

PIETER BRUEGEL
AND PHILIPS GALLE AFTER PIETER
BRUEGEL THE ELDER

64–77. The Seven Virtues, 1559–60

Seven drawings and seven engravings

LITERATURE FOR THE ENTIRE SERIES: Van Gelder and Borms 1939; Barnouw 1947, pp. 24–38; Hollstein 1949–, vol. 4 (Cock), nos. 243–49, vol. 9 (Van der Heyden), nos. 37–43; Stridbeck 1956, pp. 126–70; Klein 1963, pp. 179–244; Brussels 1969, pp. 93–106; Zupnick 1969; Riggs 1971, pp. 97–98; Zupnick 1971; Zupnick 1972; Gibson 1977, pp. 58–64; Brussels 1980, pp. 91–96; Serebrennikov 1986; Tokyo 1989, pp. 136–43; Mielke 1996, nos. 45–51.

The series of Virtues from 1559, in contrast to Bruegel's group of Seven Deadly Sins (cat. nos. 42–54), which are executed in the style of Hieronymus Bosch's phantasmagoria, is characterized by historically accurate detail. Thus, the engraving showing Spes (Hope) presents a Flemish port city threatened by high water. Placed in the center of the compositions, the personification of the virtue wears a headdress that is a beehive and balances on an anchor, brandishing a sickle and a rudder, her attributes. The image develops a distinct paradox. Dying of thirst, the prisoners in the upper left have lowered a pitcher from their window in the hope of catching rainwater; meanwhile the sea has risen so menacingly that it appears about to engulf the entire city. In the one instance water saves life, in the second it brings death. Other scenes in the series also present similar contradictions.

Justitia (*Justice*), for example, is also based on a paradox. The personification appears with her usual attributes, a blindfold, a sword, and scales, yet all around her people are tortured and killed. It is as if injustice rather than justice were being addressed. The man stretched on a rack in the left foreground, especially, reminds us that in Bruegel's day it was common judicial procedure to extract confessions by torture. Although various scholars have correctly noted that the Latin inscription on *Justitia* refers to the necessity of punishment and have even cited legal treatises of Bruegel's time in support of their opinion to the contrary, it seems entirely plausible that this image is a pointed criticism of contemporary legal practice. The world depicted has been reduced to an execution site. Nothing but wheels and gallows appears on the horizon, and in front of them we see an offender being burned at the stake. Bruegel shows us only the accused and condemned; there is no sign of anyone

being favored by a decision of *Justitia* or protected by her judgment from an unjust world. *Justitia*'s blindfold may be intended to symbolize equality before the law, but we are tempted to think that it prevents her from seeing the atrocities committed in her name. Her determined impartiality has turned into blindness.

For a final example of Bruegel's ironic approach, look at the *Temperantia* (*Temperance*). Once again a personification of the virtue stands before us in the center of the picture with her attributes, here a bridle, a clock, and eyeglasses. Her right foot is resting on the vane of a windmill. Around this central figure are various narrative groupings, some representing the liberal arts. Two astronomers are trying to measure the Earth and the distance between Earth and the moon. However, they are thwarted because the planet is turning on its own axis—indeed, the astronomer standing on Earth and reaching toward the moon is close to falling owing to the rotation. In this sheet Bruegel is declaring that even though the virtue of temperance is the basis of all the arts, none of them acknowledges its own limits. It is interesting to note that he included both sculpture and painting among the grouping of the liberal arts. At the left edge of the composition we see a painter, furnished with palette and maulstick and seated in front of a large easel. We are to perceive this not only as a sign of the elevated status Bruegel implicitly accorded to painting but also as an indication of the high moral demands to which it is subjected. In the secondary literature it has been suggested that the men who are debating at the right are either theologians or representatives of different creeds. The object of their debate would thus be the book to their right, which has to be the Bible.

In his presentation of *Fides* (Faith), Bruegel showed a series of sacraments. In careful detail he depicted baptism, confession, communion, and marriage, but the sermon, the instruction to the faithful, is also given considerable attention. *Fides* herself is pointing to the Scriptures, upon which the Dove of the Holy Ghost has settled. Bruegel emphasized the book and the dove by placing them at the intersection of diagonals—leading from the lower left to the upper right and from the lower right to the upper left—that draw the viewer's attention to these details. This focus

might suggest that Bruegel's message is that the Holy Ghost and the Scriptures inspired by him reveal to humanity the knowledge of God; they alone give us a true understanding of his salvation through Christ and the sacraments it imposes. However, we can also conclude from the emphasis on the Holy Ghost and the Scriptures that the artist was championing a spiritualist stance, one that values the reading of the Bible more highly than observance of the sacraments. In my view no definitive interpretation is possible.

In the allegory of Caritas (Charity) the focus is on compassionate works and active love for our fellow creatures, for perched atop the personification's head is the pelican, said to open its own breast to feed its offspring. The depiction of Prudentia (Prudence), here understood as judicious foresight, shows people preparing for the future in various ways. In the *Fortitudo* (*Fortitude*) men and women battle sins represented by the animals familiar from Bruegel's Seven Deadly Sins series. The engraving's inscription defines true strength as the ability to overcome our own weakness.

Bruegel's Virtues as well as his Seven Deadly Sins are more analytical than designs that treat these subjects by his contemporaries. His images not only tell us that we should emulate virtue and abhor vice, they also attempt to show us why.

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