxey, "Sebald Beham Church Anniversary Holidays and Sixteenth Century Woodcut: Festive Peasants as Instruments of Repressive Humor," *Simiolus*, vol. 12, no. 2-3 (1982), 107-130; see also Allison Stewart, "The First 'Peasant Festivals': Eleven Woodcuts Produced in Reformation Nuremberg by Barthel and Sebald Beham and Erhard Schön, ca. 1524 to 1535." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University (1986), 109-120.

ought to abolish church anniversary celebrations outright, since they have become nothing but taverns, fairs, and gambling places and only increase the dishonoring of God.³¹⁵

The 1531 edict of Charles V, aimed to restrain excess, was reprinted in 1559 when Margaret of Parma became governor of the Netherlands and wanted to reinforce it:

Consequently, as a remedy to the disorderly drinking bouts and drunkenness which are occurring in our country in various inns, taverns, and hostelryes, held in secluded places away from towns, market towns, and villages, away from the public roads and other places, [disorder is also occurring] in fairs and kermises, and as a remedy to the brawls, murders, and other problems that result, we decree and order that [...] the said fairs and kermises shall last but one day, with the threat of a fine of 15 Carolus guilders to be paid by any and all of those who hold said fairs and kermises beyond and longer than this limit of one day, and the same [fine] must be payed by any and all of those who come to said feasts and kermises.³¹⁶

On the other hand, Gibson and Kavalier have shown that this is only one side of the story.³¹⁷ Antonio de Guevara (1480-1545), for instance, presents an idealized kermis as an enviable contrast to the intrigue and corruption faced daily by the courtier. In his popular and much translated *Dispraise of the Court and Praise of the Rustic Life*, Guevara commends the honest rejoicing that takes place during village religious holidays. He mentions the cleaning of the church and altars, the ringing of bells, the services and sermons. He concludes by noting women who pretty themselves for the

³¹⁵ C. M. Jacobs, *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 2, Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915. Cited from Project Wittenberg, Proposals for Reform, part II: <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/nblty-06.html>. (June 15, 2007).

³¹⁶ *Ordonnancien, Statuten, Edicten en (de) Placcaten*, Gent (1559), 761-2. (my translation) "Ende om to remedieren op de onghereghelde gulsicheyt ende dronckenschappen die daeghelicks ghebueren in onze landen van herwaertsouer, in diuersche cabaretten, tauernnen, ende logijsten die bezydensweeghs ghehouden worden, buten steden ende dorpen ende den rechten openbaeren herbaenen ende anderen plecken: oock inden feesten ende kermissen, ende zonderlinghe op de gheschillen, doodslaeghen ende ander inconuenientien daer uut procederende, hebben wy ghestatueert ende gheordonneert [...] dat die voorseyde feesten ende kermissen maer eenen dagh dueren enzullen, op de verbuerte van vijftien Carolus guldenen by den ghenen ende elcken van hemlieden die de voorseyde feesten ende kermissen buten ende langher dan den dagh daer toe geordonneert houden zullen: ende insghelijcks by den ghenen ende elcken van hemlieden die tot der voorsyder kermissen commen zullen." For a detailed discussion of this edict and its potential impact on the celebration of kermises during Bruegel's time, see A. Monballieu, "Nog eens Hoboken bij Bruegel en tijdgenoten," *Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen* (1987), 185-206.

³¹⁷ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 195.

occasion, the meal and the playing afterwards, and the simple pleasures with which the day ends. It is especially interesting, writes Kavalier, that the *Spiegel der duecht* (Mirror of Virtue), a didactic work published in 1515, should not condemn the kermis but rather concede its attraction and counsel moderation in attendance and in behavior. Peasant festivals required caution not avoidance.³¹⁸

Similar to the popular theme of the delicate balance prescribed between the seasons of Carnival and Lent leading up to Easter, each assigned their own span of time and function, and the abuses of both conveyed in Bruegel's *Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, religious holidays were occasions in which the ambiguous relationship between pleasure and devotion had itself become a topic of discussion.³¹⁹ Bruegel visualizes this ambiguity by playing on the newly emerging representations of antique bacchanalia in the North, combining figural constructions with a habit of viewing that emphasizes the interaction of foreground and background in such a way that one's perspective becomes a topic *per se*. As a result, the viewing and interpretive processes reenact the act of balancing pleasure and devotion that is locked into the subject of the painting. Perception itself is already part of discerning meaning. There is a fundamental interplay between the construction of the paintings perspective and the construction of the viewer's perspective of the world and his actions within it.

In addition to the recessional space that leads to the church in the background, a second corridor in the center of the painting, created by the cascade of faces and arms and legs of the peasant couple in the middle ground, leads to a smiling jester in the distance who faces the viewer with his left hand raised. This gesture of proclamation both acknowledges the activities of the scene and points toward the city-dweller next to him who is visiting the countryside. People from the city often visited these rustic festivals and took pleasure in observing the playful customs of the peasant class.³²⁰ But, judging by the expression on the man's face, a frowning scowl, he is not pleased

³¹⁸ Ibid., 196.

³¹⁹ See for example, K. Renger, "Karneval und Fasten. Bilder vom Fressen und Hungern," *Weltkunst*, vol. 3 (1988), 184-189; A.P. van Gilst, *Vastelavond en carnaval. De geschiedenis van een volksfeest*, Veenendaal: Midgaard, 1974; Majzels, "The Dance in the Art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder" (1977); Walter Salmen, "Der 'Bauerntanz' im Urteil von Reformatoren und Reformierten," in Beat Kümin (ed.), *Landgemeinde und Kirche im Zeitalter der Konfessionen*, Zürich: Chronos Verlag (2004), 91-110.

³²⁰ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 164-211. See also Vandenbroeck, *Beeld van de ander* (1987).

with what he sees (fig. 63). The fool's gesture is one often employed in more didactic moralizing pictures. For example, in an engraving after Cornelis Massys a fool is portrayed in a brothel scene sitting at a table where men and women become more intimately acquainted (fig. 64). On the right, a woman kneels mischievously behind one of the male visitors and reaches her hand into his bag. The fool's left hand is raised in front of him inviting the viewer to behold the folly unfolding. Likewise, a woodcut illustration in Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* shows a fool offering a similar gesture while he is explaining the heavens to a pensive man (fig. 65). Thus, the central fool in Bruegel's *Peasant Dance* stands beside the urbanite and raises his hand, prompting the viewer to consider the scene from his perspective.³²¹ Whether we understand these figures of the fool and gentleman to represent opposite outlooks on the revelry before them, one praising and one condemning, they share a detachment from the kermis activities and, therefore, function to shift the viewer's perspective from one of pleasure and participation to one of judgment, to take account of and balance oppositional forces.³²²

The figures in the fore- and middle- ground of Bruegel's painting are constructed so that the gaze of the viewer is guided into depth toward the discovery of two marginal, yet significant, details in the background, a church and a fool. Although minute in size, once recognized the viewer becomes sensitive not only to the relationship between the two but also the commentary this relationship offers for the festivities in the foreground. The two motifs are representative of the oppositional theme that makes up the subject of the picture—rustic revelers that juggle devotion and pleasure, religious observance and human folly, as they celebrate a sacred holiday. Similar to my discussion of Floris's *Feast of the Gods*, for all the apparent revelry in Bruegel's *Peasant Dance*, it too addresses a very topical subject, the questionable state of village kermises. The visual juxtapositions, both in form and content, not only function to define different, yet interactive, perspectives from which to view the

³²¹ Kavalier also discusses the function of the fool in the background of many paintings and prints which offers negative commentary on the action in the foreground; see *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 200-211.

³²² Edward Snow, *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in Children's Games*, New York: North Point Press (1997), 55. See also Snow, 13-15 for a similar discussion regarding two children next to one another, one smiling and one wearing a mask of an adult frowning.

painting but also provide a model for the viewer to follow in further analyzing oppositional structures and motifs offered by the painting.

