

PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER  
AND PIETER VAN DER HEYDEN AFTER  
PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER

42-54. The Seven Deadly Sins, or The Vices, 1556-58

Six drawings and seven engravings

LITERATURE FOR THE ENTIRE SERIES: Van Gelder and Borms 1939; Van Gils 1940-42, vol. 2, pp. 56-88; Barnouw 1947, pp. 10-22; Hollstein 1949- , vol. 4 (Cock), nos. 236-42, vol. 9 (Van der Heyden), nos. 30-36; Stridbeck

1956, pp. 62-125; Klein 1963, pp. 179-244; Brussels 1969, pp. 62-76; Riggs 1971, pp. 97-98; Gibson 1977, pp. 45-53; Brussels 1980, pp. 83-90; Serebrennikov 1986; Tokyo 1989, pp. 122-29; Mielke 1996, nos. 33-39.

Pieter Bruegel's two series of prints on The Seven Deadly Sins, or The Vices, and The Seven Virtues (cat. nos. 64–77) are nearly identical in format, yet there is no specific contextual connection between them. The series of Seven Deadly Sins, completed in 1558, is carried out entirely in the style of Hieronymus Bosch and filled with fantastic figures and landscapes. The Virtues, begun in the following year, by contrast, are all set in Bruegel's own time and place, reproducing actual Flemish scenes of the second half of the sixteenth century.

Scholarly writing on the two series has always stressed these differences, but why Bruegel adopted Bosch's manner in the earlier set has yet to be explained. Already in his 1557 engraving *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (cat. no. 39), Bruegel had repressed his own identity, publishing the work with the inscription *Hieronymus Bos Inuentor*. It has been assumed that Bruegel's chief reason for imitating Bosch in his graphic work was a commercial one: Bosch was simply more popular than Bruegel, and therefore engravings in the Bosch manner were more marketable than his own prints.

With regard to The Vices, however, this does not strike me as a satisfying explanation. It seems more probable that Bruegel adopted Bosch's style because viewers would instantly associate it with the world of sin and folly. Moreover, Bosch's anticlassical manner represented a specifically Christian piling up of imagery as opposed to the serene order of antiquity. Bruegel's densely packed pictures, at first glance so confusing that we can make little sense of them, represent the antithesis of the clarity and realism extolled, for example, in Vitruvius's *On Architecture*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, they find their literary equivalent in the works of Rabelais.<sup>2</sup> Thus Bruegel's borrowings from the Bosch tradition are by no means to be thought of merely as a bow to the earlier artist but rather should be viewed as a statement of his own theoretical stance, a way of distancing himself from the Italianizing manner of such contemporary Netherlandish artists as Maarten van Heemskerck and Frans Floris. In this context, we should note that it would be instructive to attempt to determine just which of his compositions Bruegel produced in deliberate contrast to works by his contemporaries. And we should remember that the master's stylistic choices constitute a definite rejection of the prevailing style of the Italian Renaissance, but this is not to say that they reveal a national character or a typically northern European sensibility.

All the engravings in the series of Seven Deadly Sins follow the same compositional scheme. In the center foreground of each there appears a personification of the sin

portrayed, identified both by attributes and by a Latin inscription: Ira (Anger), Desidia (Sloth), Superbia (Pride), Avaritia (Greed), Gula (Gluttony), Invidia (Envy), and Luxuria (Lust). These personifications do not appear in isolation but in a scenic context; Gula, for example, sits drinking her fill at a table with other tipplers. The remainder of each scene is filled with figures representing particular aspects of the depravity in question. Luxuria is permitting a dragonlike demon to kiss her and fondle her breast. The hollow tree in the foreground, the fountain in the background on the left, and especially the mussel shell that encloses a pair of lovers and sits atop the tree trunk are pointed echoes of details in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Prado, Madrid). In the other engravings the borrowings from Bosch are less specific. The personification of Ira calls to mind the subject in Bruegel's own *Dulle Griet* (Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp), a painting that has been dated to 1561–62—a rare instance of a graphic motif finding later use in a painting.

In each of the engravings the personification of the vice is accompanied by a symbolic animal. The bear shown with Ira is gnawing the leg of a man who did not jump to safety quickly enough. Desidia is in the company of an ass, which serves her as a kind of bolster. Next to Superbia stands a showy peacock, while a poisonous toad crouches directly in front of Avaritia, and Gula is seated on the back of a pig. Invidia is pointing at the turkey standing to her right, and Luxuria is attended by a lecherous cock perched on the back of her partner's chair.

Like Bosch before him, Bruegel managed to present the various permutations of each vice he portrayed in vivid detail. It is as though he shows us a world in which the sins are repeated eternally in an unbroken cycle. The people in his pictures, like those in Bosch's phantasmagorias, appear mainly as victims, yet it is altogether probable that these numberless naked men and women are not so much real people as personifications of the soul. In his series of Seven Deadly Sins Bruegel delineated an imaginary world, as Bosch did in his panel paintings. Yet the real world is also in evidence in each of these engravings. Although the foreground is filled with an allegorical scene, we generally see on the horizon the silhouette of a city or ships at sea.

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1. Kayser 1960, p. 14.

2. Müller 1999, pp. 117–25.