The peasant woman on the right, who is guided into the scene by her partner, is in full stride. Her left leg is fully extended forward while the location of her right leg is only indicated by its foot, barely visible at the bottom right corner of the picture. Her long stride indicates the pair's haste to participate in the day's festivities. In mid-step, she hurdles a broken pot handle that is prominently located in the foreground (fig. 66). The roundness and texture of the handle are carefully painted, along with a faint reflection of light. No doubt it could be argued that this detail is evidence of Bruegel's keen observation of nature and represents his ability to paint *nae 't leven*.³²³ However, having previously observed the importance of the marginal motifs of the fool and church in the background, such an isolated detail placed prominently in view demands a second thought.

Margaret Sullivan has pointed out that, for Bruegel's audience, the broken or overturned pot was a sign for sexual promiscuity.³²⁴ "*Gebroken potten*" had become a term for a girl who has lost her virginity; in the so-called Antwerp *Liedboek* from 1544, a poem states that, "young lovers are mocked who in springtime seduce a girl, and consequently marry a 'broken little pot.'"³²⁵ Conversely, Konrad Renger uses this argument to make the opposite claim for a painting by Maarten van Cleve in which a bride holding a pot and candle is escorted to her wedding bed; that the pot is whole indicates that her innocence is also still intact.³²⁶ Thus, the association of the broken pot handle between the open legs of the woman bears commentary on her licentious character. Yet, Bruegel's visual grammar does not stop with simple moral condemnation. Similar to the oppositional theme created by the compositional juxtaposition of the fool and church, this iconographical reference is also paired with a similarly counteractive motif. Just above the right shoulder of the woman hangs a

³²³ Picturing *nae 't leven* involves picturing something with reference to a direct viewing experience; Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon* (1991), 63.

³²⁴ Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants* (1994), 62.

³²⁵ As translated by P.J. Vinken, "Some Observations on the Symbolism of the Broken Pot in Art and Literature," *American Imago*, vol. 15 (1958), 149-174; see also, Gisela Zick, "Der zerbrochene Krug als Bildmotiv des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, vol. 31 (1969), 149-204.

³²⁶ Konrad Renger, "Tränen in der Hochzeitsnacht," in Lucius Grisebach and Konrad Renger (eds.), *Festschrift für Otto von Simson zum 65. Geburtstag*, Frankfurt a.M.: Propyläen Verlag (1977), 312-327.

crude wooden frame attached to a tree with a colored woodcut of Mary cradling a naked Christ Child. Such objects of worship functioned as roadside chapels and were widespread in the Netherlands. They were incentives to, and objects of, prayers and other practices of popular religion.³²⁷ Below this image hangs a pot in which someone has placed freshly picked flowers as a token of his or her reverence for the Virgin and Child. The visual connection of these two details, an image of Mary and Christ with a pot bearing flowers in honor of her virgin birth located directly above and behind a broken pot handle between the legs of a woman signifying that she has lost her virginity, functions to underline, both in form and content, the oppositional nature of what is represented, namely the fragile balance between celebratory, carefree behavior and cultivated reverence when observing church holidays.

Moving to the center of the image, the peasant woman's male companion also strides swiftly into the scene. The bottom portion of his left leg is extended backward into the air while his right foot is planted on the ground. On closer observation, it is difficult to make out which is the right leg and which is the left because of their awkward placement so close together. The width of the upper portion of the peasant's body, especially his shoulders and hips, is far too broad for the way in which his legs are depicted, one in front of the other. In fact, what is the peasant's right leg is more accurately represented if it is understood to be his left leg; although, this is impossible since the left leg overlaps in front of it. Given the accurate depiction of the complex figural compositions surrounding this figure, such an awkward assembly that is prominently displayed in the center foreground could, on the one hand, be seen as a willful formal construction, much like the hands in Hemessen's *Calling of St. Matthew* or Bruegel's "third foot" in the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, which functions to attract prolonged viewing and force the viewer to see the painting as individual parts that must be reconstructed. On the other hand, in connection with his coarse face, sunken forehead and display of teeth, the visual effect of such an awkward composition also acts to enhance the rough, unrefined nature of the peasant's haste.

³²⁷ Falkenburg, "Pieter Bruegel's Series of the Seasons" (2001). See also Achim Timmermann, "The Poor Sinner's Cross and the Pillory: Late Medieval Microarchitecture and Liturgies of Criminal Punishment," in Uwe Albrecht and Christine Kratzke (eds.), *Mikroarchitektur im Mittelalter. Ein gattungsübergreifendes Phänomen zwischen Realität und Imagination*, Nürnberg (forthcoming, 2007).

With his back to the viewer, his body indicates that he is moving into depth; yet, the direction of his gaze to the left, over the heads of the bagpipers, reveals that his attention is settled on the drunken discussion taking place at the table. Looking to the ground, two crossed pieces of hay are depicted beneath him (fig. 67). Similar to the broken pot handle on the ground under the woman, the hay is carefully represented—fibers flake off and where the pieces cross a shadow is cast—and could be viewed as a natural detail ornamenting a scene of a country village. Upon closer observation, however, multiple authors have noted that the crossed pieces of hay form a particular symbol, the cross of the Christian church.³²⁸ Furthermore, the right foot of the man so eager to join in the dancing—and judging by his gaze to the left, the drinking—is blind to the religious symbol and tramples on it. As with the image of Mary and a pot of flowers above the right shoulder of his female companion, arms forming an arch that echo and point toward the arches of the church are located above the man's right shoulder. Seen in isolation, a figure stepping on crossed pieces of hay in a rustic scene would not justify an iconographic reading. But viewed in the context of the religious occasion of the festivities, coupled with the visual strategy that consistently connects, and thus clarifies, the oppositional nature of marginal motifs, the man stepping on the cross in the foreground formally connected to a church in the background functions to once again emphasize the dynamic balance, push and pull, between the pleasure and devotion involved in a religious festival. The motif is an indication that the unbridled pleasure of the characters represented competes with any devotion to a religious saint.

In puzzling out the connection between these references, the viewer is forced to visually negotiate the rustic space of the kermis, from foreground to background, while at the same time consider the peasant's daily behavior within a sacred context. Therefore, the viewer's careful "observance" of the painting stands in opposition to the peasant's carefree "observance" of the religious holiday. The beholder incorporates the very mental characteristics that the peasants lack, namely balance, foresight and insight, in navigating pleasure and piety—acts of gratification and devotional iconography—the two primary aspects of peasant kermises that seemed to be in

³²⁸ Several scholars have suggested this possibility, both in support of and opposition to the idea; see Klaus Demus, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna*. Wien: Kunsthistorisches Museum (1999), 139.

constant conflict. While the peasants represent one perspective on the festivities, through visually analyzing both the painting's syntax and content, quite a different perspective on the church festival is cultivated in the mind of the viewer.

As Kavalier and Falkenburg have pointed out, structural oppositions, or antithetical motifs, particularly between foreground and background, have a longer history in Netherlandish art.³²⁹ Falkenburg argues that in the biblical landscapes of Herri met de Bles and Jan van Amstel, among others, antithetical iconography in the foreground and background or left and right margins of the painting characterize the alternatives offered to the beholder as they scan the view of the world.³³⁰ They function as "*machina*" for the viewer to "see through," or beyond, what initially confronts their gaze to spiritual insights that are, both in the picture and life itself, less visible and more difficult to ascertain. According to Jan Emmens, the paintings of Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer, in which depictions of markets or kitchens with peasants and foodstuffs in the foreground are combined with biblical narratives in the background, are to be regarded as moral allegories.³³¹ The figures in the foreground, he claims, are personifications of sensual or materialistic vices which are to be considered in light of the spiritual teaching of the biblical narrative in the background. For example, in the *Market Stall* (1551, fig. 68), the viewer's gaze is attracted, even consumed, by the elaborate and realistic portrayal of various meats, in particular a

³²⁹ Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel* (1999), 10 and Kavalier, "Structural Opposition and Narrative Function in Bruegel's Christ and the Adulteress," in Jane Fenoulhet and Lesley Gilbert (eds), *Presenting the Past: History, Art, Language, and Literature*, London: University College London, Centre for Low Countries Studies (1996), 171-191. See also K.C. Lindsay and B. Huppé, "Meaning and Method in Bruegel's Painting," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 14 (1956), 376-386. For a discussion of this schema in the work of Herri met de Bles, see Michel Weemans, "Herri met de Bles's Sleeping Peddler: An Exegetical and Anthropomorphic Landscape," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 88, no. 3 (2006), 459-481. For a broader discussion of this visual technique, see Efraim Sicher, "Binary Oppositions and Spatial Representation: Toward an Applied Semiotics," *Semiotica*, vol. 60 (1986), 211-224.

³³⁰ Reindert Falkenburg, "Marginal Motifs in Early Flemish Landscape Paintings," in Norman E. Muller, Betsy J. Rosasco, James H. Marrow (eds.), *Herri met de Bles: Studies and Explorations of the World Landscape Tradition*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers (1998), 153-169; "Iconographical Connections Between Antwerp Landscapes, Market Scenes and Kitchen Pieces, 1500-1580," *Oud Holland*, vol. 102 (1988), 114-126. See also Oskar Bätschmann, "'Lot und seine Töchter' im Louvre. Metaphorik, Antithetik und Ambiguität in einem niederländischen Gemälde des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts," *Städel-Jahrbuch*, n.s. 8 (1981), 159-185.

³³¹ J.A. Emmens, "'Eins aber ist nötig'—Zu Inhalt und Bedeutung von Markt- und Küchenstücken des 16. Jahrhunderts," in J. Bruyn (ed.), *Album Amicorum J.G. van Gelder*, Den Haag: Nijhoff (1973), 93-101. See also K.M. Craig, 'Pars ergo Marthae transit: Pieter Aertsen's "inverted" paintings of Christ in the house of Martha and Mary', *Oud Holland*, vol. 97 (1983), 25-39.

monumental cow's head, while a small vignette in the background depicting the Flight into Egypt shows Mary giving up food, offering it to a begging child.³³²

The allurements of worldly pleasure in the foreground, coupled with spiritual commentary in the background is a combination also taken up by Meadow in his discussion of Aertsen's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, now in Rotterdam (fig. 69).³³³ Generally stated, rather than seeing them as antithetical to one another, Meadow argues that if compared to the similar spatial arrangement of the stage for *rederijker* plays and the function of the *tableau vivant*, which would have been behind the open stage and more distant from the audience, the relationship of foreground and background can be understood to operate in a reciprocal relationship, the former helping to prepare the viewer for the latter and the latter helping to explicate the former.

Aertsen also incorporates a connection between foreground and background oppositional motifs in his depiction of a village kermis, *Return from a Pilgrimage to St. Anthony* (ca. 1550, fig. 70) now in Brussels. The panoramic view of the painting reveals a procession passing in the background in which attendants raise banners and carry a statue of St. Anthony, the figure to whom the festivities are dedicated. The statue is clothed in bright yellow and women from the village kneel in devotion. The presence of peasant festivities is rather subtle while the urban guests who visit from the city are prominently displayed in the foreground. In the right foreground, a bearded beggar sits near the creek flowing in the middle. In his right hand, he holds a bowl in which to collect his alms. He is surrounded by skulls that serve as *memento mori*, presumably to aid in his request for assistance. An additional reminder of mortality is the ash cross marked on the beggar's forehead. In the center of the painting, a wealthy urban couple ride a white horse across the body of water. While the couple looks back over their shoulder, focusing their attention down toward a barking dog, their horse rears its front legs as if about to trample the beggar in front of them.

³³² For a detailed analysis of this painting see Charlotte Houghton, "This was Tomorrow: Pieter Aertsen's *Meat Stall* as Contemporary Art," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 2 (June 2004), 277-300; Reindert Falkenburg, "Matters of Taste: Pieter Aertsen's Market Scenes, Eating Habits, and Pictorial Rhetoric in the Sixteenth Century," in A.W. Lowenthal (ed.), *The Object as Subject. Studies in the Interpretation of Still Life*, Princeton (1996), 13-27; Pieter Aertsen, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 40, 1989; Sullivan, "Aertsen's Kitchen and Market Scenes" (1999).

³³³ Meadow, "Aertsen's Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" (1995).

The golden, yellow garment worn by the bearded man on the ground is the same color as the St. Anthony statue in the background and functions to visually connect the saint and the beggar. When St. Anthony began his life as a hermit, he sold all his possessions, gave the proceeds to the poor and went into the desert to lead a life of prayer and contemplation. His subsequent life of solitude was supported in large part by the giving of alms.³³⁴ Furthermore, what looks to be a crutch at the man's side also replicates the staff carried by Anthony in depictions of the saint, which is in the shape of the Tau cross (or St. Anthony's cross) as depicted on the left side of the painting. The correlation between the saint in the background and beggar in the foreground also functions to contrast Anthony's venerative audience with the impious action of the urbanites on the horse, which is illustrated by the couple's haste and blindness to a man in need. An additional marginal motif on the left supports this visual connection between foreground and background, sacred and profane figures. As I mentioned, to the left stands a tall Tau cross. Just to the right of the upper portion of the cross, a peasant man stands on a fence and leans against a tree. When seen in isolation, the man and his raised arms follow the dancing of the revelers in front of him. But situated as he is next to the cross, the man also assumes the posture of Christ during his crucifixion.

The juxtaposition of the cross with the festive peasant and the veneration of Anthony with the couple's inattentativeness to the beggar, possibly an echo of the saint, highlights the dual nature of celebrating a church holiday—reverence and revelry—and is highly reminiscent of similar oppositional motifs I have described in Bruegel's *Peasant Dance*. The use of opposition as an informative visual mechanism, particularly between foreground and background or the center and margins of a painting, is a practice of picturing employed by a number of Bruegel's predecessors and contemporaries and, therefore, was not only taken up by the artist but would have also informed the habit of viewing that engaged the painting.

Kavaler compares Bruegel's *Peasant Dance* to similar compositions of *historiae* which are constructed by monumental figures in the foreground that guide the viewer to "see through" (*doorkijk*) to small, yet significant, scenes in the

³³⁴ On the life of St. Anthony, see Henri Queffelec, *Saint Anthony of the Desert*, New York: Dutton, 1954.

background.³³⁵ For example, in a contemporary tapestry representing *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1550, fig. 71), three pairs of struggling Romans in the foreground form a central opening that permits a view into the distance. As in Bruegel's picture, figures in this gap decrease rapidly in size, implying abrupt recession. At the vanishing point of the perspectival construction is the small figure, not of a fool, but of Romulus, who leans out from his gallery and orders the abduction. Kavalier explains that the viewer's process of locating the Roman king beyond the three couples and thereby grasping the idea of plan and purpose might be likened to the discovery of the fool beyond the dancing couples in Bruegel's painting and its role within the development of the narrative.³³⁶

The same year of Bruegel's *Peasant Dance*, Maarten de Vos painted *St. Paul and the Silversmith Demetrius* (fig. 72).³³⁷ The scene represents Acts 19: 23-41 in which Demetrius and his colleagues, their livelihood threatened by Christian proscription against pagan images, aggressively confront the Apostle in Ephesus.³³⁸ A crowd of characters occupy the entire left side of the picture; they exhibit dramatic facial expressions and seem to emphatically move toward St. Paul in the center. A figure in the left foreground also steps toward the Apostle, his arms are open wide and, along with the extended left arm of the man to his right, function to bracket the crowd and focus the viewer's gaze on the emotion they display. The weight of the group bears against the figure of St. Paul, but the visual momentum to the right is continued by the apostle's right arm extending upward and pointing toward the recessional space leading into the distance toward a significant event. On the right side of the painting, three figures in particular also function to frame a view of the scene in the distance of books burning.

These two images can serve as additional examples for what was considered in this period to be ambitious paintings of history—the way figures are thoughtfully composed to guide the viewer through the fictive space and insure that certain elements or motifs were seen in relation to one another, especially in terms of foreground and background, while not losing sight of the composition as a whole. The comparison to

³³⁵ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 203.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 44.

³³⁸ Ibid.

Bruegel's later peasant paintings further reveals the way in which the artist mediates characteristics from this mode of representation—particularly the use of monumental figures whose careful composition frames actions, emotions and spaces that both guide the gaze and lead into depth toward marginal yet significant details—for his peasant scenes, employing the visual mechanisms of *historiae* to cultivate his vernacular style.

With this in mind, another duo of oppositional motifs I will mention in Bruegel's *Peasant Dance* occurs on the left side of the picture. A triangular-shaped red banner hangs from what is probably the local village inn (fig. 73). The banner is large, twice as long as the figures beneath it. The symbols on the flag are very similar to the one represented in Bruegel's *St. George Kermis*. However, whereas the saint is depicted alone on the banner in the print, two figures are shown in the *Peasant Dance*; Mary is on the left and St. George stands on the right. The saint holds a weapon in one hand and what looks like arrows in the other. George was the patron saint of Antwerp where the city militia also took on his name and there was a church of Saint George.³³⁹ When the saint is depicted alone, it is a representation of his status as patron saint of cavalry. But, when he is depicted in the company of Mary it symbolizes an attribute that evolved in the later Middle Ages from his association with cavalry—he is the protector of women and a model of chivalry.³⁴⁰ In a fifteenth-century German engraving of *St. George with the Stork's Nest* (fig. 74), now in Chicago, Meister E.S. (1420-1468) depicts the saint killing the dragon with a lance, while his right arm is raised with a sword pointing to the damsel in distress he is protecting. According to *The Golden Legend*, after George slayed the dragon, the king whose daughter the knight saved built a church where the dragon had been slain. He dedicated it to Mary

³³⁹ For a discussion on St. George as the patron Saint of Antwerp, see Wuyts, L. "Het St.-Jorisretabel van de Oude Voetboog," *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (1971), 107–136; See also Christine Göttler, *Die Kunst des Fegefeuers nach der Reformation: Kirchliche Schenkungen, Ablass und Almosen in Antwerpen und Bologna um 1600*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern (1996), esp. 145-154.

³⁴⁰ The popularity of Saint George, patron saint of arms and chivalry, is generally dated to the time of the Germanic kingdoms in the early medieval period. On the life and attributes of St. George, see Samantha Riches, *Saint George: Hero, Martyr and Myth*, Stroud: Sutton, 2000; S. Braunfels, "Georg" and "Georg und Maria," in E. Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 8 Bde., Rome, Vienna and Basil (1968-76), 365-390; W. Haubrichs, "Georg, Heiliger," in G. Krause and G. Müller (eds.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Berlin, vol. 12 (1984), 380-385; Brigit Blass-Simmen, *Sankt Georg: Drachenkampf in der Renaissance*, Berlin: Mann Verlag (1991), 93-97.

and Saint George.³⁴¹ By the fifteenth century, not only was George the patron of soldiers but he also was the personification of the ideals of Christian chivalry.³⁴² It is important to point out here that the banner of St. George and Mary in the *Peasant Dance* is on the same horizontal line as the church in the background and Marian devotional image hanging on the tree. To the left of this motif, in the left foreground, a number of peasant figures crowd around a table decorated with bread, butter and beer mugs. The man in the blue hat sitting at the head of the table bears an empty, drunken gaze; his wide eyes look across toward another figure on the far left side who enters the scene. Like the first figure, this man blunderingly reaches into the air with his right arm, apparently for nothing in particular, and his gaze is directed upward in a completely different direction; the direction of his gaze is peculiar, especially since his hand is extended directly in front of him. A third peasant sits between these two. He holds a beer mug in his right hand and places his left hand on the shoulder of his companion. His mouth is open and his hat dips over his eyes. His interest in the action at the table seems to distract him from what could be his female companion who leans in for an affectionate kiss. Directly behind this couple, another pair tightly embrace and kiss on the lips.

As with the recessional spaces so clearly framed in the center and right side of the painting, upon closer analysis of the formal construction of this vignette, we can see that the tight grouping of peasant figures is demarcated within a triangular frame, which is similar to the shape of the red flag hanging from the inn, but now inverted (fig. 75). While the peasant entering from the left completely extends his right arm in front of him, his gaze is directed upward. Although the gesture and gaze are not consistent with one another, they create an angle the sides of which enclose the couple before him. On the other side of the group, the drones of the bagpipe are angled in such a way that their intersection with the direction of the man's extended arm forms a second acute angle incorporating the figure wearing the blue hat. The upper portion of the bagpipe drones are compositionally extended by the foremost side of the village inn's roofline, whose angle forms the apex of the triangle. The final side of the frame is completed by

³⁴¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*, 2 vols., trans. by William Granger Ryan, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1993), vol. 1, 238.

³⁴² David Hugh Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, New York: Oxford University Press (1978), 166. See also Wallace F. Cornish, *Chivalry*, New York: The MacMillan Co., 1911.

the backside of the roofline which extends downward and intersects with the upward gaze of the peasant man. The compositional borders function as brackets for the figures and their actions and they can be seen as representing one of the two perspectives that is consistently denoted in the painting. The crowd of characters participates in the pleasures of the revelry. Whether eating, drinking or kissing their gazes are empty (or blinded) and their minds are free from care and restraint.

The effect of well-constructed compositions demand certain ways of looking, whether or not the viewer is conscious of them. The triangular compositional frame not only functions to emphasize certain interactions that must be puzzled out by the viewer but also causes this group of people to be viewed in relation to other interactions framed within similar spaces, for example the figures of Mary and St. George on the triangular red flag. The resonance between the two triangles is further suggested by the peasant man kissing his lover; although his behavior is contradictory to the chivalrous act displayed by the saint honored by the flag, the vibrant red color of his hat and shirt echo the hue of the banner.

The particular depiction of St. George and Mary symbolizes that he was the protector of women and patron saint of chivalry. The banner indicates that the church festival unfolding is dedicated to him, as well as, presumably, to the characteristics he represents. For example, the celebration of holy days often included the theatrical reenactment of events from the life of the saint being honored, such as St. George killing the dragon.³⁴³ However, in the foreground to the left of this motif, the triangular frame I just described demarcates figures that are a far better indication of the tenor of the festivities unfolding in the scene. The elongated triangle—yet now inverted—frames two couples. While one pair engages in an affectionate embrace, the other couple includes a drunken man completely ignoring the advances of his partner. Rather than reenacting events from the life of the saint, these two motifs enact the exact opposite (or inverted) extremes of the chivalry and honor represented by St. George and Mary. The oppositional nature of the interaction between what the flag represents and what surrounds it is underscored (literally) by the couple located in the doorway directly beneath it. While it is impossible to discern whether the woman is

³⁴³ See Ramakers, *Spelen en Figuren* (1996), 260.

trying to pull the man inside or the man is attempting to persuade her to join him in a dance, what is clear is that there is a resistance between the two, a desire for one not to do what the other wants. This pair also stands in stark contrast to the mutual reverence symbolized by the couple on the flag.

By analyzing the formal aspects of the painting, a connection between two different vignettes, and two different perspectives, is revealed. Seen in isolation, they are details that appropriately ornament an event in the countryside. Yet, when one triangular section is viewed in the context of the other, as well as with the visual strategies represented in different areas of the painting, the viewer recognizes the pairing to repeat both the foreground/background relationship between motifs and the oppositional relationship between what the motifs represent. The red banner, church, and roadside chapel are details that all occupy the same horizontal line and are located behind their oppositional counterparts (framed peasant couples, crossed hay and broken pot handle) in the foreground. The visual analysis that involves navigating the various grounds of the painting, employing foresight and insight to see the different perspectives on display and connecting oppositional motifs requires meditative thought that negotiates between acts of pleasure and religious symbols, between dancing and devotion. Therefore, in the performance of close visual analysis, the patient and contemplative viewer exercises the discipline and mental agility that is absent in the carefree peasant figures depicted, yet absolutely essential when honorably celebrating a church holiday.

We could imagine a painting such as this hanging in a room to which dinner guests retreated after a meal. In fact, we know from Noirod's inventory that a peasant dance on canvas by Bruegel hung, along with a peasant wedding attributed to Hieronymus Bosch, in an upper room above the salon that could have served this function, the "*camer boven de salen*."³⁴⁴ This time after dinner, according to the *convivium* literature, allowed for food and conversation to digest while more lighthearted entertainment took place.³⁴⁵ Friendly games or competitions, usually involving the composition of poetry, often accompanied dessert. No doubt Bruegel's

³⁴⁴ Goldstein, "Keeping up Appearances" (2003), 46.

³⁴⁵ See the "Profane Feast" where the character Christian discusses "bantor" about light subjects during dessert; Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 39 (1997), 148.

painting of a holiday could have echoed the leisurely function of this kind of room. The equilibrium between pleasure and self-control that the painting advocates would have not only been a topic of discussion regarding the theme of the painting but also for the social setting in which the painting hung, a place where the delicate balance between wine and wittiness was also of prime concern.

In the opening of the “Profane Feast,” the characters Christian and Augustine immediately engage in a conversation addressing such issues. After sitting at the table, Augustine proclaims, “Let’s live now and make ourselves sleek. Let’s be Epicureans now. We’ve no use for Stoic sternness. Farewell, cares! Away with all spite, off with distraction, on with the carefree mind, merry countenance, witty talk.” After a brief discussion regarding the definition of human happiness—Epicureans live by pleasure while the Stoics by stern moral virtue—Christian asks Augustine whether he is a Stoic or Epicurean. Augustine responds, “I praise Zeno [Stoic] but I follow Epicurus.”³⁴⁶ However, later in the meal, Augustine opines, “If I were pope, I would urge everyone to perpetual sobriety of life, especially when a feast day was near. But, I would decree that a person may eat anything for the sake of bodily health so long as he did it moderately and thankfully.”³⁴⁷ But, typically for Augustine, this seriousness does not last long; he continues a few lines later: “Now we’ve had enough theology at this party. We’re at dinner, not the Sorbonne...Let’s absorb, then, and not argue, lest our Sorbonne be named from sorbs instead of from the absorbing of wine.”³⁴⁸

The negotiation between pleasure and moderation is also prominently staged in the “Godly Feast,” a dinner which itself takes place in a country house outside the city. Whereas the host, Eusibeus, boasts about the quality of the wine being served, “The wine is of my own growth,” Sophronius later responds with a raised finger in warning: “In wine there’s truth (When wine is in the wit is out).”³⁴⁹

Once again, we are presented with a painting that calls on various aspects of the beholder’s awareness—artistic, literary and religious—in the process of visual analysis. The painting is constructed in such a way that the viewer is led to see certain aspects of

³⁴⁶ Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (1965), 135.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ Desiderius Erasmus, *All the Familiar Colloquies of Desiderius Erasmus, of Rotterdam Concerning Men, Manners, and Things*, trans. by N. Bailey, London (1733), 110.

the picture in relation to one another, creating a visual experience that participates in the push and pull of the image, considering the juxtaposition of foreground and background. In so doing, this experience performs the balancing act of reverence and revelry that seems to be lost on many of the peasants portrayed and of particular importance both for celebrating a feast day as well as the social setting for Bruegel's likely wealthy, cultivated viewers. Furthermore, the distribution of monumental figures also plays on contemporary visual concepts incorporated for painted *historiae*, such as antique bacchanalia, the recognition of which would have inspired thematic associations between the classical theme as it was received and judged in the sixteenth-century Netherlands, namely the necessity for an equilibrium between pleasure and self-control, and the peasant kermis. The combination of antique and modern themes, sacred and profane, and a painting of everyday life in the form of a *historia*, all imaginative constructions on the part of Bruegel, would have provoked his contemporary viewers and inspired conversation on multiple levels—about art theoretical ideas and opinions, about religion, and about the relationship of celebration and self-control in their own lives.

III.

Although completely different in size and make-up from the *Peasant Wedding Banquet* and *Peasant Dance*, Bruegel painted a third peasant scene in 1568, the *Peasant and Nest Robber* (fig. 23).³⁵⁰ A monumental peasant who faces the viewer and strides forward is depicted in the center. With his left arm he points upward toward another figure who dangles from the branch of a tree while reaching to grab the contents of a bird's nest. Although his legs are wrapped around the tree trunk, his falling hat hints at the risk he is taking, possibly even foreshadowing what is about to happen to the boy himself. With a smile on his face, the central peasant stares out at the viewer. He does not realize that he has reached the edge of a river bank and his next step will send him plunging into the barely visible water in the foreground; a danger that is also difficult to see for the viewer. On the left of the painting, a cluster of trees block our view, while, on the right, a golden landscape shows a body of water that leads to a farm including two barns, horses, chickens and at least five workers and children.

Jürgen Müller offers a sensitive visual analysis of this painting that emphasizes its “instantaneousness.”³⁵¹ The peasant's gesture of pointing, his movement forward, as well as the hat falling in mid-air are all elements that highlight the instantaneous, or as I would call it, “in-between-ness,” of the scene. Bruegel has depicted the narrative at its climax or turning point; while at this moment the central peasant feels safe and superior, concerned with pointing out to the viewer the action in the tree, with his next step he will find himself in the water. Bruegel emphasizes the “in-between-ness” of this very moment—the conflation of what is happening and what is about to happen—

³⁵⁰ See Stridbeck, *Bruegelstudien* (1977), 276; Jürgen Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform*, (1999), 82-89. For a general study of this painting, see Thomas Noll, “Pieter Bruegel d.Ä.: der Bauer, der Vogeldieb und die Imker,” *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, vol. 50 (1999), 65-106.

³⁵¹ Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* (1999), 85.

by what Müller describes as a visual trick.³⁵² If one disconnects the upper body of the peasant from his lower half and views his legs in relation to the ground where he is standing, it becomes apparent that they are depicted as if from a bird's eye perspective. If we were to imagine a torso connected to these legs, it would be leaning forward in the space of the viewer—not *about* to fall into the water, but *in the process* of falling. However, the torso Bruegel has painted is more upright, on the same level of the viewer. The effect of this one body, which takes up the entire center of the painting, being portrayed from two different perspectives is a split visual experience. Initially, the prominent gesture of the central farmer draws the viewer's attention; as a result, the man's torso defines a stable, parallel spatial relationship with the viewer. Following the direction of his accusatory, pointing finger, the viewer sees a young man pilfering a bird's nest. While this perilous act might produce a sense of agitation, the volatility of the instant is not revealed until the viewer tracks the path of the falling hat downward and focuses on the bottom half of the painting, simultaneously seeing the water in the foreground and the bottom half of the peasant whose legs redefine the moment by indicating that he has already begun to fall. Tracing the sliver of water to the right, around the painting's edge, we see that what at first sight seemed to be an unthreatening, shallow creek is connected to, and therefore is representative of, a much larger, deeper body of water. This process of viewing facilitated by the painting replicates the experience of the central peasant; as Kavalier explains, "The viewer meets the farmer's gaze, glances to the tree and, presumably like the farmer himself, only afterwards discovers the water that runs along the bottom of the panel."³⁵³

Bruegel depicts an instantaneous moment but portrays the body of the central peasant so as to indicate or inspire, even thematize, the present and future; in one figure he conflates what is occurring with what is yet to come.³⁵⁴ But it is exactly this

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 251.

³⁵⁴ Bruegel represents a similar moment of instantaneousness, or "in-between-ness," in his painting of the *Conversion of Saul* (1567). Having just fallen off his horse, Saul is in the process of falling to the ground. We know that this is the case, rather than having already fallen and now getting up, because Saul's right leg is off the ground, in mid-air. If he were in the process of getting up, as his right shoulder might indicate, he would need his right leg on the ground for leverage. Because it will be important later on, I want to emphasize that in the *Conversion of Saul*, Bruegel has depicted an instantaneous moment in which a man is in the process of falling, a fall which marks the event of his spiritual conversion, becoming blind to the world so that he can see God.

figure who cannot see beyond the present moment, the threshold of what he considers to be his primary task. So consumed with his mission of pointing out the actions of someone else, the central peasant is not only blind to the future hazards he will encounter in his own path but it seems that he has also dropped his pack, which lies on the ground behind him. In the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus has Dame Folly describe just such a person: “But if ever some mutual good will does arise amongst these austere characters it certainly can’t be stable and is unlikely to last long, seeing that they’re so captious and far keener-eyed to pick out their friends’ faults than the eagle or the Epidaurian snake. Of course, they’re blind to their own faults and simply don’t see the packs hanging from their backs.” And later, when describing philosophers: “They know nothing at all, yet they claim to know everything. Though ignorant even of themselves and sometimes *not able to see the ditch or stone lying in their path*, either because most of them are half-blind or because their minds are far away, they still boast that they can see ideas, universals, separate forms, prime matters, things which are all so insubstantial that I doubt if even Lynceus could perceive them (emphasis added).”³⁵⁵

The format and sentiment of the *Peasant and Nest Robber* can be compared to another painting by Bruegel from 1568, titled *The Misanthrope* (fig. 76) now in Naples.³⁵⁶ Set within a gray, black-bordered square, an expansive landscape is dominated by the tall figure robed in black who walks to the left with his hands clasped before him. The elderly man, whose white beard and slight profile are the only things visible from the hood he wears, is introspective, withdrawn into his own thoughts. The viewer even gets a sense of bitterness, communicated by the scowl on his face. Three small thorny objects lie on the ground in front of him which will no doubt cause the man anguish within his next few steps. Behind the monumental, dark figure, a smaller barefooted man wields a knife in order to cut the purse, or money bag, that was hidden beneath “the misanthrope’s” cloak. So consumed with his own thoughts or worries, the hooded figure does not notice the actions of the thief. With his lack of awareness of the stumbling blocks set before him and his bag being stolen behind him, similar to

³⁵⁵ Desiderus Erasmus, *Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten van Dorp*. trans. Betty Radice, London and New York: Penguin Books (1993), 34, 85.

³⁵⁶ For detailed examination of this painting, see Margaret Sullivan, “Bruegel’s Misanthrope: Renaissance Art for a Humanist Audience,” *Artibus et historiae*, vol. 13, no. 26 (1992), 143-162.

the farmer in the *Peasant and Nest Robber*, this man's self-absorption also resonates with the characteristics of folly just quoted from Erasmus.

The thief is encased in a transparent orb surmounted by a cross. This motif appears as a detail in a previous painting by Bruegel, the *Netherlandish Proverbs* in Berlin (1559, fig. 77). In this context, the glass globe represents the "world" and illustrates the proverb, "one must stoop to get through the world."³⁵⁷ In *The Misanthrope*, however, the man inside the globe performs quite a different act, robbery, and can be understood more broadly as representing the deceit and greed that characterize the world in general. To insure proper understanding of the image, two lines of text written in Dutch were added to the painting later: "Om dat de werelt is soe ongetru, Daer om gha ic in den ru" (because the world is so deceitful, I go in mourning). A print after the painting also includes a French version of the same lines. Despite the fact that the text is not contemporary with Bruegel, they nevertheless are consistent with the impression created by the old man and can offer an indication for how the image could have been understood by Bruegel's viewers.

In a similar way, George Hulín de Loo has speculated that Bruegel's *Peasant and Nest Robber* should be related to a text, a vernacular proverb about the value of the active life over the passive one.³⁵⁸ Bruegel's *Beekeepers* (1568, fig. 78), a drawing made in the same year, depicts a figure in a tree similar to the one in the *Nest Robber* and bears a text in the lower left corner that reads: "dye den nest Weet dye Weeten / dyen Rof dy heefen." In English, it would best be translated as: "He who knows of the nest has the knowledge; he who robs it has it."³⁵⁹ Based on the similar motifs, Hulín de Loo concludes that in the painting the boy in the tree "has" while the peasant about to step in the water simply "knows" and will soon disappear.

While the *Peasant and Nest Robber* can be compared to the format and sentiment of *The Misanthrope*, similar to the *Peasant Wedding Banquet* and *Peasant Dance*, there is much more to be said about the painting regarding the mediation, or in this case translation, of formal and stylistic elements traditionally found in history painting for a representation of local rustic life. Like the previous two pictures, the

³⁵⁷ Ibid. See also Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs* (2002), 41.

³⁵⁸ Van Bastelaer and Hulín de Loo, *Peter Bruegel l'Ancien* (1907). See also Kjell Boström, "Das Sprichwort vom Vogelneest," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, vol. 18 (1949), 77-98.

³⁵⁹ Kavalier, *Parables of Order and Enterprise* (1999), 234.

recognition of these visual elements would have inspired reflection among Bruegel's contemporary viewers not only about art *per se* but also regarding possible thematic connections between the subject of the painting and the sources he references, providing impetus for yet another level of conversation and interpretation.

In addition to this painting being a detailed, complex representation of a farmer in his rustic surroundings, possibly even an illustration of self-righteous blindness described by Erasmus, scholars such as Carl Stridbeck and Müller have also commented on the formal and stylistic elements of the picture. For example, the pose and stocky body of the central figure has been connected to a number of possible Italian sources, including two figures from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel: the Christ figure in the *Last Judgment*, with his short but sturdy legs, and the putto beneath the Erythraean Sibyl on the ceiling (fig. 24). However, an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi of St. John in the wilderness provides an almost exact visual precedent for the way Bruegel constructs his central figure, both in pose and posture (fig. 26). Situated between two trees, the lone Baptist is in mid-step (both heels are off the ground) and gestures across his chest; his pointing hand intersects with his staff which bears a cross at its end. In contrast to Bruegel's peasant, however, the body of this figure is constructed from a single, consistent perspective that is parallel to the viewer.

The farmer's pointing gesture has also been associated with a painting of *John the Baptist* by Leonardo, now in the Louvre (fig. 25).³⁶⁰ Upon closer observation, the two figures by Bruegel and Leonardo also share a strikingly similar facial structure and expression—they both have widely separated eyes, elongated noses and faint smiles—as well as *contrapposto* positioning. The facial expression, which only hints at a grin, illustrates not so much an emotion of joy, as it does one of fulfillment.³⁶¹ According to scripture, the Baptist proclaims, "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been

³⁶⁰ See Tolnay, "Bruegel et l'Italie" (1951), 121-130; Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform* (1999), 83; Vinken and Schlüter, "Pieter Bruegels *Nestor*" (1996), 54-79.

³⁶¹ The so-called "mysterious smile" was much copied by Leonardo's students. On its peculiarity and popularity, see Raymond S. Stites, *The Sublimations of Leonardo* (1970), 357; Michael Kwakkelstein, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing*, Leiden: Primavera Press, 1994; Ritchie Calder, "Anatomy of the Gioconda Smile," in *Leonardo and the Age of the Eye*, London: Heinemann (1970), 141-163; Flavio Caroli, *Leonardo: Studi de fisiognomica*, Milan: 1991. Other examples include *Leda* and *Virgin and Child and St. Anne*.

fulfilled.”³⁶² Bruegel presents a comparable face slightly tilted to the right bearing a contented, similarly fish-eyed gaze with a closed mouth upturned at the ends. However, unlike the Baptist’s spiritual contentment, it seems that the peasant’s grin has more to do with a fulfillment that is false; his self-righteous fixation with the ambitious man in the tree has blinded him to the hazards in his own path. Although his widely separated eyes have been described as characteristic of crude peasant features, when coupled with his long nose and faint smile and seen in comparison to the face of Leonardo’s Baptist, the visual similarities are compelling.³⁶³

Leonardo was the first Italian artist whose influence was felt in the North, as can be observed in the art of Quentin Massys, Jan Massys and Joos van Cleve.³⁶⁴ It is generally agreed that the Baptist painting should be dated ca. 1513-1516, the final stage of Leonardo’s career when he moved from Rome to Cloux (near Amboise), France to work in the court of King Francis I. The popularity of his representation of the saint is illustrated in the number of his pupils who copied it; their work appears in various collections.³⁶⁵ One such painting, which was probably a collaboration between Leonardo and a pupil, is titled *Baptist/Bacchus*, also dated ca. 1513-1516 and now in the Louvre (fig. 27). In terms of its overall composition, including the facial expression and gesture of the central figure, it bears an even closer resemblance to Bruegel’s *Peasant and Nest Robber*.³⁶⁶

Although there are vast differences between the content of the collaborative painting from Leonardo’s design and Bruegel’s picture—religious subject versus peasant scene—they also share certain iconographic motifs. In the design after Leonardo, John the Baptist holds a staff with his left hand and points with his index

³⁶² John 3: 29.

³⁶³ Gibson describes his expression as vacuous, *Bruegel* (1985), 188; Kavalier explains that he, “lacks fashionably refined features and his eyes may be set rather far apart;” Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel* (1999), 252.

³⁶⁴ See Larry Silver, *The Paintings of Quintin Massys*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1984; John Oliver Hand, *Joos van Cleve: The Complete Paintings*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. On the use of Leonardo’s compositions in Germany and the Netherlands as early as the 1520’s, see Cécile Scailliérez, “Joos van Cleve e Genova,” *Pittura fiamminga in Liguria*, Milano: Cinsello Balsamo (1997), 111-125.

³⁶⁵ Edoardo Villata, “Forse il più importante di tutti i quadri:” elementi per la fortuna critica del ‘San Giovanni Battista’ di Leonardo,” *Raccolta Vinciana*, vol. 30 (2003), 85-132; C. Pedretti, *Leonardo* (1973), 166. For a sensitive study on Leonardo’s painting and particular changes that are made in copies, see Klaus Krüger, *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag (2001), 101-106, 128-131.

³⁶⁶ See n. 56 for literature addressing the *Baptist/Bacchus* painting.

finger downward toward what is most likely the river Jordan continued from the background. The plants and flowers are given special attention, as is usually the case in contemporaneous depictions of the solitary Baptist in the wilderness, especially the eclectic herb garden on the left side. For example, a similar cluster of vegetation can be found next to a river bank in the foreground of a painting of *St. John in the Wilderness* by Pintoricchio (fig. 28). The plants in Leonardo's painting can be traced to various botanical studies drawn by the artist. William Emboden argues that the abundant vegetation in the painting was probably designed by Leonardo, if not executed by him, and it contains some iconographic religious elements appropriate to St. John; the columbine in the foreground expresses Christian hope of redemption to be achieved through Christ and the sacrament of Baptism.³⁶⁷ His right arm extends across his chest gesturing toward what would have been, in the original version, the cross at the end of his staff, visually referencing his biblical prophecy of Christ's coming, "there is one that cometh after me."³⁶⁸ The history of images depicting John the Baptist from the fourteenth century onward, both in Italy and the North, reveal this gesture upward to be one of his attributes.³⁶⁹ Further, the angle of John's staff, and its now painted-out cross, is extended in the background by the solitary tree stump crowned with jagged splinters. The stump or, even better, dead tree resting on the overhang of the cliff, is an additional standard iconographic motif in images of the Baptist and recalls the verses in which he instructs the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance," and later, "The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."³⁷⁰ For example, situated in a niche in an inner room of the cathedral in Reims, a statue of John shows the saint pointing across his chest with his left hand and, with his right, pointing downward toward a dead tree with an axe at its trunk (fig. 80).³⁷¹ To the left of the central figure, an atmospheric golden landscape unfolds in the

³⁶⁷ See William Emboden, *Leonardo Da Vinci on Plants and Gardens*, Portland: Dioscorides Press (1987), 137.

³⁶⁸ Matthew 3: 11.

³⁶⁹ See Friedrich-August v. Metzsch, *Johannes der Täufer: Seine Geschichte und seine Darstellung in der Kunst*, München: Callwey, 1989.

³⁷⁰ Matthew 3: 8-10.

³⁷¹ For more on this attribute, see Metzsch, *Johannes der Täufer* (1989).

distance and is ornamented with a deer, horse and large body of water, most likely the river Jordan.

Bruegel's *Peasant and Nest Robber* assumes a very similar composition, but in reverse—the cluster of trees is now on the left and open landscape with animals, farm and body of water on the right.³⁷² Though not seated like the Baptist from Leonardo's studio, a central figure strides directly toward the viewer. As previously mentioned, the forceful, articulated pose of the farmer's body is painted in an Italianate style, especially in comparison to the stumpy, almost shapeless, manner with which peasant figures were previously depicted in the North.³⁷³ With his left arm, the peasant gestures upward and across his chest. In comparison to the figure in the *Baptist/Bacchus* painting who points to the cross on his staff which directs the viewer's gaze toward a dead tree stump, a symbol calling attention to one's moral actions, the central figure in Bruegel's picture points his finger toward the nest robber who seems to be safely fastened to the tree. But, the central figure also carries a staff that points in the direction of the hat that once was settled securely on the youth's head but now is falling to the ground, hinting at the risk—in line with the central peasant himself—that a fall might be in this boy's future as well.

As in the *Baptist/Bacchus* picture, an eclectic assortment of plants and flowers are gathered at the bank of the river to the left of the central peasant figure in the foreground. The bouquet of vegetation—fern, blue iris, bramble bush, and herbs—would not have naturally grown together in such a marshy area.³⁷⁴ Each plant carries iconographic undertones that could have been familiar to Bruegel's sixteenth-century viewer. The most obvious example is the blue iris (*iris germanica*) which appears in a painting by Bruegel made in the same year, *The Blind Leading the Blind* (fig. 81), now in Naples. Like *The Misanthrope*, this painting on canvas can be related to a text and, therefore, the meaning determined, at least on the surface, with a little more certainty. In Luke 6:39, Jesus asks: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a ditch?" The passage addresses the dangers of false prophecy, as well as the value of spiritual understanding over earthly sight. In the painting, two blind men fall into a

³⁷² The reversal of Bruegel's composition in comparison to Leonardo's might indicate that Bruegel saw a reproduction of this painting in print.

³⁷³ See Raupp, *Bauernsatiren* (1986).

³⁷⁴ Vinken and Schlüter, "Pieter Bruegels *Nestrover*" (1996), 62.

ditch, while four others behind them follow in their path. On the water's edge, directly located above the two men already falling, appears an iris. The iris is prominently located next to a representation of blindness; having followed a blind leader, the men have themselves become blind. While Pierre Vinken and Lucy Schlüter argue that the iris is a general symbol for transience or mortality, others argue that it refers to Mary's compassion (parallel to its primary meaning in religious painting) or, more precisely, to Simeon's foretelling of her future suffering because of the death of her son.³⁷⁵ This sense of foreboding is brought out in a painting by Hugo van der Goes (1440-1482) of *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden* (fig. 82). The two figures stand naked in Eden next to the tree of knowledge. The teeth marks in the apple held in Eve's right hand indicate that she has already been convinced by the devil to taste the forbidden fruit. She now reaches upward to pluck an apple for Adam. In the center foreground, a high rising blue iris bloom covers her genitals. This moment represents the fall of humanity and the introduction of death into the world. While Eve's wide-eyed gaze into empty space emphasizes her earthly sight, it also betrays her spiritual blindness; she is now under the spell of the devil and unable to see the consequences of her actions. While the iris in this context carries with it connotations of suffering and death, especially Christ's passion, its location over Eve's genitals also calls to mind the purity of Mary, the second eve, whose virgin birth gave life to Christ, the second Adam and atonement for humanity's depravity. Like the irises in Hugo's painting and *The Blind Leading the Blind*, in the *Peasant and Nest Robber* an iris is also located in the foreground next to a visual expression of blindness, the central peasant who is blind to the risks in his own path due to his self-righteous preoccupation with the hazardous behavior of another.

Based on the similarities I have discussed between the compositional, iconographic and stylistic elements employed for diverse depictions of John the Baptist and Bruegel's *Peasant and Nest Robber*, I would like to suggest that these resonances would have been recognized by Bruegel's contemporary viewers and discussed as such. This is not only the case for specific stylistic or formal elements incorporated by Leonardo—such as the hand gesture, facial characteristics and overall composition of

³⁷⁵ Reindert Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir: het landschap als beeld van de levenspelgrimage*, Nijmegen (1985), 41. See also M. Levi-d'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*, Florence (1977), 185-188.

the picture—but also for depictions of St. John in the wilderness more generally, such as the engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi. On the one hand, these references betoken Bruegel’s artistic awareness, an intimate conversation with artistic practice, both in Italy and the North, and the innovative spirit with which he mediates characteristics from history painting to cultivate his own vernacular style. On the other hand, the division of and play with the form and content of previous models is a rhetorical technique that remains consistent throughout his work, as I have discussed it in relation to the *Peasant Wedding Banquet* and *Peasant Dance*, and could have led to discussions among Bruegel’s contemporary viewers about possible insights the life of John the Baptist might offer for discussing potential interpretations of the panel, especially the importance of spiritual discernment in everyday life.

Müller argues that the *Peasant and Nest Robber* should be seen within the context of Erasmian ironic philosophy, the most well-known example being his *Praise of Folly*, not only in regards to the iconography but also in terms of artistic style.³⁷⁶ A woodcut illustration from a chapter of Sebastian Brant’s *Sottenschip* shows a fool toppling from a tree with a bird’s nest in his hand (fig. 83). The text warns against trusting too much to fortune, since “He who climbs unwisely often falls hard,”³⁷⁷ and later “live soberly and moderately, not doing more by good fortune than is proper for one’s station.”³⁷⁸ Contrary to Brant, Müller argues, Bruegel transforms the meaning of the nest robber into positive; on Bruegel’s panel it is not the boy who is falling from the tree, or will fall, but the arrogant central peasant. The drama of the painting consists in the turning upside-down safety and danger. He who blindly thinks he is safe actually lives dangerously. Although Müller does not argue for one specific artistic quote, he asserts that the mixture of a lowly peasant subject with a generally Italian manner of painting traditionally deployed for depicting lofty *historiae* highlights the contradictory relationship between form and content, a contradiction that would have been understood as simultaneously ridiculing the central peasant and Italian style.

³⁷⁶ Jürgen Müller, *Das Paradox* (1999), 82-89.

³⁷⁷ Brant (1548), ch. 109, “Die climt onwijsselick valt diewijl swaerlick.” As translated by E.H. Zeydel, New York: Columbia University Press, 1944.

³⁷⁸ Ibid. “Al eest dan dat ons fortune toe lacht wi en sullense niet te seer betrouwe[n] noch achter volge[n] / mer doen als dye wijse die in voor spoede he[m] wapent teghen wederspoet dat is leeft soberlic en [de] tamelijc niet doende na sijn gheluc mer na sine[n] staet en [de] toebehoorte.”

Vinken and Schlüter argue that the picture should be understood as a kind of *memento mori*, rather than adhering to a particular sixteenth-century adage as Hulin de Loo claims.³⁷⁹ According to the authors, the scene is an allegory concerning man's mortality, a theme brought out by the paintings details. For example, they contend that theft and more specifically the act of robbing a bird's nest were common metaphors for Death, and the bird itself served as a metaphor for the soul. However, Klaus Demus takes a different direction. Observing the importance of the vernacular translation of the Bible during the Reformation, he points out the close resemblance between the Netherlandish proverb (he who knows of the nest has the knowledge; he who robs it has it) and the words of John the Baptist in John 3: 29-30: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice."³⁸⁰

In my mind, while each of these observations touches upon several different ideas the painting raises, it is Müller's theme of inversion that characterizes the way in which artistic and sacred ideas are mediated into a vernacular representation of everyday life. For a picture that depicts a farmer self-righteously consumed with pointing to a figure behind him, Bruegel has employed a style, composition and iconography that resonates with those used for John the Baptist, the prophet who was also obsessed with pointing to a man coming behind him. Only, in this case, his motivation is the exact opposite—complete self-denial. A peasant whose fixation leads to him being totally unaware of his (literal) place in the world, about to disappear into the water before him, is formally depicted in such a way that it would have awakened in the mind of the viewer associations with the religious figure who was well aware of his role as an "in-between," to point to Christ, "he that cometh after me," then immediately disappear into the background of the story, "He must increase, but I must decrease."³⁸¹ Whether out of humble or self-righteous motivations, both St. John and the central peasant are unable to see beyond the threshold of what they deem their place in the world, to point to who comes behind them. Whereas St. John is only

³⁷⁹ Vinken and Schlüter, "Pieter Bruegels *Nestrover*" (1996), 59-60.

³⁸⁰ Klaus Demus, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (1999), 123.

³⁸¹ John 3: 30. See also Lyckle de Vries, "Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus*" (2003), where he argues that Bruegel takes texts directly from the Bible, Solomon speaking in Ecclesiastes, and presents them in the form of everyday life.

concerned with pointing out what at that moment is invisible, engendering in his audience a spiritual vision for Christ that insures future salvation, the central peasant's obsession with pointing toward what is visible behind him is an indication of his worldly concerns and his inability to see his own impending doom to come.

Similar to Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Banquet* and *Peasant Dance*, the *Peasant and Nest Robber* is put together in such a way that the formal and stylistic elements beg for closer analysis and feed the analytical minds of its contemporary viewers. By imbricating the sacred and profane, Northern and Italian, art and literature, the image not only allows for different levels of interpretation, but constructs them. The picture is a visual discourse, if you will, that would have inspired a similar conversational mode as represented in the *convivium* tradition; an experience in which the beholder must parley and connect different voices speaking to one another: the beauty of nature represented and the artistic form in which it is shaped, a sacred story (and the iconographical tradition associated with it) and profane life (including the literary tradition that describes it). The recognition of Bruegel's translation of a religious visual tradition for a painting of rural life calls on—indeed, is dependant on—various levels of viewer awareness—literary, religious and artistic—during the process of analysis. Central to the viewing experience Bruegel's picture creates is the ability of the viewer to recognize subtle artistic, stylistic and/or iconographic references and to analyze and discuss them on multiple different levels.

Such mixing and mingling of form and content may seem difficult for modern viewers to assimilate, but Bruegel's educated sixteenth-century audience would have been trained in such a practice. It can be compared to a similar exercise in rhetorical pedagogy. According to Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540), students were required during the Renaissance to keep notebooks divided into form and content.³⁸² By form is meant the design, structure or pattern of arranging literary elements (prose, drama or poetry). By content is meant the subject, meaning or significance. The practice of imitation, one aspect of their rhetorical education, required them to analyze form and content. They were asked to observe a model closely and then to copy the form but supply new

³⁸² On the use of the notebook system as an adjunct to rhetorical practice and an aid to education, and therefore highly important for understanding the habits of mind of Bruegel's contemporary viewers, see Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs* (2002), 85-97.

content; or to copy the content but supply a new form. Such imitations occurred on every level of speech and language, and forced students to assess what exactly a given form did to bring about a given meaning or effect.³⁸³

This educational device of deconstructing and reassembling form and content in varying contexts could have also defined, at least in part, the viewing habits of Bruegel's educated audience, especially in the context of the *convivium* tradition as I have described it. Similar to the way in which dinner companions in the *Poetic Feast* recite poetry, analyze difficult terms, resolve problems of rhyme and meter and offer diverse readings of traditional manuscripts, paintings such as the *Peasant and Nest Robber*, *Peasant Wedding Banquet* and *Peasant Dance*, with their stylistic and iconographic references, would have inspired similar discussions on the way in which form and content interact within their visual grammar. This nuanced viewing involves an analysis of painting that takes place on a number of different levels and seeks to connect, or at least intertwine, heterogeneous concepts.

Similar to the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, the *Peasant and Nest Robber* mediates artful forms and iconography traditionally employed for a religious subject within a painting that, if taken at face value, seems to depict a rustic scene of a peasant, a subject indigenous to the North. The tension generated between form and content, sacred and profane creates an ambivalence that inspires more in-depth investigation on both artistic and religious grounds. Present reality and a biblical story, vernacular subject in a painterly style, are layered within the painting, encouraging viewers continuously to negotiate, question and discuss shifting perspectives about artistic standards as well as the translation and recognition of sacred stories in everyday life.

In this shift in perspective, from sight to insight or from seeing to understanding, Bruegel's treatment of previous visual vocabulary in new and innovative ways is crucial; his choice of visual concepts or pictorial motifs dynamically interacts with the viewer's artistic and religious awareness. As with the *Peasant Wedding Banquet*, Bruegel's inter-pictorial discourse not only mediates the religious narrative within everyday life, mixing the "sacred" with the "profane," but

³⁸³ See Gideon O. Burton, "Silva Rhetoricae," <http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm> (January 31, 2007). Michel Jeanneret describes a similar process in the work of Montaigne, "The Renaissance and Its Ancients: Dismembering and Devouring," *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 110.5 (1995), 1043-1053.

also combines previous visual tradition with his own emerging artistic practice. As a result, the viewers of this visual conversation have to follow the interplay of that mediation, shifting focus back and forth from the surface of the painting to the model it references. It goes without saying that such visual and intellectual agility requires time and patience, a slow extrication of meaning through prolonged meditation on the painting, and assigns a dynamic role to the viewer. The beholder, therefore, is asserted as the judge not only of proper response to the painted subjects, but also of creative innovation in relation to artistic practice. The result is both the cultivation of the mind of the viewer as well as Bruegel's vernacular style.